

Framing Public Relations: Media Portrayals and Journalistic Perceptions in New Zealand

A Qualitative Study Using Framing and Attribution Theories

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Abstract

Public relations plays an important role in how organisations engage with the outside world, yet it often receives negative media coverage that portrays it as a manipulative tool. Such a perception of public relations may overshadow its potential to promote communication and trust between organisations and their audiences. Through the lenses of attribution theory and framing theory, this study investigates how New Zealand news media contribute to these portrayals. It emphasises that the news media's portrayal of public relations is influenced by journalists' personal prejudices and professional ethics. By exploring this relationship, the study highlights the discursive link between journalists' perceptions of public relations and its portrayal in the news media.

This study explores a research gap by examining how journalists in New Zealand's news media perceive and portray public relations. The distinctiveness of this area in New Zealand's cultural and media landscape has often been overlooked in global research. Public relations and journalism interact uniquely in the country's bicultural context, limited professional networks, and evolving digital landscape. Concurrently, the convergence of public relations, marketing, journalism, and organisational publishing brought about by the digital transition has heightened tensions between the two fields, undermining journalists' gatekeeping authority and raising doubts about practitioners' tactics.

Three research questions guide this study: RQ1. How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage? RQ2. How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners? RQ3. What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners? This study combines the analysis of news stories from well-known New Zealand national news media outlets with semi-structured interviews with journalists from those outlets. The goal is to understand journalists' perceptions of public relations,

the challenges it presents, the factors that influence their perceptions, and how all these shape its portrayal in the news media.

Public relations is often referred to by journalists as spin or a disaster, which implies that its practitioners may be unethical. According to social identity theory, this perspective emphasises journalism's independence and accountability while also underscoring the distinction between in-groups (journalists) and out-groups (public relations practitioners). Attribution processes reinforce this divide by portraying public relations behaviours as internally motivated and controllable, thereby legitimising ongoing scepticism and negative portrayals in the media. Often, the public relations team is blamed for issues, even when the actual problems arise from deeper organisational decisions. During a crisis, journalists have the power to shape public opinion by suggesting that public relations practitioners control the narrative, which can create the perception that they prioritise storytelling over substance.

The study shows that these negative or mixed perceptions are not random but arise from a broader system of shared newsroom practices, cognitive schemas, institutionalised professional norms, and organisational constraints. Persistently unfavourable opinions about public relations stem from journalism's organisational constraints, such as strict deadlines, reliance on reliable sources, budgetary strains, and a workplace culture that encourages mistrust of practitioners. Over time, this scepticism becomes ingrained in deeply held beliefs, which in turn strengthen and perpetuate the very depictions that journalists encounter in the news.

This research combines framing and attribution theories to demonstrate how journalists' internal attributional reasoning interacts with external media frames, thereby affecting the portrayal of public relations in the media. This interaction accounts for both the enduring unfavourable perceptions and the symbolic reinforcement of power imbalances and professional boundaries between journalists and practitioners. The results provide a theoretically informed and contextually relevant understanding of the

portrayal of public relations in the New Zealand news media, emphasising its effects on professional credibility and the developing connection between the two domains in a swiftly shifting communication landscape.

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Attestation of Authorship

I declare that this submission is my work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public relations plays an increasingly visible yet contested role in shaping public discourse through its interaction with journalism (Macnamara, 2014, 2016; Moloney & McGrath, 2019). The term 'public relations' or its abbreviation 'PR' is often perceived negatively, with journalists playing a key role in shaping these representations (Anderson, 2018; Callard, 2011; Spicer, 1993; Sterne, 2010). Journalists' perceptions of public relations and how they portray the industry are influenced by professional norms, pressures from their employing organisations, and the changing media environments (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Sissons, 2014). These portrayals, in turn, can shape how public relations is understood by the wider public and how its legitimacy¹ as a professional practice is constructed (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2013; Moloney, 2006; Moloney & McGrath, 2019).

In New Zealand, however, little systematic research has examined how journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners, or how these perceptions influence the media narratives through which the profession is portrayed (Callard, 2011; Sele, 2006; Sterne, 2010; Tilley & Hollings, 2008). This study addresses that gap by examining two objectives: (a) to analyse how public relations is portrayed in New Zealand's news media, and (b) to investigate how New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners. In doing so, it highlights the contextual factors, such as information access, responsiveness and timeliness, content quality, and transparency, that underpin both scepticism and collaboration in journalist-public relations relationships.

This chapter introduces the study, presents the research problem and its significance, justifies it with a research background, outlines its aims, objectives, and research questions, and describes the thesis structure.

¹ The perception that a profession or institution is credible, ethical, appropriate, and serves the public interest in accordance with accepted social norms (Edwards, 2018).

1.1 The Research Problem

Although public relations is a crucial function in organisational communication, it is often portrayed negatively in the news media, frequently characterised as manipulative, self-serving, ethically suspect, or lacking legitimacy (Callison, 2004; Callison & Zillmann, 2002; Jo, 2003; Moloney & McGrath, 2019; Sallot, 2002; van Ruler et al., 2004). The term 'legitimacy' in this study refers to whether journalism or public relations is perceived as credible, ethical, and serving the public interest. This negative view sharply contrasts with the positive work that public relations practitioners (erstwhile referred to as practitioners in this thesis) do, as they help build credibility for organisations, facilitate relationship building, encourage public dialogue, and support community engagement (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2013; Edwards, 2018; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012).

The unfavourable depiction of public relations in the media serves as a tactical approach that enables journalists to uphold their credibility and professional integrity (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Shaw & White, 2004; Spicer, 1993). Framing theory shows how media can shape public opinion by focusing on certain parts of a news story and downplaying others (Entman, 1993, 2007; Reese, 2001, 2007). This selective focus shapes how audiences view public relations and its role in society (Macnamara, 2014; Moloney, 2006; Spicer, 1993). The media often portrays public relations in a negative light. This approach helps journalists safeguard their integrity and reputation. By presenting stories in a particular manner, media organisations can uphold their credibility and influence public perception, even in the face of criticism (Craft et al., 2016; Spicer, 1993). Early research has shown that influential sources play a significant role in how conflicts are framed within public relations (Culbertson, 1996; Hallahan, 1999). Subsequent studies have emphasised the importance of these frames in managing reputation (Culbertson & Chen, 2013; Molleda & Kochhar, 2019; Schultz et al., 2012; Van der Meer et al., 2014). The way public relations is usually portrayed, as shallow or dishonest, reinforces journalism's position as the ultimate judge of reality

(Anderson, 2018). Separating agenda-driven public relations from ethical journalism—a distinction emphasised by terms such as spin² and image management—increases the credibility of journalism (Bedeley et al., 2025; French et al., 2025; Lindgren et al., 2024). Accordingly, public relations may receive less support in society and the workplace when news audiences regularly encounter these negative narratives (Khanya, 2024; Le, 2024).

To understand the origins of these portrayals, it is essential to examine how journalists attribute meaning to public relations, as their perceptions influence the media's portrayal of the field. The viewpoints of journalists regarding public relations, along with the factors that influence these viewpoints, such as their interactions with practitioners, industry standards, personal experiences, and organisational limitations, can significantly affect the tone, framing, content, and selection of sources in news reporting (Kaur & Shaari, 2006; Obermaier et al., 2018; Sterne, 2010). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012) explores how individuals attribute causes, responsibilities, intentions, and motives to events. In journalism, this theory holds that journalists' perceptions of practitioners' behaviour, credibility, dependability, and trust³ greatly influence how they interpret public relations (Boateng & Lauk, 2021; Hinnant et al., 2012; Matthews, 2025). It helps clarify how journalists perceive their interactions with practitioners, whether they view them as helpful support, strategic manipulation, or responses to external pressures.

By combining framing and attribution theories, this study shows that the media portrayal of public relations is influenced in two ways: (a) external factors, such as the way news narratives are written, and (b) internal factors, such as the reasoning and choices made by journalists. While framing shows how public relations is portrayed, attribution explains how journalists perceive and react to public relations in specific

² The strategic and selective presentation of information designed to influence audience perceptions in ways favourable to an individual or organisation (Moloney, 2006; McNair, 2018).

³ Journalists' confidence that practitioners provide reliable, honest, and credible information that can be depended upon in the news-gathering process (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003).

ways. This dual approach helps analyse both how public relations is portrayed and the professional reasons behind those portrayals.

Despite previous research (Callard, 2011; Sterne, 2010), the dynamics of media portrayals of public relations in New Zealand are underexplored. New Zealand's unique media landscape, which is characterised by a smaller market and a bicultural foundation, may lead to distinct journalist perceptions of public relations compared to those in larger media systems (Motion & Leitch, 2001; Trenwith, 2010; Weaver & Motion, 2002). Furthermore, advances in digital technology have made it harder to distinguish between journalism, public relations, and other forms of communication (Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2016; Sherwood et al., 2019). This research gap raises an important question: Given these developments, are journalists reevaluating their views on public relations? However, these perceptions and their origins have not been thoroughly examined, leaving a significant gap in understanding media portrayals of public relations. Therefore, this study analyses the nature and tone of media portrayals of public relations in New Zealand, investigates the motivations and sources behind journalists' perceptions of public relations, and discusses the possible implications of these portrayals. By doing so, the study aims to enhance the discussion on public relations' role and significance in modern society.

1.2 The Research Background

This section provides the scholarly and contextual foundation for the study by examining how journalists' perceptions of public relations have influenced, and continue to shape, its portrayal in the news media. It explores how narratives about public relations have evolved across contexts by reviewing theoretical, empirical and historical studies, revealing new trends, conflicts, and ways of framing issues. In doing so, the section identifies key factors, including professional norms, institutional structures, socio-cultural contexts, and technological factors, that underpin journalists'

attitudes toward public relations, as well as the gaps in understanding that this study seeks to address.

1.2.1 Journalists' Attitudes Toward Public Relations and Media Portrayals

Due in large part to its association with publicity and alleged attempts to conceal the truth, public relations frequently faces misconceptions, societal stigma, scepticism, and ethical issues (White & Park, 2010). Public relations still has a bad reputation even if it has undergone substantial changes to adapt to the digital environment (Bhadra, 2024; Moloney & McGrath, 2019). Public perception is influenced by how public relations is portrayed in the media (Sterne, 2010). Journalists typically hold prejudices that influence how they depict practitioners; they often see them unfavourably and label them as manipulators who use 'spin' (Aronoff, 1975; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Pincus et al., 1993; Supriadi et al., 2023).

Such an unfavourable portrayal of public relations in the media also reflects journalists' mistrust of the industry. The term 'PR' often carries negative connotations (Bishop, 1988; Henderson, 1998; Jo, 2003; Keenan, 1996; Özoran, 2023; Spicer, 1993). Nonetheless, a few studies have shown that public relations is sometimes presented positively in entertainment media (Ames, 2010; Kinsky, 2011; Tsetsura et al., 2015). This variation in media portrayals suggests that how public relations is portrayed changes over time and can be influenced by emerging trends. It is therefore important to study how and why the media portrays public relations differently, and how journalists perceive it.

1.2.2 Media Portrayals and Public Perception of Public Relations

The portrayal of public relations by the news media significantly shapes the conflict between practitioners' definitions of the field and the public's perception of it (Penning, 2008). Prior research has acknowledged that journalists' preconceptions about the field can influence their public relations coverage (Spicer, 1993; Stocking & LaMarca, 1990).

The journalists' use of language to support cultural stereotypes or emphasise interpretations, such as characterising practitioners as 'spin doctors' or corporate spokespeople as manipulative, is an example of this subjectivity (Ball-Rokeach, 2010; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). According to Spicer (1993), the choices of journalistic language, including the connotations associated with public relations terms, can influence how the public perceives public relations. The way the media portrays public relations, particularly when it uses negative labels or metaphors (such as 'spin'), can lead to numerous misconceptions and a negative public perception of the field (Sterne, 2010). Furthermore, while neglecting more crucial aspects of the field, such as long-term relationship-building, stakeholder engagement, and organisational communication, the media regularly emphasises high-profile tactics, such as media manipulation or crisis management (Cameron, 2003; Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2013). This narrow viewpoint ignores public relations' vital function in assisting company operations and influencing public opinion, reducing it to the management of messaging and appearances.

Understanding perception and the portrayal of public relations and its practitioners in New Zealand's news media is constrained by a lack of relevant research conducted in the past decade. Recent studies have mainly focused on the changing relationship between journalists and practitioners (Sissons, 2016; Theunissen & Sissons, 2017; Verčič & Colić, 2016), rather than on how the public relations profession is perceived and portrayed. There is a considerable knowledge gap about how journalists' perspectives on public relations affect how the field is portrayed today. Journalists' opinions on public relations vary, according to research conducted in New Zealand. Some view it as essential to news reporting, while others see it as dishonest and a threat to journalistic independence (Callard, 2011; Sterne, 2010). These findings suggest that journalists have varying opinions, which can differ based on their experiences, specific situations, and industry standards. However, little is known about

how these divergent perspectives shape public relations portrayal in the media, underscoring the need for further study.

1.2.3 Digital Age Transformations: Shifts in Journalists' Perceptions

The knowledge gap mentioned is more evident in the digital age, where technology enables practitioners to engage directly with stakeholders (Coetzee, 2019; Meyster, 2020; Silver, 2018). Organisations now communicate directly with consumers, bypassing traditional media (Macnamara, 2016). The rise of digital media has blurred the lines between journalism, public relations, marketing, and advertising (Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2016; Sherwood et al., 2019). Organisations now share their own content, challenging journalists' traditional gatekeeping role (Douglas, 2023, March 18).

Although these developments have provided practitioners with more avenues for communication, they have raised significant issues regarding how journalists perceive public relations. For instance, the rapid spread of information, along with the prevalence of fake information on digital platforms, can worsen negative public perceptions of public relations in today's environment, contributing to increased scepticism, mistrust, and confusion among the public (Renjith, 2017; Ryabicheva, 2020). Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between various communication roles and the ever-increasing organisational content available to journalists could influence their perceptions of public relations, offering fresh perspectives or reinforcing negative stereotypes (Callard, 2011).

This changing media landscape highlights a critical knowledge gap on how the digital era affects journalists' perceptions of public relations and the resulting media portrayals. Understanding how journalists navigate these changing dynamics and how their perceptions of public relations evolve in response is, therefore, essential to explaining contemporary media portrayals of the field.

1.2.4 The New Zealand Context: Journalistic Attitudes and Media Portrayals of Public Relations

Research on how journalism and public relations relate has mainly focused on the US and the UK. This narrow geographic focus emphasises a need for studies that consider differences in other regions within these Western countries (Domm, 2016; Macnamara, 2019; Supriadi et al., 2023; Verčič & Colic, 2016). Studies in the US and UK have examined themes such as transparency, mutual mistrust, and efforts to challenge the perception of public relations as propaganda (Callison, 2004; Sallot, 2002). Although these studies provide insightful information, they often take a universal perspective of Western media systems and overlook the influence of regional circumstances on professional dynamics.

The public relations industry in New Zealand functions within a unique socio-political and cultural framework. This framework is shaped by the bicultural principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, which underlie many public institutional practices and cultural expectations in New Zealand, including communication norms (Sibley & Ward, 2013). Early research on public relations in Aotearoa highlighted the importance of biculturalism. It encouraged practitioners to change their communication methods to better suit both Māori and mainstream cultural contexts (Motion & Leitch, 2001; Trenwith, 2010). New Zealand has a smaller and tightly connected media landscape that shapes its social and cultural dynamics. According to research, mainstream media shapes how culture is portrayed and how democracy operates, especially in the Māori public sphere (Stuart, 2005). Unlike those in larger, more dispersed cultures, New Zealand's distinctive characteristics promote communication tactics that emphasise relationship-building and context comprehension. As a result, journalist-practitioner interactions in New Zealand are deeply connected to cultural awareness and relationships.

Furthermore, within this unique environment, studies have shown that journalists' perspectives are varied (not consistently positive or negative) but rather fluctuate

depending on context, the journalist's background, and industry standards (Callard, 2011; Sterne, 2010). However, little is known about how these mixed perceptions influence actual media portrayals of public relations. This gap highlights the need to examine journalists' perceptions and their impact on the portrayal of public relations in New Zealand's unique media and cultural context.

1.3 Addressing the Research Gap

Building on the research gaps identified in the preceding section, namely, the limited understanding of how journalists' perceptions influence media portrayals of public relations, the lack of focused analysis in the New Zealand context, the impact of digital era on journalists' perceptions of public relations and the resulting media portrayals, and the underexplored role of cognitive and professional processes, this section outlines how the study addresses these gaps.

Specifically, the study examines cognitive attribution processes, which refer to the ways journalists interpret and assign causes to practitioners' behaviour, decisions, and motives (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967, 1973; Weiner, 1985, 2012). These cognitive processes operate at multiple levels: individually, journalists assess the meaning of public relations actions. Socially, their opinions are influenced by their journalistic culture, contacts with coworkers, and professional norms. When taken as a whole, these processes influence how the media covers public relations. By analysing these cognitive and professional mechanisms, the study examines how journalists think and work. It explores how journalists' beliefs and habits shape how they present news. The aim is to show how these factors can lead to repeated negative or sceptical portrayals in the media over time.

1.3.1 The Research Objectives

This study aims to address existing gaps by focusing on two primary objectives, utilising framing theory and attribution theory to analyse media portrayals and journalistic reasoning:

Research Objective 1: To explore how public relations is portrayed in the New Zealand news media

The study's first objective is to critically examine the connotative meanings associated with the term 'PR' as used in news stories from leading national newspapers in New Zealand. It seeks to explore how public relations is framed within journalistic discourse by focusing on the contexts in which the term is used, the communicative intentions attributed to public relations activities, and the general sentiment—whether positive, negative, or neutral—implied in each instance. It also seeks to identify the underlying perceptions, stereotypes, or value judgments communicated that may influence the public's understanding of the field by analysing the linguistic and contextual framing of public relations in news media. Although this study does not aim to measure public perceptions directly, prior research indicates that repeated media portrayals may influence public perceptions over time (Sterne, 2010; Valentini, 2021). The study employs a qualitative content analysis, utilising detailed textual and thematic approaches, to identify recurring patterns in news content produced by journalists when referencing public relations practices. The objective is to shed light on how public relations is portrayed in New Zealand news media by offering insights into the meanings, assumptions, and value judgments in media narratives that may impact public discourse on communication, credibility, and influence.

Research Objective 2: To examine New Zealand news media journalists' perception of public relations and its practitioners, and to explore the reasons behind journalists' perception of public relations in New Zealand

The second objective of this study is to investigate how New Zealand news media journalists perceive the field of public relations and its practitioners, and to examine the various factors that influence these perceptions. The approach entails investigating journalists' attitudes, convictions, and assumptions about public relations as a discipline, as well as the dynamics of their interactions with practitioners during reporting. In this study, references to public relations encompass both the

institutionalised professional practice and the practitioners who enact it, reflecting how journalists themselves often collapse this distinction in their discourse.

Journalists' perceptions may shape how the public perceives public relations, as they serve as crucial information gatekeepers and often work closely with practitioners (Sterne, 2010). The way the media portrays public relations, news organisations' cultures, conventional journalistic ideals, and broader societal narratives are just a few of the elements that influence journalists' perceptions (Jukes, 2019; Leonhardt et al., 2025; Magrin, 2024). By examining these factors, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the often complex and ambivalent relationship between journalism and public relations. It looks at common themes in journalistic discourse on public relations that may affect practitioners' credibility and public image in New Zealand's media landscape.

1.3.2 The Research Questions

The research questions that stem from the research objectives and guide this study are conceptualised as follows:

RQ1. How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?

This research question focuses on analysing the meanings, connotations, and framing of public relations in news stories published in leading New Zealand media outlets, including the *NZ Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, and *Stuff*. It investigates how journalists write about public relations, the contexts in which the term 'PR' is used, and the opinions—whether positive, negative, or neutral—that are conveyed. Framing theory serves as its guidance.

RQ2. How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?

This research question investigates journalists' attitudes, presumptions, perceptions, and beliefs towards public relations as a profession. Using attribution theory, it explores how journalists assess the reliability, motives, professional function, and credibility of

practitioners in their reporting, offering insight into how individual thinking affects general opinions about the industry.

RQ3. What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?

This research question examines how journalists' opinions are shaped by newsroom culture, professional experience, journalistic standards, and public relations narratives. By identifying these sources, the study expects to understand how perceptions are formed, maintained, or disproved and how they affect the way public relations is portrayed in the media.

The integration of the media's construction of public relations (RQ1) with journalists' professional and cognitive processes (RQ2 and RQ3) provides a clear framework for addressing the study objectives.

1.4 The Research Approach

To answer these research questions, the study uses a qualitative research approach, grounded in a constructivist epistemological and ontological framework, enabling a thorough exploration of media texts and journalists' interpretive reasoning in the interviews. Constructivism recognises that individuals develop their understanding of the world through subjective meanings shaped by their social, cultural, and contextual experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This philosophical stance informs a flexible and reflexive research design, which is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena, such as the media's portrayal of public relations and journalists' perceptions of the profession (Tuli, 2010).

Guided by this constructivist viewpoint, the study uses two primary data sources, namely, news content and semi-structured interviews, to investigate how public relations is socially constructed within New Zealand's media environment. The news content source provides portrayals of public relations in news stories published since 2011 across three major New Zealand news outlets, viz., *NZ Herald*, *Otago Daily*

Times, and *Stuff*. These sources were selected for their national and regional relevance and for their contribution to previous research in this area. The analysis focuses on language, framing, and context to show how public relations is depicted and understood in media narratives. In addition, journalists' professional experiences and perspectives on public relations are revealed through semi-structured interviews. These interviews uncover the perspectives and pressures shaping journalists' views, emphasising the mutual connection between media portrayals and journalists' perceptions of public relations.

The qualitative research approach used in this study is guided by framing theory and attribution theory. Framing theory analyses media narratives to identify dominant frames in news coverage. It questions whether public relations is viewed as a genuine part of discussions, a business interest, or an area with ethical concerns (Entman, 1993, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). This viewpoint highlights how professional, institutional, and cultural meanings of public relations are formed and shared, revealing the tactics that may influence public perception of the discipline. As a result, framing theory provides a methodical way to examine not only what is communicated but also how it is communicated, as well as the interpretive cues in media content that may shape viewers' perceptions. By focusing on journalists' mental and emotional processes, attribution theory enhances framing theory (Heider, 1958, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018). It takes into consideration how journalists may ascribe causes and responsibilities to public relations endeavours, considering practitioners as professional assistance, deceptive strategies, or reactions to systemic pressures. This notion captures the negotiation of trust and scepticism in interactions between journalists and practitioners. By combining these viewpoints, the research shows how journalists' attributional reasoning and narrative construction can impact media portrayals of public relations.

Additionally, this research integrates social identity theory to illustrate how journalists' professional responsibilities are influenced by their group identities (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel

& Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner et al., 1987). It highlights how belonging to a specific professional group can create a divide between journalists and other professionals, such as those in public relations. At the same time, it helps journalists strengthen their professional identity (Deuze, 2005; Macnamara, 2014; Sallot et al., 1998). This group-based interaction can affect how journalists develop narratives and attribute responsibility in their reporting (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Entman, 1993, 2007).

1.5 The Research Significance

By offering regionally specific insights, this study fills a clear research gap by examining how New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners and how these perceptions can affect media portrayals of the industry. The study contributes to broader scholarly discussions of the profession's significance and visibility in modern society. It highlights how media portrayals can legitimise, challenge, or complicate public relations, emphasising journalists as essential mediators of meaning.

This study makes a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge on public relations in the New Zealand context by offering updated and focused insights into how news media journalists perceive and portray the profession and its practitioners. It builds on and extends previous research in two key ways. First, whereas earlier studies by Tilley and Hollings (2008) and Sterne (2010) drew on data from a broad range of media formats, including print, broadcast, and online sources, this study focuses exclusively on news media, allowing for a thorough analysis because news journalists are essential in crafting stories that propagate public relations across society. By focusing on the viewpoints of journalists, the study offers deeper insights into the presumptions, convictions, and interpretive frameworks that underlie media portrayals of public relations. These insights could be lost when data are dispersed across diverse media professions. Secondly, the study goes beyond examining journalistic perceptions alone to analyse how public relations is framed in news coverage, offering

an understanding of the journalism-public relations dynamics in New Zealand by illuminating internal perceptions held by journalists and the external narratives presented to the public. The dual focus of this study reveals evolving media trends, offering timely and relevant insights that suggest possible implications for academics, media professionals, and observers.

1.6 The Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised into seven chapters, moving from the introduction of the research problem and theoretical framing, through the review of literature and methodology, to the presentation and discussion of findings and concluding insights. The following outlines summarise the focus and contribution of each chapter:

Chapter One—Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the research problem and its broader context, emphasising the importance of investigating public relations perceptions in the news media. It also presents the aims, objectives, and research questions guiding the investigation. The chapter also refers to the theoretical framework for the study, drawing on framing theory to examine how media narratives construct portrayals of public relations, and on attribution theory to analyse how journalists interpret their interactions with practitioners. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual grounding for the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure, preparing the reader for the detailed analysis that follows.

Chapter Two—Literature Review

This chapter reviews the body of research on how the news media portray public relations and how journalists perceive the discipline. It presents the leading causes of these viewpoints and situates them within scholarly and professional debates. The study's theoretical framework is also introduced in this chapter, which utilises framing theory to explain how media narratives create specific portrayals of public relations and

attribution theory to examine how journalists understand their interactions with practitioners. These viewpoints collectively offer the study's conceptual foundation.

Chapter Three–Methodology

This chapter describes the constructivist, qualitative methodology used in the study. It supports the use of semi-structured interviews with journalists, examined using attribution theory, and qualitative content analysis of media texts, guided by framing theory. The chapter describes procedures for data collection, sampling, and analysis as well as actions needed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness. It demonstrates how the selected methods align with the theoretical perspectives and research questions.

Chapter Four–Media Portrayal of Public Relations

This chapter presents findings on how public relations is portrayed in New Zealand's news media. Using framing theory as a foundation, it analyses the contextual, manifest, and latent themes in news texts, supported by figures and quotes. It also discusses findings in relation to the research question RQ1, emphasising how media frames can shape cultural and professional understandings of public relations and connecting them to previous research.

Chapter Five–Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations

This chapter, a themed chapter, presents the research findings on journalists' perceptions of public relations in New Zealand, derived from the transcript analysis of the interviews with the news media journalists in New Zealand. Using attribution theory as an analytical framework, it addresses research questions RQ2 and RQ3 by analysing findings on journalists' perceptions of public relations and the factors that shape those perceptions, including newsroom practices, professional norms, and personal experiences. The chapter relates these findings to existing scholarship and highlights their implications for journalist-public relations dynamics and for the profession more broadly.

Chapters 4 and 5 are organised as themed chapters, integrating findings and discussion to facilitate immediate contextual understanding for the reader. This approach not only makes it easier to grasp the information but also avoids repetition, which is common in traditional formats where the discussion restates the findings before interpreting them. By integrating these parts, the text clearly connects findings to their meanings, keeps the narrative simple and focused, and suggests how journalists' perceptions relate to media framing across the three research questions.

Chapter Six—Integrating Framing and Attribution: From Journalists' Perceptions to Media Portrayals of Public Relations

This chapter theorises the 'framing-attribution interplay' by integrating theories, relevant scholarship, empirical data from the news stories and interviews analysed in Chapters 4 and 5, and a contextual interpretation of journalists' meaning-making practices. It also examines how journalists perceive their experiences with public relations and how this perception can influence their media portrayal. The experiences are explored through analytical lenses of causality and professional boundaries to understand the collective framing of public relations in the media. This chapter is purposefully organised as a synthesis chapter that progresses from explanations at the micro level to those at the macro level. It starts by defining framing and attribution as cognitive processes, looks at how these processes influence professional identity, and then situates them within broader institutional and power structures. The goal is to demonstrate how different interpretations relate to broader journalistic routines and media portrayals of public relations.

Chapter Seven—Conclusion and Recommendations

This final chapter synthesises the findings across the three research questions, showing how framing and attribution processes intersect to shape portrayals of public relations in the news media. It revisits the research aims and draws together insights from both thematic strands, namely, journalistic perceptions and media portrayals. It consolidates these insights and builds on them in four areas. First, it explains how the

findings reflect journalists' perceptions and portrayals of public relations. Second, it considers the practical impacts on journalists, practitioners, and organisations, such as the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ). Third, it discusses the theoretical and practical implications for public relations practice and relevant dynamics between the media and public relations in New Zealand. Finally, it highlights potential research pathways to investigate further the cultural and structural factors shaping these interprofessional perceptions and portrayals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted that the public perception of the public relations profession can be influenced by its portrayal in the media. It also emphasised that the language journalists use in news stories can influence the public perception of any topic, including public relations. It is, therefore, crucial to understand how journalists describe public relations in their narratives, as distorted media depictions may influence audience perceptions. In this context, this chapter focuses on reviewing past studies concerning two main areas: (a) the portrayal of public relations in news media, particularly in New Zealand and (b) journalists' perceptions and attitudes toward the profession. Accordingly, the literature identifies several key issues that shape journalists' perceptions and the portrayal of public relations in the news media, specifically, ambiguity in its roles and practices, the ongoing process of its professionalisation, the dynamics of the journalist-practitioner relationship, and the challenges posed by a rapidly changing media environment. This chapter also discusses the study's theoretical framework, which applies framing theory to elucidate how media narratives shape representations of public relations and attribution theory to explore how journalists perceive their interactions with practitioners. The chapter highlights the importance of the current study, setting the stage for an in-depth exploration of the study area.

2.1 Public Relations Definition and Practice

2.1.1 Public Relations Definition

The lack of a single, agreed-upon definition of public relations emphasises the variety of perspectives within the industry and the dynamic context in which it operates. Industry associations' practice-based definitions (CIPR, n.d.; IPRA, n.d.; PRINZ, n.d.; PRSA, n.d.) differ from scholarly definitions based on theoretical viewpoints (Cutlip, 2013b; Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Harlow, 1976; Hutton, 1999; L'Etang, 2011). This section

examines how different perspectives on public relations shape how the public views it. It highlights the importance of a unified framework and effective communication to build the public relations industry's credibility and define its identity in a changing environment.

2.1.1.1 Academic Perspective of Public Relations

Academic definitions of public relations have historically emphasised its theoretical and strategic roles, particularly in organisational management. Harlow (1976) provided a key overview of 472 definitions, describing public relations as a "distinctive management function" (p. 36). His views were shaped by his background in journalism and his role in founding the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Other scholars with similar backgrounds further expanded this management-focused perspective. Grunig and Hunt (1984), both with backgrounds in journalism and economics, defined public relations as "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics" (p. 6). Similarly, Cutlip et al. (2006) framed public relations as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 22). These scholars emphasise communication as a strategic tool for achieving organisational goals, influenced by their training in media and organisational communication.

However, this managerial framing of public relations is not universally accepted. L'Etang (2008), in her critical and reflexive view, noted that scholars' backgrounds and beliefs influence how they define public relations. She stated that public relations is about analysing how an organisation's actions can affect its relationships and reputation, which highlights its ethical and social aspects. Other scholars also emphasised the importance of relationships and social context when defining public relations. Heath (2001), drawing from rhetorical and critical communication traditions, defined public relations as "a relationship-building professional activity" that enhances public support (p. 8). Hallahan et al. (2007) described it as a process to "establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with key

constituencies” (p. 6), while Hutton (2007) contended that legitimising “relationship management” (p. 53) as a central paradigm remained a key challenge. Ihlen and van Ruler (2007) added a sociological perspective, urging scholars to consider how public relations operates within broader societal systems and discourse. More recent research has demonstrated that defining public relations is a challenging task, more so because it is a multifaceted field shaped by a range of disciplinary and ideological influences, as reflected in its numerous paradigms (Adi & Stoeckle, 2022; Borah et al., 2017; Kumar, 2014). Parastiwi and Darmastuti (2020) argued that public relations is an evolving concept, particularly given the ongoing impact of digital technologies on communication practices.

There are several challenges concerning this definitional plurality. All other entities, including practitioners, educators, and the public, struggle to develop a cohesive understanding of the discipline when scholars cannot agree on the fundamentals of public relations (Botan & Hazleton, 2010; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). The profession is often misrepresented as mere 'spin' or 'PR stunt', which obscures its complexity and diversity (Demetrious et al., 2024) and can harm its reputation (Edwards, 2012; Moloney, 2006). Although public relations studies have placed more emphasis on ethics, Jackson et al. (2022) noted that the field remained 'unbalanced' and fragmented, making it more challenging to establish a unified professional identity. It is therefore essential to engage in a dialogue to formulate a definition that is both inclusive and considers the complexities of public relations in meeting society's evolving needs (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007).

2.1.1.2 Industry Perspective of Public Relations

Various public relations associations worldwide created definitions of public relations that emphasise the operational dimension, apart from academic definitions that emphasise the field's theoretical dimension. According to PRSA, the largest professional organisation in the US representing communication professionals, “public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics”

(PRSA, n.d.). The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), a UK-based association for practitioners, defines public relations as reputation management: “Public relations is about reputation.... It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (CIPR, n.d.). The emphasis on planning and mutual understanding between organisations and their publics in the CIPR definition is also evident in the definition provided by the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ): “...the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding and excellent communication between an organisation and its publics” (PRINZ, n.d.). The new definition of public relations offered by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), a global network of practitioners based in the UK, informs the researcher’s understanding of public relations as it aims to clarify what, why, and how of public relations:

Public relations is a decision-making management practice [What is public relations?] responsible for building relationships and interests between organisations and their publics [Why do we do public relations?] based on delivering information through trusted and ethical communication methods [How is it done?] (IPRA, n.d.).

Several scholars have argued that the definitions offered by public relations scholars and association members are viewed as self-serving by the public, undermining the credibility they strive to uphold (Cernicova-Buca, 2016; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008; Palea, 2012).

2.1.2 Practice Paradigms of Public Relations

While there are no widely accepted definitions of public relations, there is no widely recognised public relations practice paradigm either. Researchers recognise that public relations encompasses different paradigms, reflecting its range of theories and practices. However, a primary focus on functionalism still shapes many areas, emphasising strategic management, organisational goals, communication efficiency, and resolution of practical problems (Grunig, 2006; L’Etang, 2008). The multiple public relations paradigms range from publicity-driven models, such as the press agency/publicity model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), to

relationship-building strategies, including the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig, 2006, 2013) and the dialogic paradigm (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Such plurality of paradigms may demonstrate confusion about the practice of public relations. However, it may also reveal the maturing and broadening of public relations as a discipline capable of encompassing both managerial and societal perspectives.

Long-term stakeholder engagement supersedes communication as the primary focus of the relationship management paradigm (Ki & Hon, 2007; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The strategic management paradigm views public relations as an essential part of organisational strategy (Ledingham, 2003). The co-creational approach stresses collaborating to generate shared meaning, in contrast to traditional communication models that emphasise one-way messaging (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2006). At the same time, the rhetorical and critical perspectives (Heath, 2001; L'Etang, 2008, 2014) and the postmodern approach (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Holtzhausen, 2000) push back against traditional public relations methods. They encourage strategies that consider different viewpoints and the complexities of power dynamics. This shift highlights the importance of listening to and engaging with diverse opinions rather than solely promoting a single narrative. Furthermore, public relations is increasingly viewed as a tool for activism and social change (activist paradigm) (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2013), functioning within cultural contexts (socio-cultural paradigm) (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009) and intersecting with marketing and branding (integrated marketing communication paradigm) (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009, 2013; Kliatchko, 2008; Mersham et al., 2009).

The literature reviewed here reveals a lack of general consistency in either the definition or practice of public relations. This lack of consensus is more than a theoretical issue, as it can directly shape how the field is portrayed in the media. Conflicting definitions in the field can create confusion, leading the media to simplify it as mere 'spin' or manipulation due to unclear professional identity and standard editorial practices.

As mentioned previously, the various perspectives of public relations highlight its intellectual growth. According to Toth (2009), public relations operates across corporate, relational, and activist spheres, which complicates a singular definition. Several other studies support this viewpoint. For instance, a recent review of the last hundred years found a shift in how public relations functions are viewed (Hollenczer et al., 2023). At the same time, computational modelling showed that the strategic management approach is important, but not the only one (Zhou et al., 2023). For a long time, functionalism, led by Grunig's excellence theory, has been the primary focus in this field. Contingency theory also supports this practical perspective.

In contrast, scholars such as Holtzhausen (2013) linked postmodern and critical theories by examining public relations as a form of activism. Taylor (1998) combined ideas about relationships with social constructivism, explaining that knowledge is created through interactions with others. Shin and Burk (2024) outlined seven main characteristics that demonstrate the complexity of public relations and why it is hard to define. These include: (1) definitions that focus on the words 'public', 'relations', or both; (2) the impact of differences in practice across cultures and countries; (3) an expanded scope of public relations functions beyond traditional media relations, including marketing communications and crisis management; (4) the application of public relations within specific subject areas, such as healthcare, politics, and sport; (5) emphasis on particular public relations elements like ethics and engagement; (6) focus on the expertise and qualifications of practitioners; and (7) the integration of critical and postmodern theoretical perspectives that challenge conventional assumptions.

This section highlighted that the diversity of public relations paradigms can confuse the public and the media. However, this diversity can also show that the field is becoming more complex. This confusion helps explain why the media often misrepresents public relations and does not capture its professional and ethical intentions. It provides an essential

foundation for exploring the gap between how public relations is practised and how it is portrayed in the media, including the underlying factors that shape these misalignments.

2.1.3 The Identity Crisis and Its Consequences

Public relations' long-standing failure to establish a coherent and widely accepted definition has contributed to what Hutton (1999) termed an "identity crisis", leaving the profession vulnerable to encroachment by adjacent disciplines, such as marketing and advertising, and to critics who associate it with "spin control" and "spin doctoring" (pp. 199–200). This assertion has been supported by several other scholars (Dawson, 2018, August 14; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; Reed, 2013; Sha, 2018; Stan, 2016, June 06; Thurlow, 2009), all of whom pointed to the definitional fragmentation that has undermined public relations' credibility, confused its external image, and contributed to the reassignment of its functions to other departments within organisations.

As Hutton (2007) further argued, the absence of a precise definition of public relations has led to a misunderstanding of its purpose, thereby reducing its professional influence. Even practitioners have often avoided using the term 'public relations' in favour of 'corporate communications' or 'public affairs' to avoid its negative connotations (Gregory, 2020).

Internally, the lack of a distinct identity has weakened the public relations role within organisations. As a result, public relations functions are absorbed into other departments, such as marketing, human resources, or larger communications teams, which may further diminish the strategic importance of public relations (Gregory, 2020; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). In addition to undermining the autonomy of public relations, this marginalisation may disintegrate the field's professional identity and perpetuates views of it as a supporting role rather than a fundamental strategic discipline, framing it as something people understand, such as communication management.

This ongoing struggle for public relations to establish a clear professional identity may also increase the likelihood of negative media portrayals. Because the role of public relations is

open to interpretation, as Lee (2019) observed, public uncertainty about its actual function often reinforces the perception that it is fundamentally manipulative. Similarly, Theunissen and Sissons (2017) found that journalists' strong link of public relations with 'spin' affects how they view the profession. All these findings demonstrate how the lack of a cohesive identity has hindered public relations' strategic position within organisations and solidified negative media portrayals that blur its ethical and societal importance.

Nevertheless, it is critical to recognise that public relations plays an important role in today's complex media environment; it helps organisations communicate effectively with their audiences in a two-way manner, which is essential for building strong relationships (Dowling, 2025; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Obasi, 2024). It is also essential to recognise that journalism and public relations are not the same. Journalism concentrates on objective fact reporting and verification, whereas public relations focuses on strategic communication designed to manage relationships between organisations and their publics (Deuze, 2005; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L'Etang, 2008; Moloney, 2006). Building trust, managing a company's reputation, and managing crises are the goals of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Grunig & Grunig, 2013). Building trust in public relations requires open dialogue and engagement with stakeholders (Heath, 2006). Public relations supports journalism by providing timely, relevant information that advances transparency and public discourse rather than damaging it (Moloney, 2006). Toth (2009) claimed that the adaptability and emphasis on communication in this field make it essential in the digital age. To address oversimplified views and show that public relations is a strategic and ethical profession, it is important to recognise its important role within today's media landscape (Edwards, 2012; Moloney, 2006). Acknowledging public relations' strategic and ethical contributions legitimises the field. It offers a counter-narrative to long-standing journalistic scepticism, which often overlooks the collaborative potential between these professions in serving the public interest.

2.2 The Professionalisation of Public Relations

Persistent lapses in the professionalisation of public relations, such as a lack of a clear definition, inconsistent ethical guidelines, weak accreditation systems, and little regulatory oversight, have led to public mistrust and reinforced negative stereotypes (Hutton, 1999; L'Etang, 2008; Sha, 2018). These lapses have made it hard for the field to meet the standards of a recognised profession. Consequently, it lacks formal training, ethical guidelines, and a coherent body of knowledge (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024; Gregory, 2020; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; Pardon, 2024). Public relations is frequently misinterpreted, typically reduced to strategies such as spin, manipulation, publicity, or image control, rather than viewed as a constructive and beneficial career that emphasises relationship-building. This section examines how such professional shortcomings may influence the public perception of the field and continue to impact its credibility and status in both media discourse and organisational contexts.

2.2.1 Challenges in Establishing Professionalism in Public Relations

As mentioned above, public relations has struggled to establish its distinct professional identity, frequently being confused with journalism, marketing, or advertising. Although these fields utilise similar communication strategies and target audiences, their fundamental objectives vary greatly (Gesualdi, 2019, January 06). Advertising focuses on paid promotion, marketing on customer acquisition and sales, and journalism on independent reporting for public information. In contrast, public relations centres on establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their various publics through strategic, often unpaid, two-way communication (Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig, 2006, 2013; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; PRSA, n.d.). Recognising these distinctions is essential for the professionalisation of public relations. If the field lacks a clear identity of its values and practices, it may be misunderstood, pushed to the sidelines in organisations, or seen only as a tool for spin or publicity (Hutton, 1999; L'Etang, 2008; Sha, 2018).

This challenge in establishing professionalism has fuelled the debate over whether public relations should be categorised as a nascent profession (Bowen, 2007), a semi-profession (Dozier, 2013), or just an occupation (L'Etang, 2004, 2008, 2014; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006). Public relations in New Zealand began its path toward professionalisation with the establishment of PRINZ in 1954, marking the first step in professionalisation for practitioners (PRINZ, n.d.). Although public relations in New Zealand became formally recognised as a distinct profession with the establishment of PRINZ, its origins as an occupation can be traced back to the period following World War II, starting in 1945. The creation of PRINZ gave practitioners a way to come together and improve their skills. It also helped promote a better understanding of the field and encouraged a code of ethics. Despite these developments, the public relations profession in New Zealand is still grouped under 'sales and marketing' (ANZSCO, 2022). Such failure to portray public relations as a unique service may affect public relations' perception.

The goal for greater professionalisation of public relations has been the subject of longstanding debate (De Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Fitch, 2016; Yang & Taylor, 2013, 2014). According to Fitch (2016), the professionalisation of public relations refers to the processes used by professional associations and practitioners to position public relations as a unique service over which they have a monopoly. The global public relations market was valued at US\$88 billion in 2020 and was projected to reach US\$129 billion by 2025, growing at a cumulative annual rate of 7.4% (Fact.MR, 2022). As the public relations industry grows in economic value and influence, it faces intensified expectations for professionalisation to demonstrate consistent standards of quality, competence, ethical practice, and accountability that legitimise its expanding role (Yang & Taylor, 2013, 2014). The pursuit of such professional recognition is also tied to the profession's aspiration for greater respect, prestige, a positive public image, and legitimacy (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008; Li et al., 2012; Park, 2003).

2.2.2 Professionalisation and Public Perception of Public Relations

The ongoing effort to professionalise public relations directly affects how it is perceived by the public, the media, and even within organisations. While progress has been made toward establishing public relations as a legitimate profession through formal education, ethical standards, accreditation processes, and professional associations, significant gaps remain. Standardised education and ongoing training are important for professionalising public relations. They help define the skills needed to work in the field and support its recognition as a knowledge-based discipline (Fitch, 2014; Kaur, 2020; Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg, 2009; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2001, 2006). However, inconsistency in public relations curricula across various institutions and different countries often results in variations in practitioners' competence, fuelling external perceptions that the field lacks rigour, professionalism, standardised benchmarks for practice, and credibility, thereby affecting the overall reputation of the field (Fitch, 2014; Grunig & Grunig, 2013; L'Etang, 2008; Tsetsura, 2010).

Many professional associations have established ethics codes to guide behaviour, but inconsistent enforcement of these codes allows unethical practices to persist (Yang & Taylor, 2013). Without strong oversight, even a small amount of unethical behaviour can harm the public relations field, leading people to view public relations as manipulative, deceptive, self-serving, or untrustworthy (Lee, 2019; Theunissen & Sissons, 2017). The field's professional reputation is further undermined by the absence of a universally mandated accreditation procedure. In countries such as New Zealand and the US, the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) is available; however, it is not essential. Because accreditation is not mandatory, individuals can enter and advance in the profession without formal training or qualifications. This lack of compulsory accreditation undermines the profession's reputation. This situation is different from fields, such as law, medicine, or engineering, where a formal education is essential. While it is easier for people to enter the field of public relations, this can harm the profession's reputation, making it harder for the

public to trust the skills of those who work in public relations (Bernays, 1979, 2017; Sha, 2011).

Research from different countries shows ongoing problems in applying key aspects of professional standards. These aspects involve enforcing ethical practices, providing proper accreditation, ensuring consistent education, and implementing effective regulations (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008; De Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Gupta, 2007; Kirat, 2016; Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008). While some associations are starting to adopt a firmer stance against unethical practices (Kolić Stanić, 2019), these efforts vary in their visibility and consistency for the public. Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) identified four main reasons why people are sceptical of public relations. First, there is a confusing connection between truth and public relations content. Second, professional organisations argue about whether to support their members or maintain high standards. Third, it is easy to move into senior roles without many requirements. Finally, there are no clear ways to measure success in the field. These structural deficiencies make it difficult for the public to see public relations as a principled, knowledge-based profession, fuelling portrayals of it as spin or a tool for image manipulation.

The literature above shows that recognising public relations as a profession is important for how others view the field. If there are no clear standards and a shared professional identity, people will continue to misunderstand and undervalue public relations. Improving professionalism is essential for building trust within the organisation and for changing how people view public relations, recognising it as a valuable function in society.

2.3 Public Perceptions of Public Relations

Practitioners frequently strive to shape public opinion. However, they paradoxically struggle with a negative perception among the very audiences they intend to engage (Callison, 2001). This section examines the existing research on how the public perceives public relations. It highlights key factors, namely, historical, ethical, and operational, that can cause

people to be sceptical, arguing that improving public awareness of public relations depends on a strong commitment to ethical practices and clear communication.

2.3.1 Historical Origins of Distrust

People often view public relations negatively, partly because of its early ties to political propaganda. Before World War I, many saw public relations efforts as a means of manipulating democracy. This viewpoint is supported by De Lorme and Fedler (2003) and Miller and Dinan (2008). As Miller and Dinan (2008) observed: “Public relations was established to undermine and obstruct the process of democratic decision-making... ensuring vested interests prevail” (p. 11). Similarly, Snow (2004) described public relations as “a propaganda technique to assign a sense of meaning to the meaningless” (p. 31). Public relations and propaganda are becoming increasingly similar, according to critics such as Penning (2008) and Gelders and Ihlen (2010), making it difficult to recognise the ethical boundaries of the industry. Moloney (2006) described the overlap as “weak propaganda” (p. 41). This term describes strategies that discreetly influence public opinion by changing how information is shared (Ellul, 2021). It illustrates how certain strategies can influence public perception, even when they seem harmless, which makes it difficult to distinguish between propaganda and ethical public relations. The public perception of public relations as a professional and ethical area is further harmed by these conceptual and historical links (L'Etang, 2008; Moloney & McGrath, 2019).

2.3.2 Persistent Scepticism and Misunderstanding

Public perception studies show that people have low trust in practitioners. Callison (2004) found that the profession is seen as untrustworthy. Sallot (2002) suggested that people do not trust practitioners because they believe they have selfish motives. This scepticism is deepened by widespread views of public relations as crisis control, publicity stunts, or corporate image management—practices that effectively distort the truth (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). Even successful public relations campaigns often do not lead to a positive

public image. Moloney and McGrath (2019) noted that, despite industry growth, public trust has not improved.

People are often sceptical about public relations because of its history with propaganda and actions that have led to negative views of the profession. These negative perceptions weaken its credibility in society (Moloney & McGrath, 2019; Sallot, 2002). Media reports often create a negative view of practitioners. They portray them mainly as 'spin doctors'. According to Zugazaga et al. (2006), such media portrayals of practitioners feed a negative perception that not only misrepresents the profession but also undermines public trust. Due to the limited options available for learning about public relations, many individuals often turn to the media. The media becomes their primary source when readily available options for interaction or information are not available. Examining closely how public relations is portrayed in the media might yield insights. Coombs and Holladay (2013) stated that such research can assess if depictions adhere to industry best practices and ethics. In line with the ideas presented by L'Etang (2008) and Moloney and McGrath (2019), this strategy emphasises the importance of understanding public perception in developing successful public relations initiatives.

2.3.3 The Media's Role in Shaping Public Distrust of Public Relations

The negative public perception of public relations can be traced to its historical portrayal in the media, as discussed in sections 2.6 and 2.7. In his research on how the media portrayed public relations in New Zealand, Sterne (2010) noted that very few members of the public engaged with practitioners, and many based their perceptions of public relations on what they encountered in the media. The author claimed that the inflammatory metaphors used in the media to describe the field "denigrate the profession in the minds of the public" (Sterne, 2010, p. 5).

Many theories about communication and media explain how audiences understand and respond to media content. These theories show that audience reactions vary and are

influenced by different thinking, feelings, and surrounding circumstances. For instance, the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how individuals use two primary cognitive routes to engage with the media: the 'central route', emphasising the importance of critical thinking and a thorough evaluation of the arguments presented and the 'peripheral route', which relies on simple cues unrelated to the main argument, such as the credibility or attractiveness of the source, the number of times a message is repeated, emotional tone, or headline framing. This model explains why some audiences analyse media messages carefully, while others form interpretations based on mental shortcuts or superficial impressions.

Research shows that most people engage in rapid, low-effort thinking when consuming media, often relying on cognitive shortcuts (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). This tendency toward heuristic processing supports the dual-route processing model, which proposes that information is understood either through a fast, heuristic route or a slower, systematic route. People often use shortcuts when interacting with media, which can result in misunderstandings, particularly with biased or oversimplified content (Zhang et al., 2024). A person's interpretation of news is shaped by their cultural background, social status, and personal values (Hall, 1980). Therefore, there can be two key reasons why public relations is often misunderstood: (a) the media shape the public's impression of the profession, and (b) viewers interpret these viewpoints in light of their own beliefs and experiences. Regular exposure to the same material can reinforce preconceived notions or unfavourable sentiments (White & Park, 2010). This viewpoint is supported by framing theory (Entman, 1993, 2007; Scheufele, 1999) (covered in length in Section 2.8) that shows how the manner in which information is presented can affect its interpretation.

According to the social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), people imitate attitudes and actions through repeated exposure to media. Confirmation bias affects how people understand information. It causes them to ignore evidence that contradicts their beliefs and

to pay attention to and remember information that supports what they already think (Nickerson, 1998; Stroud, 2008). This interpretation implies that those who are already sceptical of public relations are more likely to accept unfavourable portrayals in the media, thereby reinforcing their existing opinions.

At the same time, personal relevance can help lessen certain effects. When people find a topic personally important or related to their jobs, they are more likely to think critically about it rather than rely on simple cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Thus, while media framing and audience predispositions both play influential roles in shaping perceptions of public relations, media effects research emphasises that these influences are not uniform (Entman, 1993; McQuail, 2010). Instead, audience motivation, situational context, and how a message is framed all work together to shape how the media portrays public relations (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This means that the way the media influences people's views of public relations varies among individuals. Therefore, it is essential to understand how different audiences respond to the media portrayal of public relations to comprehend how the public views the field. This knowledge can be used to assess the profession's credibility and general perception (Callison, 2004; Spicer, 1993).

2.3.4 Ethical Challenges in Public Relations

Scepticism is frequently the result of a major ethical conundrum in public relations. Practitioners must balance their clients' needs with the public's right to honest and transparent information, going beyond mere procedural compliance. Although truth and advocacy are not inherently incompatible, conflict arises when advocacy involves the purposeful selection and concealing of information. The main issue, as noted by Englehardt and Evans (1994), is the clash between advocacy and truth—advocacy often distorts reality by focusing on a narrow perspective driven by client interests, thereby limiting public understanding.

Practitioners may share only selective details to protect clients' reputations, creating ethical dilemmas amid the public's demand for transparency (Gaara et al., 2024; Jiang, 2024). In this situation, truth is not a neutral or complete set of facts; it is a shaped narrative that fits the goals of an organisation, raising doubts about whether this type of communication can be considered truthful at all. Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) explained that a communication can be technically correct but still lack ethical openness if it omits important details. This is especially true for details that could influence public opinion. According to Christians et al. (2017), the conflict here is between strategic messaging and ethical truthfulness rather than between advocacy and truth. When public relations is used to put the reputation of the client ahead of the public's understanding, it risks undermining trust. This issue is not because advocacy is unethical per se, but rather because the truth it frequently offers is partial and possibly deceptive (Bowen, 2009; Gaara et al., 2024).

When addressing the ethical challenges presented by modern media practices, it is crucial to define what is meant by ethical public relations. Ethics in public relations can mean different things in various cultures and professions. Nonetheless, fundamental values, such as honesty, openness, respect for everyone, responsibility, and a commitment to the public good, are usually part of communication ethics (Fawkes, 2018; Johnston & Pieczka, 2018). People may have different views on ethics, but professional rules provide clear guidance. For example, the PRSA emphasises honesty and informed decision-making (PRSA, n.d.), the CIPR emphasises fairness and integrity in communication (CIPR, n.d.), and the Global Alliance encourages moral communication that upholds democracy and fosters public trust (Global Alliance, n.d.). These principles reinforce the idea that ethical public relations extends beyond serving client interests and involves broader responsibilities to society and the integrity of public communication.

An ethical dilemma in public relations happens when practitioners must choose between different responsibilities or values. They may have to decide between helping their client's

goals and protecting the public's interest (Bowen, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2003). Such dilemmas often arise in unclear situations. A practice might not be illegal or banned, but could still raise ethical concerns, which is especially true when technology can mislead, control, or harm people (Baker & Martinson, 2003; Parsons, 2016). Making moral choices often requires more than just following the law. It also means considering what is right and the larger impact of words on society (Bowen, 2005). It is important to separate real ethical issues from challenges related to strategy or operations in public relations. Not every decision in this field has moral implications. However, choices become ethical when they affect audience freedom, public trust, informed consent, or when they spread false information (Fawkes, 2014; Johnston & Pieczka, 2018). In this thesis, 'ethical dilemmas' refer specifically to practices that have the potential to compromise transparency, exploit power imbalances, or undermine the credibility of public discourse—issues that are central to both the PRSA Code of Ethics (PRSA, 2011) and the Global Alliance's Code of Ethical Principles (Global Alliance, n.d.), which stress truthfulness, accountability, and respect for all stakeholders.

The main challenge is to protect both public and client interests while maintaining openness and honesty. Public trust suffers when the focus is too much on protecting corporate interests. Audiences become suspicious when they perceive public relations campaigns as prioritising limiting damage or concealing information to safeguard their clients over open and sincere discussions about the issues, which is often considered an authenticity problem (Sallot, 2002). Public scepticism grows because people see public relations as more focused on maintaining a good image than helping the common good (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). These views create lasting beliefs that public relations mainly involves propaganda and spin. The profession's attempts to forge a distinct, reliable, and moral identity are hampered by this impression. The selective distribution of information often fosters stereotypes, contributing to the perception that public relations is manipulative or dishonest (Theunissen & Sissons, 2017).

2.3.5 Rebuilding Trust: Towards Ethical and Transparent Public Relations

The literature reviewed in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.4 shows a constant struggle in public relations. Many people, including scholars and the public, often feel that public relations focuses too much on helping organisations. This emphasis can result in a lack of transparency, accountability, and honesty. This perception is not unfounded. Due to high-profile incidents in which practitioners concealed information, fabricated stories, or deceived individuals, public relations often has a poor reputation (Johnston, 2016; Moloney, 2006). These situations garner media attention because they draw attention to widespread issues that, in the worst-case scenario, public relations might mislead or distort. Incidents like these not only harm the organisations but also create distrust among the public toward the entire profession, and this can even undermine the efforts of the practitioners who adhere to ethical standards.

Contemporary accountability in public relations involves openness, responsibility, and accessibility, enabling individuals to scrutinise through digital channels (Macnamara, 2018, 2023). Unlike traditional accountability, which was often limited to internal review or post-crisis explanation, modern accountability involves real-time feedback, participatory dialogue, and a recognition that organisations must be constantly answerable to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, stakeholder groups (Christensen et al., 2015; Macnamara, 2016). Social media and citizen journalism make it difficult for organisations to control their messaging. As a result, customers are more aware and want businesses to be accountable (Hermida, 2015; Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). Being accountable entails more than just abiding by the law; it also involves transparency and regularly outlining organisations' actions (Demetrious, 2013, 2022). In modern public relations, engaging stakeholders is essential to enhancing brand image. Nevertheless, research shows that genuine engagement, in which businesses genuinely consider and address the concerns of their stakeholders, remains rare (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Motion et al., 2015). When companies do not engage in real ways, the

concept of involvement can become a front. This facade may hide rather than fix imbalances of power.

Finally, to better understand how media portrayals affect public relations perceptions, more research is required. The 'spin doctor' label misrepresents the field by implying that its primary objective is manipulation. Despite their exaggeration, these depictions can have a big impact on the real world. As already discussed in section 2.3.3, public perceptions of public relations can be influenced by how the media portrays the field. This portrayal can also shape how new professionals understand their ethical duties and what schools teach about these responsibilities. To recognise the challenges public relations faces in gaining respect and legitimacy, it is essential to know how the media portrays the field.

In summary, the literature emphasises that rebuilding trust in public relations necessitates more than merely advocating for transparency. Practitioners need to reassess their practices to comply with current standards of ethics and engage with stakeholders. These issues demonstrate why this study focuses specifically on the media's role in reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives about public relations.

2.4 The Relationships between Public Relations Practitioners and Journalists

Various research studies investigating the interactions between practitioners and journalists have shown a complex and frequently strained relationship. These relationships are valuable because they can shape journalists' perceptions of public relations (Sterne, 2010). By analysing the historical underpinnings and current conflicts, while noting opportunities for improvement, the literature referenced in this section offers hope for a better future in this relationship.

2.4.1 Historical Background and Origins of Hostility

The hostility between journalists and practitioners began after World War I, when trade newspapers feared that publicists' attempts to secure free publicity would reduce newspaper advertising revenue. Consequently, journalists were urged to discard publicists' handouts (Lucarelli, 1993). According to Delorme and Fedler (2003), the contentious relationship between journalists and practitioners deteriorated due to the use of unethical tactics, including bribes, gifts, and stunts, the practices employed by early publicists (press agents working for entertainment, railroads, and political campaigns, such as P.T. Barnum) to attract media attention and secure free coverage for their organisations or products. Andersen (2007) stated that "they could buy advertising, but even better, they could wheedle and pressure writers to promote their wares for free—clothes, furniture, gadgets, plays, books, ideas, politicians, whatever" (p. ix). Later, as journalists and practitioners attempted to clarify their respective roles, misconceptions and prejudices emerged, resulting in a hostile relationship between the two professions (Stegall & Sanders, 1986). Many practitioners came to view journalists as "incompetent bunglers who quote out of context and sensationalise the negative", while journalists frequently attacked public relations as 'flakery' (Stegall & Sanders, 1986, p. 341). According to Sherwood et al. (2019), the relationship between journalism and public relations has primarily been characterised by conflict, as many journalists' accounts depict public relations as having a dark side and refer to practitioners as purveyors of spin.

Many journalists feel that their professional ideals are violated when they work in public relations. This assumption has led to several studies (Kashaka, 2024; Moore & Murray, 2025; Muarif et al., 2024; Rezaee et al., 2024) demonstrating how journalistic values influencing journalists' behaviour explain the ongoing conflict between journalists and practitioners. The principles and standards of journalism are firmly rooted in a commitment to truthfulness, accuracy, and impartiality, the values that are also recognised within public relations but often pursued within different contextual and organisational imperatives.

Journalism focuses on holding people accountable and staying independent. Public relations, in contrast, works within strategic plans to create narratives that support an organisation's objectives (Kashaka, 2024; Moore & Murray, 2025; Rezaee et al., 2024). Muarif et al. (2024) asserted that the media promotes democracy and serves the public interest. Rather than concentrating on individual or organisational gains, it helps everyone. The focus on serving the public distinguishes journalism from public relations; the latter often promotes specific causes or private interests that may conflict with societal needs. However, it is crucial to recognise that, in democracies where accountability, pluralism, and transparency are fundamental principles, this distinction is most prominent and contentious (Christians et al., 2009; Glasser & Craft, 2002). The functions of public relations and journalism can become confused or politicised in non-democratic environments, where both may be subject to stringent censorship or official control. For instance, public relations may promote government messages or elite opinions rather than engage with the public. Similarly, journalism may act as a tool for official propaganda (Demetrious, 2013; Voltmer, 2013). Therefore, the main setting for this study is liberal democracies, where debates over public relations' ethics, responsibility, and goals are very prevalent. However, the interaction between journalists and practitioners is more complex, and a greater understanding of these dynamics can provide insight into how journalists view practitioners.

2.4.2 Negative Perceptions and Cultural Prejudices

Numerous studies have emphasised the negative perceptions that journalists hold about public relations and its practitioners (Bedi & Gordon, 2023; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Macnamara, 2014; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Sherwood et al., 2019). According to Ryan and Martinson (1988), journalistic culture, which views journalists as superior to practitioners, contributes to journalists' hostility towards public relations, a view reaffirmed in the recent research by Gandy (2023) and Supriadi et al. (2023). According to Gandy (1982, 2023), public perceptions of journalism and public relations are influenced by power disparities. While academics acknowledge journalism as a defender of democracy

and the truth, public relations is often perceived as dishonest. Supriadi et al. (2023) claimed that journalism instructors and textbooks usually depict public relations as a rival rather than an ally. As a result, many students who want to work as journalists may be cautious about public relations even before they start their jobs. Supriadi et al. (2023) also observed that journalism programmes often lack fairness in how they discuss public relations, ignoring the way these two fields complement each other. When public relations is perceived as self-serving or dishonest, a crucial facet of the industry is sometimes overlooked. The collaborative aspect of media production, which is crucial to both industries, is ignored. Creating agendas, establishing connections with sources, and exchanging information are all necessary for effective public relations communication. Conflicts between journalists and practitioners can be made worse by this selective framing, which upholds assumptions and restricts chances for more productive communication.

Journalists often form their views of practitioners based on their professional role and the frequency of their interactions with practitioners. A key factor in this relationship is occupational status. In a seminal study, Aronoff (1975) found that journalists ranked their profession highest among 16 occupations. In contrast, practitioners were rated much lower, usually in third or fourth place. Trust was affected by this perceived status gap: journalists were more likely to regard practitioners as credible only when they viewed them as colleagues. Practitioners were seen as less trustworthy when their standing was considered lower. Jeffers (1977) confirmed this finding, showing journalists treated practitioners they knew personally as equals, while shunning those they viewed as inferior in status. This information suggests that people are more likely to trust their peers when they feel treated equally, rather than based on a practitioner's skill. L'Etang (2008) provided evidence for this idea by noting that journalists' perceptions of practitioners' credibility might be influenced by their reputations and familiarity with them. Furthermore, according to Fawkes (2014), journalists were more likely to give credibility to public relations consultants who were perceived as peers or status-equals, whereas those who were perceived as outsiders

frequently encountered scepticism. These results demonstrated that power relationships and social professional echoes have a greater impact on journalists' perceptions of practitioners than do their abilities or intentions.

This divergence in status and perceptions of credibility highlights a deeper conflict over authority and the management of narratives in media texts (Sissons, 2016). After examining interactions between journalists and their public relations sources recorded during ethnographic fieldwork in New Zealand newsrooms, Sissons (2016) described a blend of resentment and mistrust in the relationships between journalists and practitioners. She concluded that managing and controlling the messages released to the media is at the core of the interaction between journalists and practitioners. Another New Zealand study corroborated this conclusion, finding that, despite their role as gatekeepers and their lack of transparency, practitioners recognised the importance of maintaining good relationships with journalists as “a means to an end” (Theunissen & Sissons, 2017, p. 152).

2.4.3 Interdependence and the Shifting Power Dynamic Between Journalism and Public Relations

Although there are widespread negative perceptions of public relations, a paradox exists in its relationship with journalism: one of interdependence. While journalists are often hesitant to publicly acknowledge the value of public relations, a significant portion of the news they produce is derived from public relations sources. Research shows that public relations materials, such as press releases, spokesperson comments, and media events, account for 40–70% of news content (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Gandy, 1982, 2023; Lewis et al., 2008; Macnamara, 1993, 2012). According to Obermaier et al. (2018), journalists themselves reported that public relations had an impact on about one-third of their reporting.

The growing use of public relations content shows that journalism is becoming less important. Simons and Strovsky (2019) pointed out that this trend stems from the increasing collaboration between the two fields in creating media content. Public relations, in this

context, has been described as entering a 'golden era', particularly through its use of 'disintermediatisation', that is, the process by which organisations bypass conventional media to directly engage with the public through digital platforms such as social media (Iturregui-Mardaras et al., 2020). Even though 'disintermediatisation' creates more chances for communication, Macnamara (2014) warned that it can weaken journalistic gatekeeping. This weakening may lead to the spread of misinformation and propaganda, which could "corrupt the public realm" (p. 746). He later described the growing dominance of public relations content in media, termed the "PR-isation of the media" (p. 122), as a widespread phenomenon reshaping public discourse (Macnamara, 2016).

Such interdependence establishes a complex dynamic where journalists rely on and criticise practitioners. Macnamara (2016) provided two explanations for this paradox. First, journalists considered only content presented at press conferences and events, as well as press releases, to be public relations; they did not consider many other public communication activities to be part of public relations. For instance, most of the content on government and corporate websites, as well as a large portion of their social media communications, is produced by practitioners. Similarly, practitioner-coordinated research studies, reports, exclusive interviews, and visits by global VIPs that journalists flock to meet and cite are frequently, if not entirely, public relations initiatives. Journalists often describe practitioners who are helpful to their work as "good contacts," "experts," or "trusted sources," rather than simply calling them practitioners. This phenomenon is referred to as "public relations acculturation" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 131). Macnamara (2016) argued that although there are challenges between journalism and public relations, they can build better relationships through mutual understanding and open communication. However, they need to recognise ongoing issues such as power imbalances, the rise of public relations-generated content in news, and direct communication from public relations to audiences without involving journalists. These circumstances raise ethical concerns about accountability and transparency, even as they offer opportunities for journalists and

practitioners to collaborate. To foster trust and promote sincere engagement, practitioners should be transparent about the sources of their information, their objectives, and the people who endorse it. For journalists, working with public relations does not mean losing their independence. It involves upholding standards for objectivity and fact-checking while recognising public relations as a trustworthy information source. Honest talks between practitioners and journalists can improve how they communicate with the public. Journalists check the facts from public relations, while public relations helps create a responsive media environment. Working together respectfully can strengthen democratic discussions and help the public understand better.

2.4.4 Domains of Conflict

Many studies have shown that journalists often perceive practitioners as making it difficult for them to obtain news quickly and accurately (Bedi & Gordon, 2023; Callard, 2011; Jo & Doh, 2024; Sissons, 2016; White & Hobsbawm, 2007). Journalists have expressed frustration that some practitioners do not fully understand what it means to uphold journalistic standards. They feel that many seem to struggle with key news values, such as timeliness, relevance, and clarity (Bedi & Gordon, 2023; Callard, 2011; Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Sissons, 2016; Supa & Zoch, 2022).

Despite public relations being frequently criticised, many journalists transition into this field. This trend demonstrates that there is more to the link between journalism and public relations than just animosity. Better salary, a better work-life balance, and greater job stability are the main reasons why journalists switch to public relations (Fedler & Pennington, 2003; Iturregui-Mardaras et al., 2020; Nayman et al., 1977; Viererbl & Koch, 2021). This change suggests that their unfavourable opinions of public relations might be more a matter of perception than of genuine conviction. Burton (2007) noted that journalists often turn to public relations because of constant pressure and tight deadlines. This shift happens not just for money but also because they struggle to pick important topics to cover. Interestingly,

though, many journalists who moved into public relations still felt pessimistic and disillusioned with the field they had entered. Callard (2011) found that while newspaper journalists recognised that public relations offered a better work-life balance and greater pay, most stated they would not switch to public relations, primarily because they felt journalism provided more fulfilling employment. These conflicting viewpoints highlight the complexity of the relationship between journalists and practitioners.

Many journalists express dissatisfaction with public relations for distorting or misrepresenting the truth. However, they often utilise public relations content, even while criticising it and claiming it leads to biased reporting. Moloney (2006) argued that in an egalitarian state, public relations can make arguments more equitable, engaging, and appealing, increasing the likelihood of uncovering the truth. Nonetheless, it has been criticised for promoting self-serving messages that introduce bias. Moloney (2006) cautioned against the “PR-ization of the media” (p. 4) and advised journalists to examine public relations material thoroughly, pinpoint its sources, and verify it before publishing. Supporting this viewpoint, Gapsiso (2018) advised the media to regularly confirm and double-check information supplied by practitioners before reporting it. This strategy strengthens ties with journalists’ audiences and promotes trust. These results are important because they show how conflicted journalists are about public relations. They regard it as both a helpful resource and a risk. This divergent viewpoint can shape the media portrayal of public relations. Negative perceptions of public relations as deceptive or untrustworthy are often driven by inherent tensions and dependencies within the media profession. This study examines how journalists’ perceptions and industry standards can shape media portrayal of public relations and how the two fields relate to each other. Gaining insight into this relationship is crucial to the research.

2.4.5 Evolving Perspectives and Opportunities for Partnership

A few studies, however, indicate a shift in journalists' perspectives, as some recognise the value of developing positive relationships with practitioners. The 2021 PR Media Report, published by the public relations firm Global Results Communication, summarised the findings from a survey of over 1,000 US journalists, demonstrating how journalists' perspectives on practitioners had evolved (Global Results PR, 2021). Most journalists regarded their relationship with practitioners as necessary, with only 10% considering it unimportant. The survey revealed that over 80% of journalists depended on public relations for news. This finding about journalists' shifting attitudes towards practitioners builds on the results of earlier studies on the relationship between journalists and practitioners, which suggested that there were fewer differences and less hostility between the two professions than previously assumed (Avery & Lariscy, 2007; Nejiens & Smit, 2006; Shaw & White, 2004; Verčič & Colić, 2016).

Previous research showed that the relationships between public relations and the media differ according to two main factors: journalists' educational backgrounds and the focus of their reporting. In one of the few large-scale studies, Pincus et al. (1993) found that editors with academic qualifications in public relations rated the profession more favourably than colleagues without such qualifications. They also noted a hierarchy of perceptions: sports editors, who primarily used public relations for factual reporting, held the most favourable views, while business editors, whose public relations interactions involved deeper issue advocacy, were the most sceptical. However, this 30-year-old data reflects a context that has since evolved. Contemporary research shows that sports public relations has become a highly strategic, reputation-driven field, far removed from a simplistic, informational role. For example, crisis communication specialists have identified effective strategies for responding to crises, such as framing stories and monitoring media. The NFL's crisis over concussions after being accused of minimising scientific evidence to protect its reputation is a perfect case study of the importance of crisis management in shaping public opinion (Castonguay &

Lowes, 2022). A recent study found that developing and involving stakeholders in sports public relations requires using social media and upholding a brand's reputation (Hafiar et al., 2024). According to recent research, strong team reputations are crucial for brand value, increased fan satisfaction, and trust—all of which are connected to public relations initiatives (Mishra et al., 2024). When taken as a whole, these results highlight that sports journalists increasingly work at the nexus of crisis management, reputation stewardship, and strategic storytelling, all of which are tasks as complex as those in corporate or governmental public relations. Since sports public relations has developed to align with the broader shift of public relations into a strategic, high-stakes field, the notion that it is only utilitarian is no longer valid.

These research findings show that several factors affect relationships between journalists and practitioners. These factors include education, specific job challenges, and the complex nature of modern public relations roles. It is therefore important to consider how media portrayals of public relations have varied over time (e.g., since 1993) and across sectors (e.g., sports, business, and politics).

Understanding the ideal of a balanced, mutually respectful relationship between journalists and practitioners is key to critically analysing media portrayals of public relations. Several studies have emphasised the need for public relations and other professions to work together for effective communication (Anderson, 2018; Brown & Isaacson, 2016; Fearn-Banks et al., 2024; Heath, 2006; Verčič et al., 2017). Despite this, public relations is frequently portrayed in the media as unethical or dishonest. This negative view usually comes from problems in professional relationships and lasting stereotypes. Scholarly calls for a more ethical and cooperative dynamic contrast sharply with mainstream media depictions of public relations as a threat to journalistic integrity. Looking at these portrayals can: (a) show the difference between the idea of collaboration and how it happens; (b) reveal biases that lessen the effectiveness of public relations; and (c) identify systemic

problems, like power imbalances, that affect trust. Hence, examining media portrayals is crucial for understanding how the legitimacy and ethical standing of public relations can be shaped in the public eye.

2.5 Public Relations in an Evolving Media Landscape

Now, practitioners can connect directly with their target audience through digital channels, eliminating the need to rely on traditional media to disseminate their messages. Studies cited in this section indicate that disintermediation can reshape journalists' perceptions of their own work, as some interpret it as undermining journalistic gatekeeping and editorial authority, as well as the perceived trustworthiness of information. This situation may raise ethical issues and harm the reputations of both professions. Public relations can seem less transparent, while journalism risks losing trust by relying too heavily on public relations content.

2.5.1 Advantages Offered by Emerging Media Technologies

The way practitioners engage with their audiences has changed as a result of new communication technologies. They now have more control over when and how they disseminate their messages rather than depending on conventional news sources. This change makes communication more efficient and intimate by enabling them to customise their content to interact directly with the public (Al Hadeed et al., 2024; Bhadur et al., 2024; Igben & Ilaya, 2021; Orji-Egwu et al., 2019). Prior studies have documented various methods for producing and sharing content, allowing practitioners to communicate directly with journalists and other audiences (Macnamara, 2014). Content marketing is one such approach, creating content that encourages positive consumer behaviour (Pulizzi, 2012). This approach places more emphasis on creating content that engages the audience than it does on merely advertising a product. Brand journalism characterises the journalistic practice of public relations that involves telling an organisation's story directly to its audience (Bull, 2013). By bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, brands can create content that

connects more genuinely with audiences. This content comes directly from the source, without being changed by others. Studies by Gillin (2008) and DiStaso and Bortree (2012) emphasised the significance of blog entries and micro-blogging, as practitioners utilised these channels to distribute content and promote more direct interactions with their audiences. Besides blogging, Facebook's instant articles (Reckhow, 2015) and social media newsrooms (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014) are other tools that have enabled organisations to reduce their dependency on traditional news channels by delivering news and information directly to users. More recently, the public relations landscape has further evolved with the rise of visual-first and algorithm-driven platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and LinkedIn video. These platforms enable practitioners to create highly targeted and emotionally resonant content in short-form video or story formats, which are often prioritised by platform algorithms. Tools like Instagram stories (Akbar & Umer, 2023), TikTok challenges (Abidin, 2021), and live streaming (Gao, 2024) enable brands to engage with their audience in real time, enhancing approachability and encouraging sharing to broaden their reach.

These days, practitioners do more than provide content. By sharing brand stories on a variety of rapidly evolving media platforms, they create narratives and oversee communities (Amartey, 2025). These advancements represent a change in the media environment, since direct-to-public communication techniques give organisations greater control over their messaging and put traditional journalism to the test. Leveraging these technologies, public relations has become more audience-focused and less centralised, with practitioners now shaping media stories rather than just reacting to them. However, with the continuous use of native advertising and sponsored content by organisations to blur the boundaries between commercial and editorial content, the conventional distinction between journalistic content and public relations messaging is becoming increasingly ambiguous (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2016). This strategic blending complicates how the

media portrays public relations and can intensify public concerns about transparency, credibility, and manipulation.

2.5.2 Challenges and Ethical Concerns in Contemporary Media

In the current digital era, practitioners have tremendous opportunities to engage with their audiences through social media, blogs, and webinars. They may interact in real time without using traditional media thanks to this direct communication. With so much information available online, however, it can be challenging to determine what is trustworthy and reliable. Fake news and too much information make it hard to tell honest communication from misleading data (Chayko, 2020; Renjith, 2017; Ryabicheva, 2020; Talwar et al., 2019). In this environment, people may view an unfiltered corporate message as self-serving or unreliable. This circumstance underscores the importance of journalists as impartial verifiers who enhance the legitimacy of public relations content. They verify information and provide a degree of trust that is often absent from public relations communications (Macnamara, 2016). Instead of attempting to replace journalism, public relations can collaborate with it. This teamwork will help rebuild public trust, clarify messages, and maintain the overall quality of information.

Furthermore, the embedded paid content in new media formats raises ethical dilemmas because it can be seen as concealing its promotional purpose and creating a false impression of deception (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; De Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2012) (Ethical challenges in public relations are discussed at length in Section 2.3.4). Because of growing concerns, practitioners need to address ethical issues when using journalistic techniques in their content strategies (Fawkes, 2018; Hagelstein et al., 2024; Macnamara, 2016). The key challenge is to make sure that the audience is not misled or manipulated by this content. Doing so helps protect the credibility of practitioners and the media.

This ethical issue is evident in numerous corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns that seemed ethical at first but later revealed a big gap between what they claimed and what

they did. For example, Volkswagen ran a misleading campaign that labelled its cars as 'clean diesel' with low emissions. The firm broke environmental regulations while seeming eco-friendly by using software to manipulate emissions tests. By withholding this information, the campaign was accused of dishonesty, deceiving authorities and consumers (Hotten, 2015, December 10). Similarly, Nestlé faced criticism for claiming that its chocolate came from sustainable sources, even as research revealed child labour and other unethical practices in its supply chain (Field, 2019, April 24). This situation shows what Epperson et al. (2019) and Ryabicheva (2020) described as companies hiding or downplaying negative facts in their public messages. Public relations became sceptical as a result of these ads' inauthenticity, which portrayed a polished image that ran counter to reality. To improve public relations practice and change how the sector is portrayed in media narratives, it is imperative to recognise and address these ethical vulnerabilities.

2.5.3 Strategic Adjustment and the Adoption of Emerging Media

To overcome the above-identified challenges, practitioners must adopt new media technologies and employ creative communication techniques to identify and expose sponsored material. Macnamara (2016) claimed that practitioners should ensure clear communication and disclose when information is sponsored or branded. In this situation, clear labelling can help reduce ethical concerns by informing audiences that sponsored content is promotional. Disclosing brand partnerships is now a legal requirement.

Practitioners must be transparent and creative in addressing ethical dilemmas while balancing promotional messaging with journalistic integrity. For instance, practitioners can produce content that meets journalistic standards by offering insightful, accurate information. Content producers can engage their consumers while upholding trust by employing journalistic storytelling in brand journalism (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Gillin, 2008). Technological advancements provide practitioners with new tools to enhance transparency and produce interesting content. However, whether these tools help with responsible

communication depends on how people use them (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014).

Effective public relations tactics must be transparent and innovative in a quickly changing media environment (Hallahan, 2014). According to Sherwood et al. (2019), to effectively use emerging communication platforms, practitioners must not only have the digital skills needed to create content but also understand the ethical risks involved in the content creation process. For example, using content management systems that include disclaimers and clearly marked sponsored content can help enhance transparency and build trust. However, the benefits of digitisation have been contested. For example, according to Kretschmer and Winkler (2024), by producing highly customised but potentially deceptive content, new technologies, such as deepfakes and generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT), create ethical dilemmas by making it difficult to distinguish between reality and fabrication. This drawback requires a cautious approach to technology, assessing not only its strategic potential but also its effect on public understanding and democratic discourse.

2.6 Media Portrayal of Public Relations

This section examines how the media disseminates information about public relations. It covers key concepts, such as how companies craft their image and communicate strategically.

2.6.1 Negative Media Portrayals

Many studies have shown a negative portrayal of public relations in news and entertainment media. For instance, Ryan and Martinson (1988) and Brody (1992) demonstrated how public relations is frequently dismissed as nothing more than public relations stunts or press agency. According to Brody (1992), the mass media have long contributed to the denigration of public relations by reducing it to stereotypes and mischaracterisations. He observed that “mass media representatives’ perceptions of the discipline have been distorted by hacks, flacks, and assorted charlatans who have adopted ‘public relations’ as a prestigious

synonym for press agency or publicity” (p. 44). This misinterpretation highlights a prevalent misunderstanding among reporters, editors, and programme directors, who often struggle to recognise the strategic and intricate nature of public relations work. The most prominent and occasionally immoral publicity techniques often influence their opinions. The wider functions that the profession plays in managing communication, involving stakeholders, and fostering ethical advocacy may be overlooked as a result of this focus (Brody, 1992).

The media’s hostility towards public relations is, as Ryan and Martinson (1988) put it, “firmly embedded in journalistic culture” (p. 139), shaping how public relations is perceived and how information flows through the mass communication process. To further explore how hostility impacts the mass communication process or how pre-existing negative attitudes may unduly affect journalistic behaviour, Stocking and LaMarca (1990) investigated how journalists constructed and used hypotheses and assumptions in framing their stories. The authors observed that all story descriptions contained unchallenged opinions about “the people, organisations, events, and phenomena reporters intended to cover” (p. 299). Therefore, it seemed logical to assume that the journalists’ preconceptions about public relations could impact their ability to interact with practitioners objectively (Spicer, 1993).

Previous studies have shown that journalists’ preconceived assumptions about public relations influence not only how they behave but also how they construct and present news stories (Cohen & Young, 1981; Hess, 1981; Tuchman, 1978). Journalists utilise language to reinforce cultural meanings, offer new interpretations, and alter well-known phrases, thereby influencing how the public views news and public relations (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Hackett, 1984; Taylor & Condit, 1988).

Journalists can never be objective, as the language they use to report the news is inherently biased (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Hackett, 1984; Morley, 1976). The subjective use of language in the news, such as the meaning embedded in the term ‘public relations’, can be a behavioural indicator of a journalist’s sentiments toward the public relations profession

(Spicer, 1993). Several anecdotal instances suggest that a journalist's bias towards public relations may contribute to the media's portrayal of the field (Olasky, 1988). One such anecdote concerns a policy at *The Washington Post* in the 1980s, in which its editor declared practitioners undesirable in the editorial pages, saying, "It's a hustle" (Cannon, 1982, p. 35). According to Cameron (2003), inaccuracies in media portrayals can lead to negative perceptions of any profession. In the case of public relations as a profession, as was previously mentioned, most people learn about public relations and its terminology from the media, including social media, which highlights some public relations practices while neglecting others (Coombs & Halladay, 2007; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; Kumar, 2014; Quinn-Allan, 2010; Reed, 2013; Sterne, 2010; Tynan, 2015).

2.6.2 The Marginalisation of Public Relations in Journalistic Discourse

Numerous studies have empirically investigated the issue of biased reporting about public relations. In their 1987 study on the portrayal of public relations, Bishop found that out of 16,000 stories in three New York newspapers, the term 'public relations' was used just three times. The term 'publicity' was mentioned 121 times, but the terms 'press relations', 'press officer', and 'public information' were not mentioned. Bishop's (1987) study demonstrated a negative and limited view of public relations: "Public relations is often equated solely with publicity... The lack of recognition for other areas of expertise may account for many people's distorted view of the field" (p. 51).

Another seminal study on print media found that 83% of public relations references were negative (Spicer, 1993). Analysing 84 articles from the print media containing the terms 'public relations' and 'PR', Spicer (1993) showed public relations terms could be categorised under seven categories, 'distraction', 'disaster', 'challenge', 'hype', 'merely', 'war', and 'schmooze', with most citations grouped under 'distraction' (19), 'disaster' (16), and 'challenge' (14) categories. According to another study that used Spicer's (1993) seven categories to assess evening newscasts on network television, ABC, NBC, and CBS

between 1980 and 1985, noted 'war' as the most frequently used theme (19), followed by 'disaster' (18), and 'distraction' (10) (Keenan, 1996). Similar findings were reported by Henderson (1998), who found that fewer than 5% of references used the term 'public relations' accurately, with 37% negative and only 7.4% positive. These findings from the 1990s research support the idea that journalists' subjective use of the terms 'public relations' and 'PR' reflects their negative perceptions of the field.

Several subsequent studies have shown that news stories across countries often portray public relations in a negative light. In South Korea, Park (2001) found that journalists commonly have biased views against the profession. In Canada, Scrimger and Richards (2003) observed that metaphors, such as 'public relations battle' and 'public relations war', were commonly used, even while recognising the importance of public relations in negotiation or conflict resolution. Analysing both print and television news in the US, Jo (2003) found that only 12% of public relations mentions were positive and 41% negative, often describing public relations as image management or persuasion. A global study by CARMA (2004) further reported that 20% of public relations-related stories were criticised for 'distorting reality', while just 0.7% depicted the profession as respected. The US studies by White and Lambert (2006) and Penning (2008) supported the notion that the media have long associated public relations with negative images. White and Lambert (2006) noted that the term 'PR' was frequently used in the *New York Times* to denote something negative, while Penning (2008) linked public relations to 'press agency' and its negative connotations. In East Asia, Yoo and Jo (2014a), who examined how the media used phrases 'Hong-Bo' and 'Xuan Chuan' (broadly translate to publicity, promotion, or propaganda in English) to denote the term 'public relations' in China and South Korea, respectively, observed that emphasis was on reputation management and persuasion as crucial public relations responsibilities, but it was slightly negative. Özorán (2023) reported that public relations was adversely depicted by two major US media outlets, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, often associating it with information manipulation for political or economic purposes. High-

profile instances of narrative spinning, according to Özorán (2023), influenced how organisations interacted with stakeholders in a critical media environment and painted the field as dishonest.

All of this research showed that news stories from various cultures frequently ignore and mislead public relations. From early research by Bishop (1987) to more recent work by Özorán (2023), public relations is frequently linked to spin or surface-level publicity. Yet its strategic and moral roles are mostly disregarded. Journalists often describe public relations with metaphors, such as ‘public relations disaster’ or ‘public relations war’, reflecting a limited understanding of the field and bias. There is a credibility gap between the profession’s ethical goals and its public image as manipulative or self-serving, resulting from persistent, unfavourable portrayals of public relations that undermine the field’s perceived legitimacy and conceal its developing role in ethical and strategic communication. These studies demonstrate the necessity of changing the public conversation about public relations by eschewing antiquated preconceptions that depict practitioners as only ‘spin doctors’ and adopting a more complex and all-encompassing view of the industry.

2.6.3 Impact of Entertainment Media

Previous studies suggest that entertainment media often depict public relations similarly to news media, with negative connotations, associating it with press agency. A survey of 51 novels and 67 films produced in the US between 1930 and 1955 found that erroneous and negative preconceptions about public relations were prevalent in fiction and film for decades (Miller, 1999). This study identified eight archetypal traits among practitioners in the entertainment media: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, or unfulfilled. Lee (2001), analysing the screen image of government practitioners, found both positive and negative portrayals. Lee’s follow-up on the media portrayal of practitioners in film and television found that practitioners were portrayed negatively in 6 of the seven films (Lee, 2009). A recent study found that television shows

reinforced unfavourable stereotypes of practitioners by portraying them as untruthful, cunning, and prepared to sacrifice ethical principles to serve their clients (Nairn & Bhargava, 2021).

A few studies, however, have indicated a slow but notable improvement in the representation of public relations despite pervasive, unfavourable preconceptions. Ames (2010), for example, examined 11 films released after 1995 and observed that those released in the 2000s depicted public relations more truthfully and contained fewer unfavourable preconceptions. Another study found that practitioners were presented as competent and knowledgeable professionals in television programmes such as *The West Wing* (Kinsky, 2011). Tsetsura et al. (2015) noted that public relations was sometimes portrayed positively, depicting an idealistic practitioner who grappled with ethical dilemmas and must choose between professional obligations and higher moral values. This study recommended that practitioners must take responsibility for maintaining a positive public relations image by respecting their profession, clients, the media, and themselves. The studies cited illustrate that public relations is inconsistently represented in entertainment media, which harms the profession's image. This inconsistency does not help counteract journalistic interpretations if alternative messaging is not provided.

2.7 Media Portrayal of Public Relations in New Zealand

The first documented research on the media portrayal of public relations in New Zealand found that the participating journalists believed that most practitioners lied (Talkies Group, 2004, as cited in Tilley & Hollings, 2008). Nevertheless, despite these findings, the study by the public relations firm was limited, as it was unrepresentative of journalists due to its small, self-selected sample and pre-set quantitative categories (Tilley & Hollings, 2008). In a follow-up study on the media portrayal of public relations in New Zealand, using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, Tilley and Hollings (2008) observed that although many New Zealand journalists were "conflicted" about the values of public relations, the antagonism

between the two fields was not “straightforward” (p. 1). According to the study, journalists’ perceptions of public relations were primarily influenced by personal interactions, with certain practitioners deemed acceptable on an individual basis. The fact that many journalists pursued careers in public relations reflected the complex relationship between the two groups, and the dynamics of such personal relationships may significantly impact journalists’ perceptions of public relations (Tilley & Hollings, 2008). In another study involving interviews with 30 media professionals from the radio, television, print and online media, Sterne (2010) argued that journalists’ perceptions of public relations in New Zealand were unfavourable. Supporting Tilley and Hollings’s (2008) conclusions regarding the ambivalence of New Zealand media towards public relations, Sterne (2010) argued that this ambivalence stemmed from sources beyond interactions between journalists and practitioners.

Another New Zealand study, which employed a small focus group interview and content analysis of 48 news articles, demonstrated that the media’s portrayal of public relations influenced public perception (Dennison, 2011). According to this study, unless journalists were neutrally describing practitioners, agencies, or their qualifications, the public relations profession was often portrayed as a disaster or a distraction. According to Dennison (2011), several factors affected the public perception of public relations, including the motivation for communication, the nature of an organisation employing public relations techniques, and whether the public relations exercise was intended to manipulate public opinion. In another survey, Callard (2011) contended that newspaper journalists’ perceptions of practitioners in New Zealand were primarily complex and hostile, mainly due to their dissatisfaction with the media relations tactics employed by certain practitioners. A review of existing research found little on how the New Zealand media has portrayed public relations over the last 10 years. While some studies have examined the relationship between journalists and practitioners, there is still little analysis of how public relations is portrayed in the media.

The New Zealand context is intended to be embedded throughout the study rather than treated as a separate analytical variable. Since both datasets are drawn entirely from the New Zealand media environment, the findings and interpretations are considered 'inherently situated' within it, characterised by its small, interconnected media system, strong relationships between journalists and public relations, and a broader bicultural environment shaped by the Treaty of Waitangi.

2.8 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Framing and Attribution Perspectives

Two complementary theoretical perspectives, namely attribution theory and framing theory, provide the theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding how the media perceives and portrays public relations. Framing theory examines how media organisations shape public relations by selecting, highlighting, and interpreting information. It was developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 and later expanded by Robert Entman in 1993 and 2007, and by William Reese in 2001 and 2007. This theory helps in understanding how meanings are created and shared. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018) helps in understanding how individuals interpret the actions of others. It focuses on how individuals decide who is responsible for actions and what motives may be behind them. By combining these two views, it is possible to connect the structural and psychological aspects of how the media represent issues. Framing theory can explain how stories about public relations are created and maintained in news organisations. Attribution theory can show how journalists understand and assess the public relations field. Together, they can provide a holistic framework for analysing both the discursive construction and the perceptual dynamics underlying media portrayals of public relations. The following subsections elaborate on each theoretical strand in detail:

2.8.1 Media Framing of Public Relations as a Strategic Institutional Practice

Framing theory provides a critical lens through which to understand how public relations is constructed in the media. In its classic formulation, Entman (1993, 2007) defined media framing as the selection of and emphasis on specific aspects of perceived reality to promote problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. This process is not neutral. It shows how journalism routines, personal beliefs, and power structures affect what people understand. It highlights certain issues that support specific stories while pushing aside others that do not fit the agenda. The way frames are presented can affect how people understand messages. People make quick decisions by using what they already know and by following cultural norms, which influence their attitudes and actions (Bedeley et al., 2025; Lindgren et al., 2024).

The interpretation and dissemination of information by journalists and media professionals is known as professional framing. The ideas of Goffman (1974) and Reese (2001, 2007) hold that shared norms, practices, and values within a profession influence this process. These elements influence how they define problems and give them significance. Framing in this context is not just about messages but also about how professionals define their roles, legitimise their actions, and interpret their relationships with others. Goffman (1974) introduced the idea of 'frames' as schemas that individuals use to make sense of everyday life, which laid the conceptual groundwork for later scholars, like Reese (2001, 2007), to apply framing to media and communication fields. Reese (2001, 2007) described frames as organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, guiding the collective understanding of events within a given field. Applying this conceptualisation of framing to journalism and public relations, frames influence not only how public relations is represented in media texts but also how it is discussed in interviews and understood within newsroom culture.

Public relations is often portrayed negatively by these professional frameworks and media representations, emphasising characteristics such as dishonesty, superficiality, and ethical ambiguity. Jo (2003) and Wright and Hinson (2009) asserted that the way topics are portrayed in journalism has recurrent patterns and persists throughout time. Journalism is based on key ideals, such as objectivity and transparency, and it tends to be sceptical of persuasion. These ideals help define journalism as a moral watchdog, according to Bivins (1987, 1989, 2009) and Anderson (2018), and set journalism apart from public relations, which is seen as agenda-driven and promotional. Bivins (2009) noted that public relations has a dual responsibility to clients and the public. This dual accountability makes public relations more vulnerable to negative portrayals, which are often used to strengthen the credibility and authority of journalism.

Culbertson and Chen (1996) and Zoch and Molleda (2006) showed how adversarial media portrayals are sustained through source bias, selective agenda-setting, and recurring ethical critiques. Building on Hallahan's (1999) foundational conceptualisation of framing in public relations, later studies (Schultz et al., 2012; Van der Meer et al., 2014) continued to underscore the utility of framing theory for unpacking strategic media portrayals of public relations. Journalistic practices and larger institutional factors influence these negative portrayals. These factors include media and public relations story alignment, reputation management, and source selection. When taken as a whole, these observations demonstrate that depictions of public relations are institutionalised frames ingrained in journalistic discourse and society rather than mirror images of reality.

2.8.2 Attribution Theory and Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations

Attribution theory offers an additional explanatory lens for understanding how journalists form and sustain their perceptions of public relations. Attribution theory looks at how people explain events or other people's actions. It was first developed by Fritz Heider in 1958 and later improved by Harold Kelley in 1967 and 1973, and by Bernard Weiner in 1985, 2006,

and 2012. Individuals identify the reasons behind their behaviour as either internal (traits) or external (circumstances). Attribution theory helps journalists and viewers understand the reasons behind professional action. This viewpoint is fundamental in media studies when actions involve conflicting interests or raise moral issues (McGraw, 1990; Valkenburg et al., 1999). These cause-and-effect connections influence how people view the motives of those involved and the judgments they make about them. These judgments are essential in how the media shapes professional legitimacy, especially since they are subjective and generalised.

When applied to the relationship between journalism and public relations, attribution processes influence journalists' views of practitioners (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). Journalists often see these practitioners with scepticism or moral uncertainty (Moloney, 2006). This point of view is derived from the core values of journalism, including objectivity and a commitment to seeking the truth (Deuze, 2005). Journalists and practitioners have different priorities. While practitioners emphasise strategic communication, journalists concentrate on public responsibility (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McNair, 2011). Even if the two fields' objectives are not inherently at odds, this distinction may lead to conflict (L'Etang, 2008). Public relations tasks, such as controlling messaging, shaping agendas, and establishing reputations, are frequently viewed with suspicion by journalists (Franklin et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2008). They tend to believe these actions are driven by self-interest (internal reasons) rather than by external factors such as organisational needs (external reasons) (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). This bias leads journalism to see itself as a guardian of transparency and ethics (Anderson, 2018; Moloney, 2006), while public relations is viewed as a field focused on persuasion or on hiding the truth (L'Etang, 2008; Moloney, 2006).

Attributional tendencies are shaped by professional routines, newsroom norms, and institutional context, with framing processes playing a key role (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014;

Tuchman, 1978). As Entman (1993, 2007) explained, attribution in news discourse operates through causal and treatment frames, the two mechanisms that not only highlight who or what is responsible for an issue (causal attribution) but also suggest how it should be addressed (treatment attribution). In this way, framing provides the narrative structure through which attributional judgments are organised and legitimised (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). In media portrayals of public relations, these intertwined processes often result in responsibility being placed on practitioners rather than on systemic or structural factors (Moloney, 2006). These difficulties lead to a pattern that keeps public relations in a lower position in the media and continues to support journalism's role as credible (Benson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1998; Moloney, 2006).

Research extends this reasoning by emphasising that attribution functions in two ways: in individuals' thoughts and in organisations. Attribution heuristics are mental shortcuts that journalists frequently employ to assess the credibility of their sources and to comprehend their ethical goals and motivations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Ji et al., 2025). Institutionally, these shortcuts are reinforced by journalists' training and the cultures of their workplaces, which prioritise journalistic independence and view public relations as a threat to it (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). The resulting attribution schema thus functions as a normative mechanism, legitimising journalism's moral boundaries and delegitimising public relations' strategic role in shaping public discourse.

Previous studies on journalism and attribution theory show that this approach is practical. For example, Hinnant et al. (2012) used attribution theory to look at how health journalists tailor their stories to fit their audience's views. The study indicates that journalists' values affect their editorial choices. Similarly, Boateng and Lauk (2021) used attribution theory to investigate how Ghanaian women journalists interpreted and responded to incidents of sexual harassment in the newsroom, suggesting that attributions influenced their trust in institutional support systems.

Attribution theory helps not only in explaining the persistence and coherence of journalists' perceptions of public relations across contexts and over time, but also in understanding how news stories allocate causes, intentions, and responsibilities and demonstrates that journalists are susceptible to public relations not just due to their behaviour in their institutional routines but also because of their attitudes. When combined with framing theory, attribution analysis deepens understanding of how the media shapes, normalises, and maintains views of public relations as part of its efforts to keep professional boundaries.

2.9 The Research Questions—Addressing the Knowledge Gap

This study aims to address the above-identified knowledge gap by examining how journalists perceive public relations and how it is portrayed within the New Zealand news media landscape. Specifically, the study aims to address three primary research questions.

First, it examines: *How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?*

This study examines the prevalent themes and narratives in news stories and inquires whether public relations is portrayed positively, negatively, or neutrally. It also considers which functions of public relations, such as crisis communication, media relations, reputation management, or strategic messaging, are most frequently highlighted and how these can contribute to shaping public understanding of the profession. Although this study does not aim to measure public perceptions directly, earlier research (discussed in section 2.3.3) indicates that repeated media portrayals may influence public perceptions over time.

Second, the study asks: *How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?* Journalists' role in shaping public opinion and their perspectives can significantly influence how any profession is perceived and assessed. This study explores journalists' perceptions of the purpose, ethics, and effectiveness of public relations, as well as their opinions on whether it is regarded as a legitimate profession, an essential strategic function, a limitation on journalistic independence, or simply a tool for manipulation or spin.

Finally, the research considers: *What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?* This study examines how various factors shape journalists' perceptions. It focuses on personal experiences, work relationships, how people interact, and the roles of workplace limits and technology. Additionally, utilising framing and attribution theories, the study aims to uncover the complex relationship between practitioners and news media journalists.

These three research questions serve as a foundation for exploring the complex relationship between professional perception and media portrayal. This approach highlights the interactions involved while emphasising the need for effective communication to enhance the field's credibility and reputation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the research design utilised in this study. It explains how the interpretivist epistemological paradigm shapes the qualitative methodology used in this study. The chapter also justifies selecting relevant news stories and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. Additionally, it discusses the use of qualitative content analysis as the main approach for analysing the data. In conclusion, the chapter details how the study employed systematic qualitative content analysis procedures to interpret the data from both the news content and the interviews, thereby answering the three research questions:

RQ1. How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?

RQ2. How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?

RQ3. What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study is grounded in an interpretivist qualitative paradigm, emphasising the social construction of meaning and the contextual interpretation of media portrayals of public relations. In public relations research, as in all forms of social research, the researcher's viewpoint is important. It shapes the study's goals, methods, and conclusions (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Daymon and Holloway (2010) suggested that these perspectives are generally associated with the following three elements of a research paradigm that form the fundamental assumptions about communication and its investigation:

Ontology : The study of being (involving concepts such as human existence, nature, and social reality) that seeks answers to the fundamental question: 'What can be claimed to exist?'

Epistemology: The theory of knowledge that defines the role of the researcher and seeks answers to the fundamental question: 'What is knowledge and how is it gained?'

Methodology: The methods of acquiring knowledge (including the ideas that govern the regulations and procedures followed in a discipline like public relations) that seek answers to the fundamental question: 'How do we know?'

According to Daymon and Holloway (2010), researchers must address questions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology before researching to select the most suitable approach based on their philosophical orientation and study objectives. The research philosophy guiding this study is based on a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Together, they help in examining media portrayals of public relations. A constructivist ontology posits that reality is not fixed or objective but socially constructed through individual and collective experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), suggesting that public relations is not portrayed in the media singularly or universally. Instead, language, context, audience perception, and cultural norms all can influence public relations' image and meaning. This view is supported by interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises the significance of understanding how individuals and society interpret and make sense of social processes. Media texts actively create narratives that frame public relations in multiple ways, rather than just reflecting reality. In this process, the researcher's interpretation of these narratives determines how frames are identified, understood, and analysed, acknowledging that framing may differ across sources, stakeholders, contexts, and audiences.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 highlights several key aspects that constitute the foundation of the philosophical approach utilised in this study. The first aspect is that media portrayals are inherently subjective, influenced by journalists' biases and beliefs and by wider public discourses (Reese, 2001). Second, the public, journalists, and practitioners all

have different opinions about the complicated and contentious field of public relations (L'Etang, 2008). Third, rather than merely testing a hypothesis or measuring objective data, the study focuses on how meanings are negotiated and produced (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). It is essential to note that applying a qualitative, interpretive approach to content analysis, for example, focusing on how meanings are constructed within texts while considering context and perspective, aligns with a constructivist perspective. This approach recognises multiple interpretations and subjective experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This framework allows the study to reveal the deeper, often implicit meanings that can shape the perception and valuation of public relations within society.

In this study, a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology guided the choice of a qualitative methodology (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). This foundation suggests that there are many realities, depending on context. To understand these realities, it is essential to explore the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, which aligns with quantitative methods that focus on hypothesis testing and causal explanation, the interpretivist paradigm emphasises the complexity of the social world and participants' subjective experiences (Sarantakos, 2012). From this perspective, researchers need to become involved in their work and engage with the content of their research and with participants to help them understand different perspectives within specific contexts (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Researchers conduct qualitative studies to learn how individuals interpret their lives and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025). Van Maanen (1979) defined qualitative research as: "...an array of interpretive techniques that seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (p. 520). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Tisdell et al. (2025), four characteristics are essential to understanding qualitative research: (a) paying attention to how individuals interpret their

experiences and assign meaning to them; (b) considering researchers as the primary tool for collection and analysis of data; (c) using an inductive process, where researchers collect data to formulate hypotheses or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses; and (d) giving rich description characterising the end product. The current study encompassed all the above four characteristics of qualitative research. As the strength of qualitative research lies in its emphasis on understanding the world, this study benefited from the firsthand experience of participants, who were interviewed, enabling them to speak freely about a phenomenon they had experienced (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for this study, as it examines how public relations is portrayed and interpreted in the media, a complex, socially constructed phenomenon. In particular, the study used semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis of stories to capture journalists' viewpoints and media portrayals, enabling a more complex understanding of the socially constructed nature of public relations. This study also examined the factors that shape how public relations is portrayed in the media. By adopting a qualitative approach, it digs deep into the stories and narratives involved, highlighting how complex and context-specific these factors could be (Tracy, 2024). This method, which emphasises making meaning within its environment, promotes a deeper understanding of participants' varied views and is consistent with the study's constructivist and interpretivist philosophical underpinnings. As a result, the findings are not only intricate and rich but also pertinent and grounded in participants' individual experiences.

Qualitative content analysis also excels at comparative analysis, as the counts it produces provide clear answers to questions about the differences in the data (pattern identification) and additional explanations for these differences (interpretation) (Morgan, 1993). To increase transparency and help readers identify patterns in the data, this study's analysis also reported descriptive counts and percentages for coded instances (that is, how often a theme or code appears). These numerical summaries function only as descriptive indicators

of prominence or visibility within the sample; they do not constitute statistical generalisation to a larger population. The interpretive claims were generated from iterative, thematic engagement with the research material. Any inferential statistics were excluded from claims of population inference; if used, they were explicitly presented as exploratory and interpreted with caution because the purposive, non-probability sample does not meet the assumptions required for statistical generalisation.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This section outlines the research design, data sources, and procedures for collecting and preparing news content and interview data for analysis.

3.2.1 Data Sources

In any data collection process, information is gathered systematically to ensure accuracy and facilitate analysis. This often involves using multiple methods to obtain sufficient data that can support one another (Cohen et al., 2017). The study used interviews with journalists and news articles as its sources. These sources helped to gather professional opinions on public relations and how it is represented in text. Utilising both methods to collect data allowed the study to confirm its findings and enhance comprehension of the subject (Catanzaro, 1988; Patton, 2002; Rolfe, 2006). These strategies were chosen based on the 'fitness for purpose' principle, which requires selecting data collection techniques that are most suitable for answering the research questions and consistent with the study's philosophical and methodological framework (Cohen et al., 2017; Daymon & Holloway, 2010). This methodical procedure made sure that the instruments used adequately reflected the richness and complexity of participants' experiences within the framework of media-public relations interactions.

This study focused on print and online news sources as they offer readily available archives that are particularly helpful for evaluating framing, language, tone, and attribution patterns. While it would have been interesting to include television, radio, and social media, doing so

would have broadened the scope of the study and required different methods of analysis. Each of these platforms has its own way of telling stories and interacting with audiences, which would impact how public relations messages are conveyed. By focusing on print and online media, the study ensured that its approach remained consistent and methodologically sound, while also recognising that these other media forms are important topics for future research.

3.2.2 Methods of Data Collection

This sub-section explains the procedures for gathering news content and conducting semi-structured interviews with journalists.

3.2.2.1 News Content Collection

Any text-based document can be used as a source for qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). According to Daymon and Holloway (2010), texts or documents are “artefacts of social communication” (p. 277) produced for private or public use by people or organisations as a rich source of information that shows how a person or organisation views its social interactions. Documents are valuable in public relations research because they are cost-effective and readily available. More importantly, they allow researchers to analyse communication practices and public responses over time, a capability that other qualitative methodologies often lack (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Although researchers can explore difficult research, save money, and avoid ethical constraints by using text-based documents, there are fewer ways to evaluate or control biases that might be present in the documents (Blackstone, 2019; Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Morgan, 2022; Tisdell et al., 2025).

Framing theory, as described by Entman (1993, 2007), suggests that the media have the power to shape public perception by emphasising specific elements and ignoring others, thereby influencing how audiences interpret key concepts and values and understand professional roles in the industry. The way the media frames these concepts can

significantly influence public perception and shape trust in, as well as expectations, regarding the roles of practitioners, setting the agenda for discussions about these roles and the associated ethical considerations (Valentini, 2021). By analysing the terminology used in media coverage, researchers can learn how these frames are created.

3.2.2.2 Interviews of Journalists

To collect data, qualitative methods often involve interviews, focus groups, and observations, such as case studies and ethnographies (Tuli, 2010). For this research, interviews were chosen as the best means of gathering journalists' opinions. Previous studies show that interviews are compelling for understanding people's meanings and experiences (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). Researchers can learn about participants' viewpoints and social situations through interviews: by encouraging participants to express their ideas in their own words, this approach produces rich, detailed data that might not be obtained through surveys or observations (Warren, 2002). According to Patton (2015), the researcher's goal in an interview is to learn what is "in and on someone else's mind" (p. 426). Patton (2015) claimed that the researcher asks participants about things that are not directly observable, such as feelings, ideas, intentions, past behaviours, circumstances in which an observer is not present, and the meanings they ascribe to events in the outside world. Most participants are likely to prefer sharing their opinions verbally. This approach offers greater flexibility, particularly by allowing personal expression while making meanings more straightforward in real time (Mojtahed et al., 2014). Since this study includes various perspectives and experiences in public relations, verbal interviews helped create a more comfortable atmosphere for participants. This environment enabled them to articulate their complex thoughts and contexts, which might be more challenging to express in writing.

Rationale for Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews in research are generally categorised into three types, depending on the researcher's independence and adaptability in crafting questions for interviewees (Weerakkody, 2008). At one extreme of the flexibility spectrum is the structured survey

interview, which follows a predetermined format and question order. At the other end of the flexibility continuum is the unstructured or informal interview, which lacks a set format or protocol. In the middle of the continuum is the semi-structured interview, which allows the researcher to add another question, change the wording, or alter the question sequence to explore or explain any intriguing issues that arise during the interview (Evans & Lewis, 2018; Weerakkody, 2008). The semi-structured interview provided this research with flexibility to accommodate the interviewees' evolving viewpoints and newly formed ideas regarding the research topic; it is considered the most successful method for gathering rich data (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The use of semi-structured interviews in this study enabled a more in-depth exploration of the topic, yielding detailed information that might not have emerged in a more rigid interview format.

Limitations and Challenges in the Interview Method

Using interviews to answer the research questions has inherent limitations. The interviewer and the social context are the two fundamental aspects of the interviewer-interviewee relationship that could compromise the efficacy of the interview method (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). According to Roller and Lavrakas (2015), an interviewer's values or beliefs, as well as other factors, such as stereotyping, misinterpretation, and assumptions about the interviewee based solely on outward appearance, may negatively affect the interviewee's responses. The second area of concern with the interview method is related to the larger social context of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, which is marked by the risk of "a one-way dialogue" whereby "the interviewer rules the interview" (Kvale, 2006, p. 484). Given these limitations, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study. The researcher continuously considered how their presumptions, experiences, and interpretations would influence data collection and analysis, acknowledging that qualitative researchers are active participants in the study process (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Rather than claiming total neutrality, this process sought to improve transparency, credibility, and sensitivity to different interpretations.

Another important consideration here was that this interview approach relied on journalists' ability to recall and reflect on their past experiences concerning practitioners. However, such memories are not faithful recordings; instead, they are reconstructive, influenced by individual perceptions, beliefs, schemas, and later experiences (Hu, 2022). As a result, participants' understandings of past interactions with practitioners may change as they reinterpret those experiences with present-day perspectives. Mojtahed et al. (2014) explained that participants' narratives do not show fixed views of events. Instead, they create narratives that are influenced by personal and social contexts. This interview approach emphasises that meaning is subjective, co-created, and ever-changing, which is consistent with constructivist epistemology, and could be seen as a strength of the study, bolstering its guiding principles.

3.2.3 Sampling Strategy

Sampling is "the science of systematically drawing a valid group of objects from a population reliably" (Stacks, 2016, p. 150). As Daymon and Holloway (2010) pointed out, it is often impractical to collect data from every source on a research topic. Therefore, researchers choose a smaller group that can provide valuable and reliable evidence. Tenny et al. (2017) defined purposeful sampling as the intentional selection of participants expected to provide insightful information on the study's subject. This method is consistent with the idea of 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen et al., 2017), which promotes a sampling technique that is in line with research objectives and ensures the sample supports the study's goals.

This study used a non-probability purposive sampling technique, widely acknowledged as an appropriate method for qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The decision to use purposive sampling was driven by the study's objective of examining the portrayal and perception of public relations in the media. This objective needed detailed insights from participants and information that was rich, relevant and fit the context, rather than just general statistics. Qualitative research aims to understand meanings, experiences, and

interpretations rather than to draw broad conclusions (Dawson, 2019). Purposive sampling offers the methodological adaptability and depth required to address the research questions effectively.

Purposive sampling was used twice in this study, in line with the two data-collection methods. Three well-known New Zealand news outlets—*The NZ Herald* (North Island), *Otago Daily Times* (South Island), and *Stuff* (digital platform)—were included in the sample for news content. These sources are appropriate for examining how public relations is framed and depicted in New Zealand media because of their broad reach, regional diversity, and influence within the country's media ecosystem (as discussed in section 3.2.3.1). For the interviews, the sample consisted of journalists with at least 5 years of professional experience working with practitioners in news production. This criterion improved the data's reliability, relevance, and interpretive depth by ensuring that participants had adequate exposure and thoughtful understanding of the relationships between journalists and practitioners. Although convenience sampling and probability sampling are alternative approaches (Fraenkel et al., 1993; Pace, 2021), they were not appropriate for this study's purpose. Convenience sampling may have introduced bias due to its ease-of-access selection (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), while probability sampling is primarily intended for studies aiming to generalise findings to an entire population—a goal inconsistent with qualitative inquiry (Honigmann, 1982, 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling, in contrast, provides a methodologically sound basis and rationale for dependable, contextually rich results while also supporting the interpretive and exploratory aspects of this study (Patton, 2015).

3.2.3.1 Sampling of News Stories

Sample and its Selection Criteria

The first step in the research is selecting the documents for the study (Morgan, 2022). A diverse range of documents is available for public relations research, including news and

features produced by the mass media, such as broadcast news bulletins, e-journals, and articles published in local newspapers. These media documents constitute a potent source of information and influence, capable of shaping public opinion on any topic, person, or organisation (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

In a study analysing news stories, the sampling process involves selecting newspapers, a time frame, and relevant keywords, with the sample size determined before data analysis (Schreier, 2019). The population for the news content analysis in this study comprised mainstream news media outlets in New Zealand that regularly produce and disseminate national news content, including coverage of public relations activities, practitioners, and related issues. *The NZ Herald* (North Island), *Otago Daily Times* (South Island), and *Stuff* (an entirely digital news platform) are the three prominent outlets selected as the sample for analysis within this larger demographic.

About NZ Herald

The NZ Herald is often seen as New Zealand's leading newspaper. This daily newspaper is based in Auckland and is owned by New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME). It has changed from purely a traditional print newspaper to include a digital newsroom. Now, it also serves its website, mobile site, and mobile app. It is the most widely read publication in New Zealand, reaching a total cross-platform audience of 1.77 million in the 12 months to December 2024 (Ray Morgan, 2025, March 07). The main circulation area of *the NZ Herald* is the Auckland region and much of the upper North Island.

About Otago Daily Times

The Otago Daily Times, with a readership of 301,000, is New Zealand's third largest and oldest daily newspaper, offering extensive local news for the southern South Island.

About Stuff

Stuff.co.nz is New Zealand's premier news website, bringing together leading newspapers, such as *The Dominion Post*, *The Press*, and *Sunday Star-Times*, as well as magazines, such as *TV Guide* and *NZ Gardener*. At the time of data collection, *Stuff* had about 1.75 million weekly readers in New Zealand, surpassing its main competitor, NZHerald.co.nz, which had 1.55 million readers (Ray Morgan, 2025, March 07). In addition to covering current events, this website focuses on investigative journalism, opinion and analysis, long-form writing, and visual storytelling (Stuff, n.d.). "From breaking news on national and international crises to in-depth stories on sports, business, entertainment, and technology...Stuff covers it all" (Stuff, n.d.).

These news outlets in New Zealand were intentionally selected because they showcase a variety of editorial styles, regional focuses, and audience demographics:

Editorial Style: *The NZ Herald* places a strong emphasis on investigative reporting, in-depth political coverage, and formal, authoritative opinion on national problems (NZME, 2024; Pacific Media Watch, 2019, May 01). It positions itself as a premium news brand by using a paywall strategy that supports excellent journalism (Pacific Media Watch, 2019, May 01).

The Otago Daily Times uses a traditional approach to journalism and is New Zealand's oldest independent daily. It is known for its extensive local coverage and community-oriented editorial approach (Gibbons, 2014; Te, 2020). In contrast, *Stuff* is a digital platform that emphasises both human-interest stories and serious news. Opinion pieces are also included. To reach more online readers, the platform writes in an approachable and casual manner (Myllylahti & Baker, 2019; Scoop, 2024, September 04).

Regional Focus: *The NZ Herald*, headquartered in Auckland, covers national and international news, as well as issues affecting the country's major urban and economic hub (NZME, 2024). Serving Otago and Southland, the Dunedin-based *Otago Daily Times* has a clear southern regional focus. The content is centred on regional concerns (Allied Press,

2024). *Stuff* reaches a national audience while providing local viewpoints through its local magazines, such as *The Press* in Christchurch (Myllylahti & Baker, 2019; Scoop, 2024, September 04).

Target Readership: *The NZ Herald* has a broad readership that includes businesses and urban workers who are interested in both domestic and international news (NZME, 2024).

The Otago Daily Times focuses on local news and regional identity and is mainly targeted at elderly readers in the provincial South Island areas (Te, 2020). *Stuff* caters to a young, digitally engaged audience with easily digestible material for mobile and internet platforms that emphasises an interactive, visual style (Scoop, 2024, September 04).

This diversity across three dimensions enhanced the study's ability to capture varied portrayals and interpretations of public relations across different media contexts. Only print and online news media, and not electronic news media (television and radio), were included in the sample and considered representative of the relevant media in New Zealand, as around 61.7% of New Zealanders aged 14 and older read newspapers via print or website platforms every week (Ray Morgan, 2025, March 07). The three media outlets were in English, as 95.37% of New Zealanders can converse in English about everyday matters (Stats NZ, 2020, April 30). Māori, Pacific Islands, and other ethnic media outlets were excluded from the sample because they are published in languages other than English, and the difficulty of accurately translating their content rendered them beyond the scope of this study.

This sampling decision was based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen et al., 2017). It ensured that, in addition to being easily accessible, the chosen sources were pertinent to the study's goal of examining how public relations is portrayed in the New Zealand media. Consequently, the selected outlets provided a credible, information-rich basis for analysing patterns of representation, framing, and discourse in public relations.

The most recent comparable research on how public relations is portrayed by news media in New Zealand was limited to news stories published before 2010 (Dennison, 2011). As a result, this research reviewed news stories from three media outlets published over a decade, spanning from January 2011 to June 2023. Previous studies suggest that research covering over a year can yield sufficient data from varied sources to create a narrative with enduring insights (Pollock & Gulati, 2007).

Sampling Process

The current study identified news stories that used the term 'public relations' and its abbreviation 'PR'. These news stories were drawn from *Newztext*, a full-text database operational on *The Knowledge Basket* search engine (The Knowledge Basket, n.d.). The study deliberately omitted terms, such as 'PR agency', 'PR firm', and 'PR director/manager', from its objectives, as they refer to practitioners' roles and the names of their organisations rather than the broader concept of public relations practice itself. Only full-text news stories were included in the analysis, as previous research has shown that information from newspaper indexes, lead paragraphs, and headlines provides only rough estimates of newspaper coverage. These sources often fail to accurately reflect other important aspects of reporting (Althaus et al., 2001).

In this study, it was considered essential to examine how the terms 'public relations' and 'PR' are portrayed in contrast to more contemporary terms such as 'communications' for several reasons. First, the terms 'public relations' and 'PR' have been historically used in many studies on public relations (Bishop, 1987; Henderson, 1998; Jo, 2003; Keenan, 1996; Park, 2001; Penning, 2008; Spicer, 1993; White & Lambert, 2006). Using these terms allowed for direct comparisons with prior studies, helping identify patterns and shifts in how the profession has been portrayed. Second, historical research indicates that these terms are often associated with preconceptions, including notions such as spin, propaganda, and image management (White & Park, 2010). Analysing how these terms are used in the media

can reveal whether these stereotypes still exist and help the profession address and mitigate negative perceptions. Third, whereas the term communications is more wide and covers a variety of activities, such as marketing and internal communication, these terms clearly describe the profession (Salient PR, 2024). Examining how the terms 'public relations' and 'PR' are portrayed in the media makes it clear how the field is viewed differently from the larger communications industry. Fourth, professional identity and the value of their work within organisations and society depend on professionals who identify as public relations practitioners rather than general communicators, and on their understanding of how their particular tasks are depicted (Bailey, 2022, January 24). Fifth, it is important to recognise that the media plays a significant role in framing terms such as 'public relations', 'PR', and 'communications' in various ways.

Using the terms 'public relations' and 'PR' in all pertinent areas, such as the main text, author, source, and title, the database search returned 12,703 documents, including news articles from sources not evaluated for this study. The list of news stories was then narrowed down based on their relevance scores (a high relevance score indicates that the items that most closely match any search are displayed first). Only stories with a relevance score of 10 and above were considered for further shortlisting—the news stories shortlisted for the current study had relevance scores ranging from 10 to 24 (maximum). The news stories with lower scores of 9 and 8 were deemed insignificant because they focused on public relations, but not in a way representative of the field. News stories about staff appointments and corporate changes in public relations agencies were excluded. A preliminary search for public relations terms, using the above filters, yielded 103 valid news stories. Mitchell (1983) emphasised that for case-based qualitative research, "statistical representativeness is an irrelevant criterion", and that "extrapolation is... based on the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events" (pp. 188, 190). This focus on analytical validity over representativeness aligns with Silverman's (2014) view that the quality of analysis matters more than the number of samples in qualitative research. For this study, 103 news

articles from three news outlets were examined. Given the topic, the qualitative approach, and time and resource limits, this sample size was enough to achieve the study's goal. As described in Section 3.3.3.1, the shortlisted news articles were then prepared for qualitative content analysis.

3.2.3.2 Sampling of Interview Participants

Sample and its Selection Criteria

Choosing the sample requires deciding who to interview. As detailed in Section 3.2.3, purposive sampling was used for this study, which is the most common nonprobability sampling method used in qualitative research to choose information-rich cases whose investigation can help best address the research objectives (Patton, 2015):

...the logic and power of qualitative purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on an in-depth understanding of specific cases: information-rich cases. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry; thus, the term purposeful sampling (p. 53).

The sample for this study consisted of journalists with over 5 years of professional experience, ensuring that participants had ample familiarity with news production processes and could offer an informed and thoughtful perspective on public relations and its practitioners. As discussed previously, the study interviewed journalists from the same three news outlets from which the news stories were sampled. While the interviewees were not necessarily the authors of the specific articles analysed, this design established an indirect but meaningful connection between the two data sets. By engaging journalists who operate within the same organisational and editorial environments as those producing the analysed news content, the study could explore how the professional norms, newsroom cultures, and editorial priorities of each outlet shape portrayals of public relations. This viewpoint is consistent with interpretivist theory (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), which contends that social factors within particular organisations also affect media representations and explains how journalists are impacted by the practices and ideals of

their newsrooms. As a result, the gathered information provided a thorough contextual understanding of the institutional logics and professional attitudes that support public relations representations in media texts.

Sampling Process

Several online resources were used to identify the journalists recruited for the study. The prospects from each of the three New Zealand news outlets were found through an initial Google search. After that, their expertise was evaluated by reviewing their profiles, mostly on Muck Rack and LinkedIn. The journalists on the list were chosen based on their employment at one of three news outlets and more than 5 years of experience. The selected journalists had two weeks to reply to the emailed invitation to be interviewed. Once they responded, they were sent an information sheet (see Appendix A) with relevant details about the study, including the voluntary nature of their participation, the benefits of the research to the participant, researcher, and community, risk minimisation, and participant confidentiality. The participants were informed that the information collected during the interview would be used only for academic purposes, and their consent was obtained (see Appendix B). The information sheet and consent form were previously approved by the AUT Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number 22/183; see Appendix C).

3.2.4 Data Preparation for Analyses

This sub-section describes the steps taken to prepare both news articles and interview transcripts for coding and analysis.

3.2.4.1 News Stories

Section 3.2.3.1 explained how the sample of 103 news stories was selected as a dataset to facilitate systematic qualitative content analysis.

3.2.4.2 Interview Transcripts

The interview schedule used in this study prioritised the interviewees' viewpoints over structured questioning, allowing open-ended responses and enabling detailed information to be obtained on the research (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The interviewees were asked about their role at the news outlet, their years of journalism experience, their area of reporting, and whether they had held public relations jobs or received training in the first section of the interview schedule (see Appendix D). In addition to demographics, the interview schedule included questions that addressed the research questions. The questions were arranged to be flexible; if appropriate, additional questions were asked to delve deeper into the interviewees' responses, and specific questions were omitted when the interviewees had already covered the topic in another question. The following areas were discussed during the interviews:

Journalists' attitudes towards public relations. The discussion on this topic provided the interviewer with background information on how the interviewees understood the term 'public relations' and whether it was connected to their perception of the industry or their relationship with practitioners.

Reasons influencing journalists' attitudes towards public relations. The discussion highlighted participants' perceptions of their career paths compared to those in public relations. It emphasised the disparities in power imbalances between the two professions and explored how new communication technologies affected these relationships. These perspectives were expected to shed light on the reasons for the current media portrayal of public relations.

Relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. This topic sought information on the relationship between journalists and practitioners. A strong connection with the media is crucial for public relations, as the media can influence public perceptions of the profession (Sterne, 2010; Valentini, 2021).

Journalists' expectations of public relations. Under this last topic, interviewees were invited to discuss how they envisioned an ideal public relations profession and what changes they expected in the field to make their vision a reality.

Before interviewing the participants, test interviews with peers from the School of Communication Studies at AUT University were conducted to ensure that the questions were understood correctly. After gathering feedback from the test interviews, the interview schedule was adjusted accordingly. Journalists were then interviewed via Zoom/MS Teams between February and June 2023, based on their convenience. Each interview lasted roughly 45 minutes. These video interviews were expected to reveal the variables influencing journalists' perceptions of public relations, the origins of their perceptions, and the media's portrayal of public relations. Every interview was recorded and organised under the titles 'Interview One' through 'Interview Twenty-One'. All digital files were fed into a voice-recognition programme on the researcher's password-protected computer for transcription. No personally identifiable information was linked to any interview/transcript files during recording, transcription, and storage. The researcher carefully compared the transcribed data to every audio recording to ensure transcription accuracy.

Before the interviews, each participant was reminded of the research purpose, their role, and the researcher's commitment to confidentiality. Protecting the confidentiality of interviewees is crucial in any qualitative research to maintain the study's integrity, build rapport and trust with participants, and safeguard their privacy (Baez, 2002). In total, 21 journalists participated in the interviews until data saturation was reached, meaning no new information emerged that would necessitate creating additional categories to answer the research questions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018): RQ2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?) and RQ3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?).

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative data analysis entails examining texts to interpret patterns and themes, understand a phenomenon, and address research questions (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Riffe et al., 2023). This study adopted qualitative content analysis of two types of datasets to investigate the institutionalisation of public relations portrayals: (a) qualitative content analysis of news stories from three major New Zealand news outlets (2011–2023), coding for the presence of key public relations-related frames and (b) qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts to explore journalists' justifications.

This study used qualitative content analysis for several reasons. First, qualitative content analysis is a systemic approach that enables researchers to “document and understand the communication of meaning” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). It is a method for explaining and interpreting the significance of qualitative data (Mayring, 2000, 2014, 2019; Schreier, 2012, 2014). Second, it helps verify, supplement, or supersede earlier research findings (Altheide & Schneider, 2012), in line with the study objectives to explore the current media portrayal of public relations. Third, it is extensively utilised across the social science disciplines, including media and communication studies, to condense the data and summarise core issues and key concepts embedded in the research material (Schreier, 2019).

According to Schreier (2012, 2014), qualitative content analysis is characterised by three key features: it is systematic, flexible, and reductive. Being ‘systematic’ means that the method covers all aspects of the material relevant to the research question(s) and follows a clearly defined sequence of steps, including procedures, such as double coding, to ensure that categories are clearly distinguished. The method is also flexible, as it allows the coding frame to be developed and refined in ways that best capture and validly represent the research material. Finally, qualitative content analysis is reductive because it focuses

analytical attention on those aspects of the data that matter most to the research question(s). This process helps turn complex information into clear and meaningful themes.

Qualitative content analysis originated in the quantitative version of the method, quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017), and a few similarities still exist between the two: both use codes to identify data segments with similar content, and they often measure the frequency of these codes to gain a sense of the substance of the data (Schreier, 2014). According to Morgan (1993), there is no apparent difference between the two; instead, it comes down to where one falls on a continuum between two extremes of coding procedure and count usage. At one extreme, quantitative content analysis begins with preset codes, employs automated methods to identify them, and considers the resulting counts sufficient to understand the data. The other extreme is qualitative content analysis, which uses codes that emerge from the data, applies them through careful data readings, and treats counting as pattern recognition (answering questions about differences in the data) to guide further data interpretation (explaining why these differences occur). While quantitative counts answer questions like 'what' and 'how many', qualitative counts respond to queries like 'why' and 'how' (Morgan, 1993).

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is occasionally ranked higher than its qualitative rivals, such as thematic analysis, grounded theory, and discourse analysis, because of its ability to incorporate elements of the quantitative research paradigm (Selvi, 2019). According to Morgan (1993), qualitative content analysis, which occupies a middle ground between the interpretive emphasis of grounded theory and the numerical orientation of quantitative content analysis, is a strong option when the study aims to evaluate data patterns and interpret their underlying causes. Qualitative content analysis also excels at comparative analysis, as the counts it produces provide clear answers to questions about the differences in the data (pattern identification) and additional explanations for these differences (interpretation) (Morgan, 1993).

3.3.1.1 Steps of Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis used in this study followed five steps recommended by Schreier (2019):

Deciding on a Research Question and Selecting Material (Sampling)

This step is not exclusive to qualitative content analysis; every empirical study chooses appropriate data and formulates a research question. However, unlike other qualitative research methods that permit changes in the research question(s) mid-study, deciding on a research question before analysis is critical in qualitative content analysis because it establishes the perspective from which the data will be analysed and serves as the foundation for creating the coding frame (Schreier, 2019).

Creating a Preliminary Version of the Coding Frame

As the foundation of qualitative content analysis, the coding frame facilitates the conceptualisation and assessment of the meanings of the research material in relation to the research question(s). It represents all relevant meanings as categories, with at least one main category and many sub-categories (Schreier, 2019). The sub-categories pertain to the data features the researcher is interested in learning more about and describing what is said about the primary categories. In qualitative content analysis, categories are essential for organising data, extracting meaning, and drawing conclusions from the information gathered (Bengtsson, 2016).

Creating a preliminary version of the coding frame comprises five sub-steps: familiarisation, selection, structuring/generating, definition, and revision (Schreier, 2019). The first sub-step in creating a coding frame is to *become familiar with the research material* to identify relevant topics. The second sub-step of *selecting research material* involves separating research material pertinent to the research question from what is not. The third sub-step of *creating a coding frame* involves developing main categories and sub-categories. In qualitative content analysis, categories can be developed through concept-driven

(deductive) or data-driven (inductive) approaches. Existing knowledge, such as theoretical concepts, prior research, or interview questions, is used to build concept-driven categories and sub-categories. Data-driven categories, on the other hand, are derived directly from the research material. Within data-driven approaches, two techniques are often distinguished: *structuring*, which involves establishing sub-categories within an existing framework, and *summarising*, which means developing an entirely new coding frame from the data.

The current study used a *structuring* technique that combined both deductive and inductive strategies. This mix was necessary because the research aimed to examine how the media portrays public relations, which required some background knowledge. It also aimed to explore how journalists understand and explain these portrayals, which required openness to new insights. Accordingly, the primary categories were developed deductively using data from previous theoretical and empirical studies. These provided an organised framework for interpreting the information. Themes emerged naturally from participants' viewpoints and textual evidence, and the sub-categories were inductively formed from news stories and interviews. This approach ensured that the analysis was firmly rooted in theoretical concepts and supported by empirical evidence, while also offering interpretive richness and alignment with recognised research frameworks. This approach is acknowledged as the most practical for developing a reliable and comprehensive coding frame (Joffe, 2011; Schreier, 2019).

The fourth sub-step *defines the coding frame's categories and sub-categories*. Category definitions often include a name (a brief description of what it refers to), a description (what a category means and its features), an example (typical examples of the category), and decision rules (optional—extra information about categories when coders disagree, particularly inclusions/exclusions) (Schreier, 2014). Analysing the coding frame and adjusting to meet the basic conditions of unidimensionality and mutual exclusivity of sub-

categories constitutes the fifth sub-step of *coding frame revision*. According to Schreier (2012) and Mayring (2014), coding frames and categories are conceptualised as unidimensional (they capture only one aspect of meaning at a time), exhaustive (each relevant passage can be assigned to one of the categories in the frame), and mutually exclusive (each passage is assigned to only one sub-category within the same main category). The requirement that categories be mutually exclusive applies only to sub-categories within one main category, not to sub-categories across different main categories (Schreier, 2019).

Piloting and Modifying the Coding Frame

The third step of qualitative content analysis involves piloting, reviewing, and modifying the coding frame to identify inconsistencies, overlaps across sub-categories, and imprecise definitions. This step is divided into five sub-steps: selecting research material for the pilot phase, breaking its content into units, completing the trial coding, comparing/discussing the trial coding, and modifying the coding frame.

The first sub-step of *selecting research material for the pilot phase* requires striking a balance between selecting enough content to evaluate the coding frame and as little research material as possible to minimise recoding. The second sub-step entails *breaking the content into units*. The data acquired for a single case is referred to as the unit of analysis (for example, interview transcript). However, the coding frame's categories/sub-categories usually refer to small sections of the research material rather than the entire unit of analysis. A coding unit, also known as a segment, is a passage whose meaning can be categorised into one of the coding frame categories or sub-categories. The information is frequently divided into coding units depending on thematic criteria, with one unit ending and another beginning when the focus of a category/sub-category changes. The third sub-step of *completing the trial coding* is to assign each coding unit to the categories and sub-categories in the coding frame twice (double coding). This step is accomplished by two coders working

independently or the researcher doing it twice at different times; the latter approach was followed in the current study. The fourth sub-step, *comparing the two coding rounds*, involves assigning units to a single category and assessing the category definitions or any missing categories. In the fifth sub-step of *modifying the coding frame*, the coding frame is modified.

Completing the Coding

This coding step in qualitative content analysis involves breaking down the research material into coding units and assigning them to the categories/sub-categories of the coding frame. Unlike the iterative processes used until the trial step, the coding frame cannot be altered at this stage. The coding frame must be valid and reliable before the final coding (Schreier, 2014). Efforts were made to ensure that each category was present frequently in the data and that the coding exercise was exhaustive and saturated (Hopkins & King, 2010). The research questions were then addressed by analysing the coding results.

Presenting the Findings

Listing the coding frame with illustrative quotes is the last step of *presenting the findings*, laying the foundation for analysing the relationships between the categories. This approach makes it feasible to identify patterns and co-occurrences between categories, particularly those that frequently co-occur or follow one another in sequence. The results are primarily presented qualitatively. However, to promote transparency and aid pattern identification, this study also presented the frequencies and percentages of descriptive coding. By doing this, the study does not claim that these results can be generalised to a larger population, given that the statistical tests are meant to be exploratory and should be interpreted carefully, as the sample was intentional and non-random.

The current study analysed two types of qualitative data: news content and interviews with journalists. These two datasets were designed to complement each other: news articles provided evidence of how public relations was represented in the media, while journalist

interviews offered insights into the professional reasoning, norms, and newsroom practices underlying those representations. Together, they enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both the *manifest portrayals* of public relations and the *latent factors* shaping them.

For both datasets, the analysis was organised into three coding layers: descriptive or contextual, manifest thematic, and latent thematic categories. The descriptive or contextual categories captured the background characteristics of each data source. For the news articles, these included details such as publication name, date, story type, and topic. For the interviews, contextual categories included participants' roles, years of professional experience, and the types of media organisations they represented. These categories were used primarily for data organisation and to situate subsequent thematic interpretations within relevant professional and institutional contexts. The manifest thematic categories focused on explicit and surface-level meanings evident in both news texts and interview transcripts. In the news data, this approach meant identifying visible trends in the language used to portray public relations or its practitioners. In the interviews, it entailed taking journalists' views at face value (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Neuman & Kreuger, 2003). The latent thematic categories examined the underlying meanings and beliefs embedded within both datasets. In the news content, this process involved interpreting the discursive and ideological signals that influenced portrayals of public relations. In contrast, the interviews involved analysing the underlying values, practices, and professional standards influencing journalists' perceptions. This interpretive process required iterative engagement between the researcher and the data, constructing meaning through contextual and theoretical reflection (Kleinheksel et al., 2020).

Together, the three coding layers, namely, contextual, manifest, and latent, ensured that the findings captured both the descriptive structure of the material and the deeper interpretive

meanings. Figures were used to illustrate manifest patterns, while both figures and direct quotations supported the interpretation of latent themes.

3.3.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study employed a dual methodological approach to investigate the representation and understanding of public relations within New Zealand's news media landscape. The integration of both news media content and semi-structured interviews with journalists reflects a deliberate strategy to capture not only the observable portrayals of public relations in news texts but also the subjective perceptions of journalists who can and do create these portrayals. Given the two distinct but interrelated strands of inquiry, the study used two related frameworks to explore its questions. To answer research question RQ1 (How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?), it mainly used framing theory, as outlined by Entman (1993, 2007) and Reese (2001, 2007). Framing theory enables the identification of how news media can shape public understanding by selecting and emphasising certain aspects of reality over others. It is particularly relevant for analysing how journalists and news organisations construct narratives around public relations, including the tone, intent, and strategic references used in news reports, features, editorials, and commentaries. In this study, framing theory guided the analysis of tone, format, language choices, and sourcing in news coverage related to public relations across selected national and regional outlets (*NZ Herald, Stuff, Otago Daily Times*).

To answer research question RQ2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?) and research question RQ3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?), the study used attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 2012). Attribution theory helps explain how individuals assign causes, intent, and responsibility in their interpretations of events or behaviours. In the context of this study, it supports the analysis of how journalists rationalise their attitudes towards public relations and explain their professional

interactions with practitioners. It allows for an exploration of perceived motivations, ethical concerns, trust or mistrust, and role boundaries, all of which contribute to journalists' professional judgments about public relations.

The significance of combining these two perspectives within the methodology lies in bridging the gap between textual representation and human agency. While framing theory focuses on how the media constructs public images of public relations, attribution theory allows for an analysis of how individual journalists construct their personal and professional views of the field. Decisions made by journalists affect news presentations in ways that go beyond mere fact presentation. The way news is written is influenced by their professional ethics and viewpoints. Examining their opinions on public relations showed factors that affect how the industry is portrayed in the media. These factors include the culture in newsrooms, limited resources, past conflicts between journalism and public relations, and the changing roles of professionals in these fields (Heider, 1958; Reese, 2001, 2007).

Figure 3.1

Dual Theoretical Framework: Framing and Attribution in Public Relations-Journalism Relations

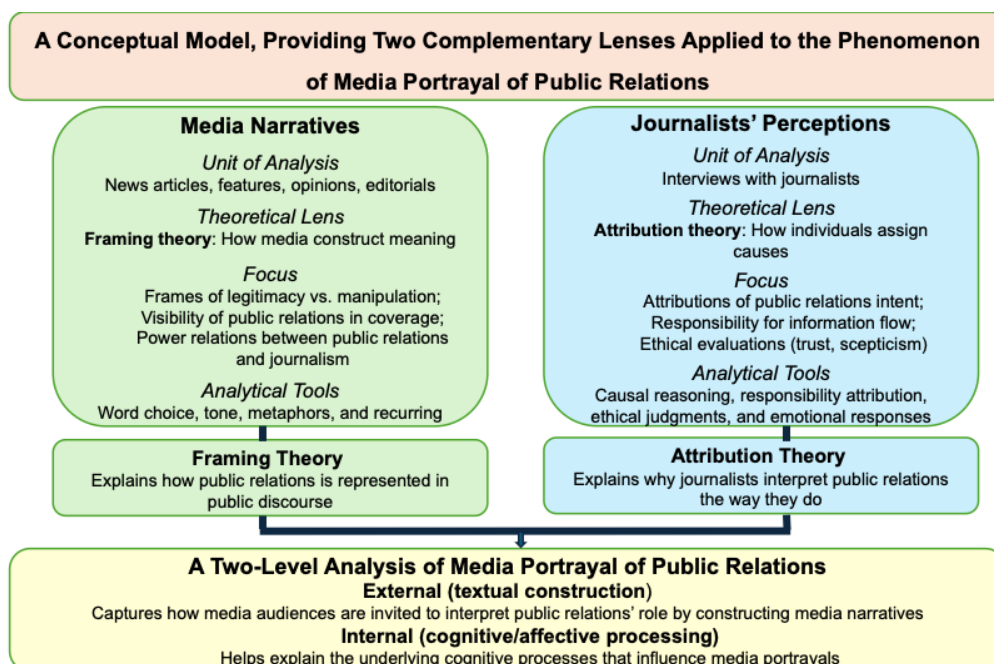


Figure 3.1 visualises the dual theoretical framework used in this study. This dual focus is essential for understanding the messages disseminated to the public and the professional cognition that shapes them. Moreover, this integrated approach helps the study to:

- *Explain the origins of dominant media frames*: Understanding journalists' beliefs and attitudes helps contextualise why specific frames (e.g., scepticism, negativity, sensationalism) persist or evolve in media portrayals of public relations (Entman, 1993, 2007).
- *Emphasise the intricate relationships between practitioners and journalists*: Interviews offer important insights into how people interact, including cooperation, disagreements, and mutual dependence. These dynamics are frequently obscured in media narratives (Heider, 1958)
- *Enhance validity and depth of analysis*: Studying media content alongside journalists' viewpoints helps better understand events and strengthens research findings (Reese, 2001, 2007).
- *Provide practical recommendations*: Understanding how journalists think can help media organisations and professionals communicate more effectively, build trust, and engage ethically (Weiner, 1985, 2012).

3.3.3 Analysis Process

This section outlines how the five previously discussed qualitative content analysis steps were applied to analysing news stories and interview transcripts. This approach enabled the researcher to link observable media portrayals of public relations to journalists' underlying motivations. As mentioned in Section 3.1, qualitative content analysis is suitable for comparing data. It helps to clearly identify and interpret patterns, showing the differences in the data (Morgan, 1993). To enhance transparency and help readers recognise patterns, the analysis in this study also included descriptive counts and percentages for coded instances, indicating how often each theme or code appears. While doing so, ample care was taken to

ensure that these numerical summaries served only as descriptive indicators of prominence or visibility within the sample; they did not constitute statistical generalisation to a larger population.

3.3.3.1 Analysis of News Stories

The focus of qualitative content analysis of news stories was to generate findings that addressed the research question RQ 1: How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage? Section 3.2.3.1 explained the selection of the research material. The shortlisted news stories were retrieved from the database and examined multiple times before being prepared for import into NVivo, the software used to create and organise codes. The preparation work involved:

- Formatting of the content of each news story for consistency.
- Scrutiny of the content of each story to identify information on several parameters, including the name of the news outlet publishing the news story, date of publication of the news story, type of the news story, source of the news story, focus of the news story, relevance score of the news story, length of the news story (number of words), and frequency of the use of the term 'Public Relations' or 'PR' in the news story.
- Compilation of the above information into a table.
- Insertion of this table after the title of the news story.

To become familiar with the data, the researcher employed a combination of techniques recommended by Bazeley (2020), including scribbling, peer discussion, and creation of word clouds. During the reading iterations, important texts related to the research question were highlighted, focusing on the purpose of public relations, the meanings attributed to it, and its characterisation.

The second step of qualitative content analysis, *creating a preliminary version of the coding frame*, began with a set of codes derived from prior knowledge, specifically findings from

previous research. The resulting coding frame used demographic and thematic categories to classify the dataset content. The thematic categories sought to determine whether public relations terms were portrayed in news stories as positive, negative, or neutral, and whether the purpose of public relations was effectively conveyed. The demographic categories focused on the news outlet in which the news story appeared, the year of publication of the news story, the source or organisation handling public relations (business, government, non-profit, citizen group, or politician/celebrity), the purpose behind the news story (e.g., news or feature published by a public relations practitioner covering an issue in which public relations is involved, an article substantially about public relations, an editorial, etc.), and the public relations coverage (peripheral or central). The categories and sub-categories were then defined inductively to illustrate the intention and extension of the underlying concepts. While intention defines or characterises the concept, extension determines the category members (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). The preliminary coding frame was then modified to satisfy the essential criteria of unidimensionality and reciprocal exclusivity of sub-categories.

In the third step of qualitative content analysis, *piloting and modifying the coding frame*, 10% of the dataset used for trial coding met the criterion required for a pilot study to be deemed representative (Schreier, 2012). Selecting news stories for trial coding from each news outlet ensured fair representation: four stories each from the *NZ Herald* and *Stuff*, and two from the *Otago Daily Times*. Each news story constituted a unit of analysis, which served as a backdrop for the meaning units, namely, the words, sentences, or paragraphs with associated content and context. New codes and their iterations were created using the same 10% of the dataset for inductive coding. Gibbs' (2018) approach guided the researcher in developing these codes. It involved describing the identified text before conducting a deeper analysis and categorisation to reveal the underlying meaning of the coded text. Multiple approaches, including data questioning, influenced the coding of the text, the identification of keyword repetition, metaphors and analogies, transitions, linguistic features, and any missing data. The preliminary coding frame was reviewed twice, with a 5-month interval

between reviews. During the review process, it was ensured that no codes needed to be renamed, removed, merged, broken down for specificity, or converted into a hierarchy.

To find any places where the definitions of the various categories overlapped or were unclear, all the units assigned to one category in the first coding frame and another in the second were marked. The coding frame was subsequently revised to reflect the modification, and a revised coding frame was created to analyse the remaining dataset. The changes made during the review of the coding frame, which involved merging and dropping some sub-categories and adding new ones, are documented in Appendix E. Writing memos regarding the changes significantly facilitated comparing the two versions and modifying the coding framework. At this point, efforts were made to ensure that the codes were relevant to the research question.

In the fourth stage of qualitative content analysis, the coding process was finalised by assigning coding units for each 'unit of analysis' (a news story) to the established categories and sub-categories of the coding framework. The final coding frame thus generated is attached as Appendix F. In the final phase of qualitative content analysis, the findings were organised into three primary categories: descriptive or contextual, manifest thematic, and latent thematic.

3.3.3.2 Analysis of Interview Transcripts

While analysis of the news stories examined how public relations was portrayed in print and online news media in New Zealand, analysis of interview transcripts focused on finding themes related to journalists' perception of public relations in New Zealand, the factors that have helped shape these perceptions, and journalists' expectations regarding public relations that could improve their perception, using the five steps outlined by Schreier (2019).

The first step in the qualitative analysis of interview transcripts involved *outlining the research questions and selecting research material*. The focus of qualitative content analysis was to generate findings that addressed the research questions RQ 2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?) and RQ 3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?). Section 3.2.3.2 outlined the methodology for selecting research materials.

In the second step of qualitative content analysis, *creating a preliminary version of the coding frame*, the comments significant to the research questions were highlighted. This step concentrated on how journalists interact with practitioners, their perceptions of these practitioners, and the factors that shape those perceptions. It also examined their relationships with practitioners, their views on the public relations profession, and their expectations regarding it. The next phase in developing the coding framework adopted a deductive approach, utilising codes based on the interview schedule. The resulting coding frame used descriptive, contextual and thematic categories to classify the dataset content. In each category, sub-categories were listed deductively based on the interview schedule, up to the first level for descriptive or contextual and the second for thematic categories. The thematic categories aimed at providing answers to the questions addressed to the interviewees to ascertain their interaction experience with practitioners, their perception of interaction experience, their relationship with practitioners, their expectations from the public relations profession and its practitioners, the role of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand, and their general perception of public relations. Descriptive or contextual categories included the interviewee's present employment, journalism experience, and public relations education, training, or experience. In the next step, the categories and sub-categories were defined.

In the third step, *piloting and modifying the coding frame*, about 20% of the dataset (four interview transcripts) was utilised, exceeding the 10% threshold required for a pilot study to

be representative (Schreier, 2012). When selecting interview transcripts for trial coding, two transcripts of the interviewees who worked for the *NZ Herald*, one from *Stuff* and another from the *Otago Daily Times*, were chosen to ensure fair representation of each news outlet. The research data were coded inductively, leading to the creation of new codes and their iterations. The preliminary coding frame was then reviewed twice. The review process aimed to evaluate whether any codes should be renamed, removed, merged, broken down for more specificity, or organised into a hierarchy. After two months, a new coding framework was established using the same data. The modifications made during the review of the coding framework, including the addition of new sub-categories and the merging and removal of some existing sub-categories, are detailed in Appendix G.

The two coding frames were then compared, identifying all units assigned to one category in the first coding frame and another in the second, noting any instances where the definitions of the various categories overlapped or were unclear. The coding framework was then revised to reflect the changes, and a new coding frame was developed for the analysis. This exercise required rearranging nodes and child nodes under three main categories: descriptive or contextual, manifest thematic, and latent thematic. At this point, it was ensured that all codes were relevant to the research question.

In the fourth step, *completing the coding*, the coding units for each unit of analysis (an interview transcript) were assigned to categories and sub-categories, leading to the finalisation of the coding frame (Appendix H). Following Saldaña's (2016, 2021) recommendations, the coded data under the thematic categories were reviewed to identify unifying characteristics among nodes and child nodes and cluster them to describe meaningful patterns in the data as a foundation for creating themes.

In the fifth step of qualitative content analysis, *presenting the findings*, the results were categorised into three significant categories: descriptive or contextual, manifest thematic, and latent thematic. In qualitative research, especially studies informed by framing and

attribution theory, meaning is often embedded in interpretation rather than in isolated descriptive statements. When discussing thematic findings, a general pattern of presenting empirical findings briefly, followed by deeper analytical engagement, is practised. This approach allowed for a better connection of the findings directly to theoretical concepts, explained how particular frames and attributions function, and situated the findings within wider scholarly debates.

3.4 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, 'trustworthiness' is generally preferred over traditional concepts of validity and reliability because it recognises that knowledge is context-dependent and co-constructed, focusing instead on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research findings should be viewed as reputable, according to Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and Graneheim et al. (2017), which calls for a comprehensive evaluation of each study based on the technique utilised in its production. The use of news stories and interviews as data-collection methods enhanced the study's credibility. Furthermore, discussing the results with colleagues introduced fresh viewpoints in addition to aiding in the identification of possible errors. In the end, this cooperation improved the trustworthiness of the study.

The *credibility criterion of trustworthiness* was ensured by using appropriate data collection methods, including the collection of news stories and conducting interviews, and by subjecting interview questions to peer review to ensure they were relevant and generated meaningful data. The coding process was carried out twice at different times to correct any discrepancies in coding and update the categorisation matrix. This iterative coding method increased the study's credibility, improving the analysis and ensuring that the coding frame adequately represented the data (Graneheim et al., 2017; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Schreier, 2012). By carefully choosing individuals and materials that complemented the study's goals, purposeful sampling increased the study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

But, like most non-probability sampling techniques, this method has drawbacks, especially regarding the extent to which the results can be applied beyond the chosen cases. These limitations are acknowledged and further discussed in the concluding chapter. Adopting this approach in this study led to rich and meaningful data that answered the research questions.

This study explained how to create and understand categories. This careful method made sure that the results were trustworthy and reflected the participants' experiences, rather than the researchers' biases (Polit & Beck, 2012). To ensure consistent data interpretation, a test analysis (coding 10% of the data by the researcher twice at an interval of 3 months) was conducted (Burla et al., 2008; Schreier, 2012). Using quotes from participants helped show how the findings related to the original data, allowing readers to assess whether the interpretations were accurate (Graneheim et al., 2017; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). These methods helped ensure the study remained organised, transparent, and trustworthy throughout the research.

3.5 Reflexivity

The study recognised the importance of reflexivity in understanding how a researcher's actions may impact the research process. According to Daymon and Holloway (2010), reflexivity involves the researcher constantly reflecting on their background, assumptions, and emotional engagement while remaining aware of their role in constructing knowledge. When it comes to generating reliable and reputable study findings, self-reflection is crucial. This argument is emphasised by writers such as Silverman (2001, 2014, 2024) and Patton (2002). Throughout the study process, researchers should be open about their personal histories and give careful thought to their viewpoints. This kind of introspection guarantees that the study is genuine, reliable, and thorough. The researcher acknowledged that how they evaluated the data and conducted their research might be influenced by their media relations degree and prior public relations experience. The researcher used self-awareness to stay neutral and produce fair results. The researcher gave serious thought to how their

professional experience and life experiences might influence their opinions on media-public relations relationships. They were able to strike a balance between their personal insights and objective analysis thanks to this method, which incorporated self-reflection into the research process.

3.6 Summary

The current study examined the meanings and connotations of public relations terms in the context of news stories published in select New Zealand media outlets. It identified the variables that influence how public relations is portrayed. Constructivism was the underlying epistemology used in this study to interpret reality in terms of the meaning others assign to it, thereby understanding (rather than forecasting) and acquiring new knowledge through social interaction. Similarly, constructivism was also employed in the study for ontological reasons, as it views reality and meaning formation as socially constructed, with individuals shaping their experience of social reality. The study utilised a qualitative method grounded in constructivist ideas about reality and knowledge, allowing the researcher to adapt and switch between various research techniques. For data collection, the study used interviews and selected news stories.

The *NZ Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, and *Stuff*—three prominent New Zealand news sources—were taken into consideration for shortlisting news articles that used the term ‘public relations’ and its acronym, ‘PR’. These news sources were carefully chosen to ensure diversity in three areas: target demographics, editorial style, and regional focus. The sample for the interviews stage of the current study consisted of senior journalists from the same three New Zealand news outlets selected for the analysis of news texts. Semi-structured interviews with information-rich respondents were used to collect sufficient qualitative data. The proceedings were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse both types of datasets. The chapter explains the rationale for the proposed research design, including the use of qualitative content analysis, and illustrates the concepts

employed. The researcher took into account important qualitative rigour criteria, such as conformability and credibility, to guarantee the study's reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These factors served as a reference for assessing the study's methodological coherence and the veracity of its interpretations.

Chapter 4: Media Portrayal of Public Relations

4.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the research question, RQ1 (How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?) by examining how public relations is framed in New Zealand news media through the lens of framing theory. It integrates empirical findings from the qualitative content analysis with interpretive insights grounded in framing and attribution perspectives. The results and discussion of this study are arranged around themes that link data patterns to analyses, prior research, and established theories. It examines how journalists create narratives about public relations through language, symbolism, and storytelling. It also highlights how news reports reflect opinions about this field, both overtly and subtly.

4.1 Framing Public Relations in New Zealand's Media Context

This introductory section lays the foundation for presenting the analyses of the portrayal of public relations in New Zealand's news media, highlighting framing as the central analytical focus. It explains how various characteristics of New Zealand's news media, including institutional, cultural, economic, and political factors, affect the news that the public consumes, which in turn influences how professions like public relations are portrayed. Framing, as defined by Entman (1993, 2007), is the process by which specific aspects of reality are selected and emphasised to influence public perception. Reese (2001, 2007) explained that frames are shared ideas in society that help shape how people understand media and what meanings they take from it. Drawing on the perspectives of Entman (1993, 2007) and Reese (2001, 2007), this section explains how frames in New Zealand's news media are created and lays the groundwork for the subsequent thematic analyses to examine how journalists construct, reinforce, challenge, or normalise narratives about the field in their news stories.

4.1.1 Media Landscape and Representational Conditions

New Zealand has a small but competitive news media market, where a few major outlets have a significant impact on public discourse (Hollings et al., 2016; Phelan & Owen, 2009). The three outlets selected for this study, viz., the *NZ Herald*, *Stuff*, and the *Otago Daily Times*, together provided a comprehensive overview of the mainstream news ecosystems in New Zealand's media environment. This choice was made to highlight differences in newsroom organisation, audience focus, and editing procedures across national, regional, and online media environments (Chetty, 2013). The details of the media landscape covered in this study are presented in Section 3.2.3.1.

4.1.2 Framing as the Interpretive Lens

Framing theory provides the foundation for this study's analysis of media portrayals of public relations. Scheufele (1999) and Reese (2001, 2007) emphasised that frames are not individually constructed but socially shared and culturally embedded within news work practices. Journalists play a key role in how public relations is understood and discussed (Sterne, 2010). Their choice of language and symbols, selection of sources, focus on specific themes, and the way they structure stories are all important factors that can shape public discourse on this topic.

This study applied framing as an interpretive lens at both 'textual' and 'conceptual' levels. This approach allowed the analysis to capture how different aspects of media coverage created meaning. Two key types of analysis guided the process: (a) manifest frames, which refer to the clear and visible parts of texts, such as labels, metaphors, headlines, or common story patterns (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Tankard, 2001), and (b) latent frames, which involve deeper, often hidden patterns and assumptions that influence media coverage, such as ethical views on the legitimacy of public relations, its connection to truth, and its overall social value (D'Angelo, 2002; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). This approach aligns with

the 'bridging model' of framing, connecting micro-level textual framing (manifest) with macro-level cultural meanings (latent) (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Reese, 2007).

To implement these categories, the analysis utilised four frame elements suggested by Entman (1993, 2007): defining the problem, interpreting causality, assessing morality, and recommending treatment. These elements aligned closely with the study's objective of examining how journalists represented public relations, assigned responsibility, and attached evaluative judgments to the profession. Entman's paradigm was more directly operationalisable for media text analysis, even if Goffman (1974) offered the conceptual underpinnings of framing and Scheufele (1999) described framing processes and effects. Additionally, it was especially appropriate because it reinforced attribution theory, particularly its emphasis on the assignment of responsibility and causal interpretation. Additionally, researchers such as D'Angelo (2002) and Reese (2001, 2007) emphasised the importance of Entman's method for relating textual patterns to broader processes of meaning creation.

Entman's four framing aspects were particularly used when meaning was evaluated rather than explicitly expressed. For example:

- The problem definition was identified where public relations was positioned as 'manipulative'
- Causal attribution was analysed, in which practitioners or communication techniques were given accountability
- Moral evaluation surfaced through terms such as 'spin', 'PR disaster', or 'damage control'
- Treatment recommendations were inferred where texts implied the need for transparency or corrective action.

Framing operates at several levels in the dataset: through language, metaphors, narrative structure, moral evaluation, attribution of responsibility, and professional identity

construction. Because the dataset was large and interpretively rich, the discussion here focuses on the most analytically significant framing patterns rather than every framing element in detail, for brevity and readability.

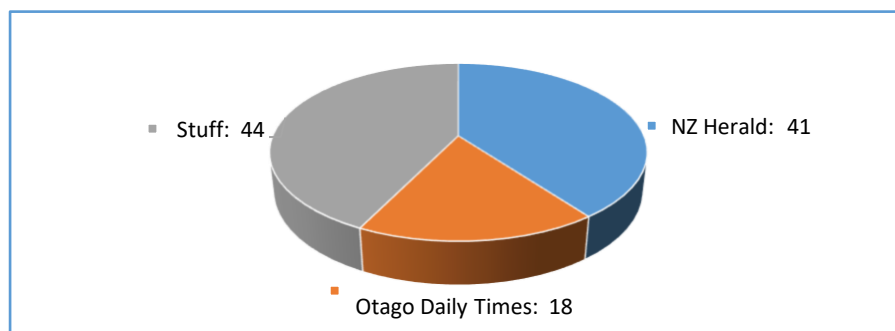
4.2 Descriptive Overview of the Dataset

This section describes how the dataset is organised within the study. By analysing the distribution, focus, type, and source of news stories about public relations, one can gain a clearer understanding of how this profession is portrayed across various news contexts. Assessing these contextual indicators clarifies the institutional frameworks that influence journalists' discourse choices (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

4.2.1 Distribution Across Outlets and Publication Years

The dataset comprises 103 news stories sourced from three major New Zealand news outlets: the *NZ Herald* (41 stories), *Otago Daily Times* (18 stories), and *Stuff* (44 stories) (Fig. 4.1).

Figure 4.1
Distribution of sampled news stories across the *NZ Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, and *Stuff*

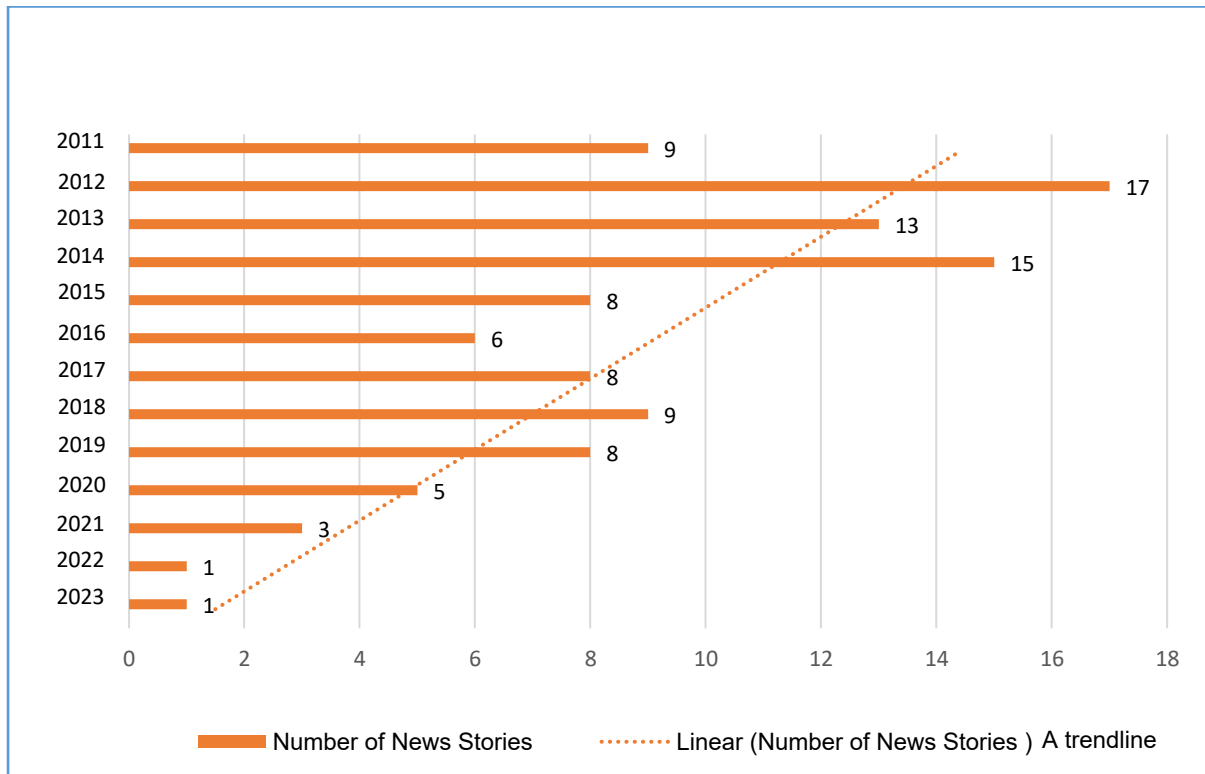


This distribution indicates that national news outlets tend to cover more public relations stories than regional ones. This finding is not surprising because national media usually have more resources, wider networks, and better ways to engage with organised communication efforts (McCombs, 1977; McNair, 2017). News organisations often depend on official, well-funded sources for information, as these sources provide clear, reliable, and trustworthy material that fits well with standard news practices (Tuchman, 1978). Because of

this dependence, stories about major organisations and policy issues are more likely to be chosen and framed as news. As Eldridge and Franklin (2016) noted, this dynamic can enhance the influence of institutional public relations.

The temporal analysis in Figure 4.2 demonstrates how public relations coverage has evolved over the previous 10 years. Mentions significantly decreased between 2012 and 2023. The majority of the stories were released in 2012. Less than 10% of the total content analysed came from the 2020s, and 2022 and 2023 had the fewest references. This pattern is consistent with studies suggesting that public interest, company issues, and newsworthiness can influence how public relations is covered by the media (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Karlsson et al., 2018). Additionally, this indicates how traditional public relations coverage is increasingly being replaced by digital and social media platforms (Wright & Hinson, 2017).

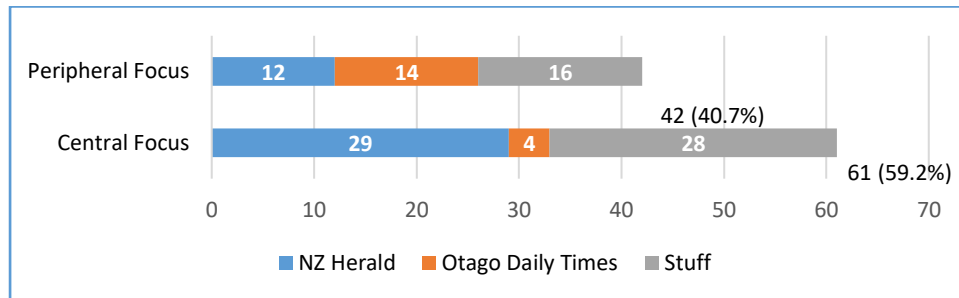
Figure 4.2
Total number of news stories per year (2011-2023)



4.2.2 Focus and Centrality

A story with a central focus on public relations discusses the profession, its activities, or its effects, and this emphasis can be seen in the headline, the first paragraph, or a detailed analysis. Figure 4.3 shows that 59.2% of the sampled news stories positioned public relations as a central focus. This pattern is particularly evident in leading national outlets, such as the *NZ Herald* and *Stuff*, suggesting that these outlets often view public relations as an important topic rather than a minor one. This framing indicates how significant the topic is when the media cover it (Fig. 4.3). Studies distinguishing frame-based reporting that emphasises the importance and consequences of the topic from mere mention of the profession lend credence to this finding (Coombs, 2022; Entman, 1993, 2007). This finding indicates that public relations gains news value primarily when it pertains to public accountability or crises, emphasising the ongoing discussions regarding the possible influence of public relations and its ability to generate controversy.

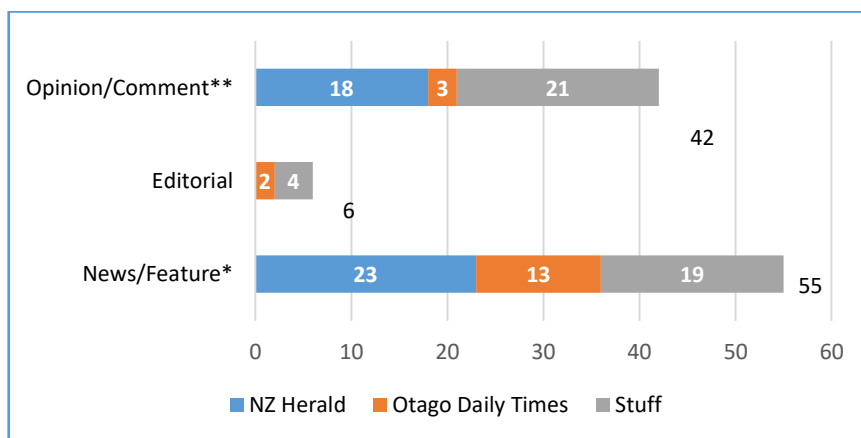
Figure 4.3
Focus of news stories on public relations (central vs. peripheral)



4.2.3 Story Type and Source Dynamics

Most news about public relations appears as news reports or feature articles, totalling 54 stories. There are also a significant number of opinion pieces, totalling 42 stories, but only a small number of editorials, which make up 5% of the dataset (Fig. 4.4).

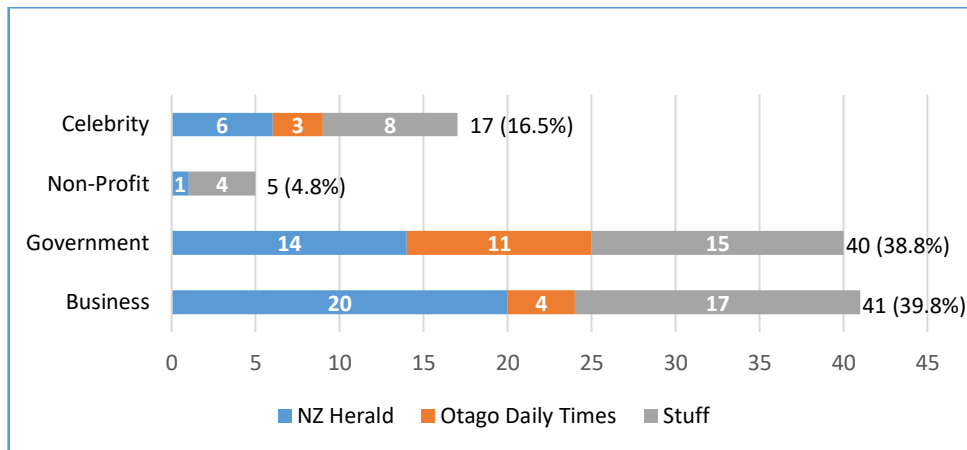
Figure 4.4
Data of the news stories that appeared as a news/feature, editorial, or opinion/comment



This distribution indicates that both evaluative and interpretive journalism (opinions, editorials and news articles) can have a significant impact on how the audience can view the profession, and this influence can persist even though public relations often appears in regular news reporting (Brants, 2003; McNair, 2009). These genres allow for more personal interpretation and opinions than regular news reporting. Because of this, journalists often share their moral judgments about the impact of public relations on public discourse. These views can change how society sees the public relations profession and its overall value.

Examination of the sources related to public relations coverage (Fig. 4.5) indicates that the profession is predominantly linked with business (39.8%) and government agencies (38.8%), while non-profit organisations are minimally represented (4.8%).

Figure 4.5
Primary sources associated with public relations coverage in the dataset



These results confirm earlier findings that media visibility in public relations is closely linked to sectors with high public exposure and influence; in contrast, smaller or less prominent organisations get very little coverage (Heath, 2010; Moloney, 2006). Source characteristics are key determinants in framing, as they shape the institutional and discursive contexts within which journalists operate (Gandy, 1982; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

The patterns described in this section help in understanding how public relations is represented in New Zealand's news media. However, they do not demonstrate how meanings are constructed or why certain portrayals occur. Collectively, these descriptive patterns provide a structural lens through which subsequent thematic analysis interprets journalistic framing of public relations. They indicate that public relations coverage can be affected not only by the profession's newsworthiness but also by other factors. These include the importance of the media outlet, timing, the way stories are presented, and the context of the sources. Together, these factors help explain how public relations is portrayed in New Zealand news media.

4.3 Manifest Framing of Public Relations: Language and Symbolism in News Discourse

Having established the broader patterns of media representation, the analysis now turns to manifest framing, examining how journalists construct meanings about public relations through observable language choices and symbolic expressions. Analysing manifest frames can reveal how particular words and expressions, including adjectives and phrases, such as 'spin doctor', influence how the media views public relations. They also help in understanding the main themes that can shape how people see public relations as both a social and organisational activity.

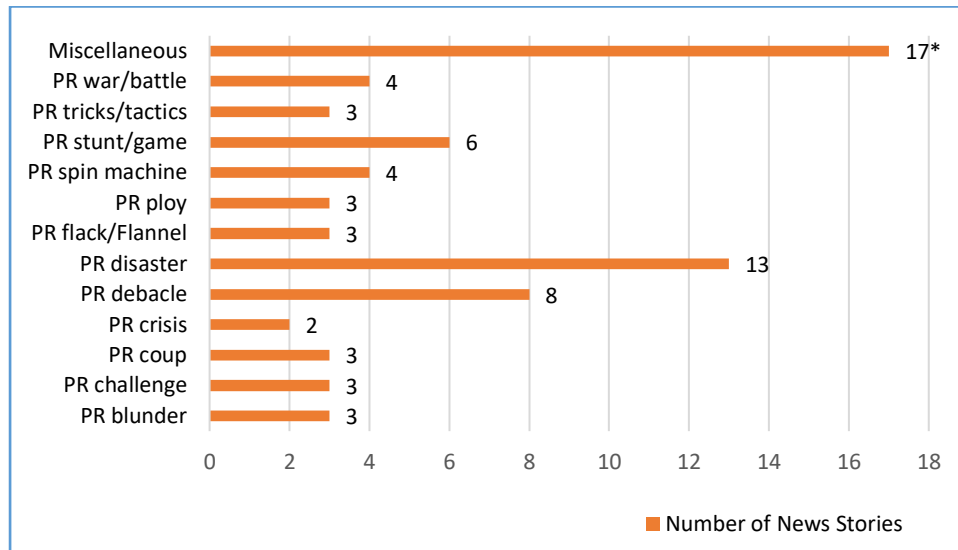
4.3.1 Language Use and Narrative Cues

This first dimension of manifest framing focuses on evaluative language. It looks at how opinions about the profession are reflected in journalists' word choices and narrative presentation techniques. Framing theory is used in this analysis to explain how specific word patterns might define responsibility, assign blame, highlight problems, and elicit moral judgements regarding public relations practices.

A recurring feature of the dataset is the adjectival use of the terms 'public relations' and 'PR', often appearing as qualifiers in expressions, such as 'PR spin', 'PR stunt', 'PR debacle', and 'PR disaster'. The term 'PR disaster' appeared 15 times across 13 stories, while others, such as 'PR stunt', 'PR war', 'PR tricks', and 'PR ploy', appeared more than four times each (see Fig. 4.6). These phrases bring additional meanings, both positive and negative. Often, they create a negative image by depicting public relations as dishonest or superficial rather than emphasising it as a valid communication strategy (Becktel et al., 2021). Research shows that public relations is frequently characterised through negative linguistic cues, which contribute to public mistrust and diminish recognition of its professional and strategic functions (L'Etang, 2008; Miller & Dinan, 2008; Moloney, 2006).

Figure 4.6

Terminology suggesting a meaning in public relations terms used by journalists



*All terminology for the 'miscellaneous' sub-category appeared only once across the dataset. This includes 'PR blog', 'PR flop', 'PR cop', 'PR damage', 'PR attack', 'PR shark', 'PR gaffe', 'PR genius', 'PR purgatory', 'PR glow', 'PR thriller', 'PR whitewash', 'PR sale', 'PR snafu', 'PR curse', 'PR hack', 'PR type', 'PR wringer', 'PR jam', and 'PR fiasco'.

This trend aligns with earlier studies indicating that journalists often distrust public relations. For example, Sherwood et al. (2019) found that many journalists view public relations as a way to mislead people and distract from important issues, a belief that increases journalists' scepticism of the industry. This perspective supports the idea that public relations efforts can undermine journalism's fundamental values of transparency and truth. In the same way, Kinsky and Callison (2009) noted that journalists often used the term 'public relations' negatively, even when the story had little to do with the profession. Scrimger and Richards (2002) and White and Lambert (2006) noted that journalists often use public relations terms negatively, which can reinforce perceptions of unethical or ineffective strategies.

In the framing models of Entman (1993, 2007) and Reese (2001, 2007), this pattern of words fulfils multiple important roles. First, it suggests public relations as a problematic phenomenon, that is, a place where communication fails or ethics are compromised. Terms, such as 'PR disaster' and 'PR debacle', imply an underlying narrative of incompetence or insincerity. Second, these framings assign causal responsibility for poor communication and

reputational harm to practitioners, while also suggesting public relations as an unreliable field that prioritises image over sincerity. Finally, by implication, they propose treatment recommendations that public relations activity should be viewed sceptically, regulated, or corrected through journalistic scrutiny.

Examples from the dataset illustrate and strengthen these interpretive functions. A news story described a corporate misstep as “a PR disaster in that it offended a key segment of the public relations’ target market” (Drinnan, 2012, June 29), while an opinion article referred to a “public relations debacle” in the health sector involving “abysmal” communication (Goodwin, 2015, May 08). Both examples use evaluative framing to suggest public relations as culpable for communicative failure and public dissatisfaction. In contrast, a smaller subset of stories presented public relations as a necessary strategic tool in complex or emotionally charged contexts, as another opinion article puts it: “You have a very tough PR challenge... to effectively communicate a restructure... so that stakeholders can understand these changes” (Kaubaridis, 2012, December 28). Even in such neutral or pragmatic uses, the term ‘PR challenge’ may carry an implicit framing of difficulty and reputational risk more than expertise or relational value.

These results corroborate White and Park’s (2010) finding that journalists often present contentious or immoral activity as a ‘PR issue’. When it comes to culpability, the emphasis frequently moves from the actual acts or individuals involved to the communication of the event. This shift emphasises public relations as a reflection of, and an indication of, the underlying problems. In addition to oversimplifying the role of public relations, this strategy gives the impression that the field is reactive or deceptive. White and Park (2010) noted that repeated exposure to negative portrayals over time reduced public trust in the profession. Although accreditation and education programmes aim to raise professional standards (Fitch, 2016), ongoing negative media coverage can damage their impact by making people sceptical about the value of public relations.

Overall, the results show how evaluative language and frequent metaphors can play a role in New Zealand news coverage of public relations. Journalists construct public relations as a morally dubious and crisis-ridden field by selective focus, which simultaneously justifies and explains their own professional alertness. A statement by an interviewee that “*public relations is centred on enhancing image, whereas journalists are committed to uncovering the truth*” (J8) is consistent with the 2007 discussion of a ‘moral divide’ in communication jobs by Coombs and Holladay, which argued that credibility is essentially the key to good communication. While journalists view the public relations industry as operating under a separate moral framework, they take pride in being objective truth-tellers.

While the preceding analysis focused on explicit evaluative language, journalists also communicate meanings about public relations through symbolic and metaphorical expressions. The next section examines how these symbolic substitutes reinforce broader assumptions about the profession.

4.3.2 Symbolic Synonyms and the Evolution of Evaluative Framing

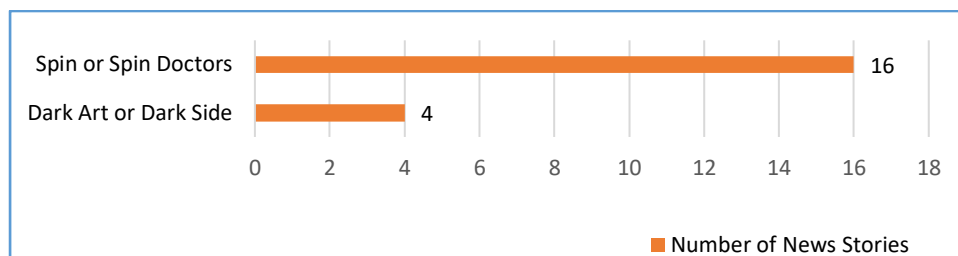
Symbolic synonyms, such as ‘spin doctor’, ‘dark side’, and ‘dark art’, operate as framing devices⁴ in New Zealand news discourse. While Section 4.3.1 pointed out evaluative adjectives (e.g., ‘PR disaster’, ‘PR stunt’) as indicators of cynicism about public relations, this section emphasises metaphorical substitutions that carry deeper ideological meanings. These metaphors illustrate how journalists establish clear moral boundaries between their professional role and that of practitioners. They also highlight how these boundaries have changed over time. Unlike manifest language, these metaphors have an ideological purpose by incorporating relational and historical meanings that have shaped perceptions of the public relations profession over time (Conboy, 2010; L'Etang, 2008). Identifying the differences in these analyses indicates that journalists view public relations in two main ways. The first approach is direct and critical, while the second uses metaphors and

⁴ Specific words, metaphors, headlines, examples, and narrative patterns used in news texts to emphasise particular aspects of an issue and guide audience interpretation (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

symbols. These linguistic strategies can demonstrate shifts in communication norms and professional standards since shifts in metaphorical and evaluative language often correspond with shifting views on public responsibilities and the legitimacy of institutions (Conboy, 2010; Entman, 2007; Macnamara, 2014).

The dataset shows that several stories (including opinion pieces) replaced the term ‘PR’ with figurative or pejorative descriptors such as ‘spin doctor’ or ‘the dark side’ (see Fig. 4.7).

Figure 4.7
Synonyms used to symbolise public relations and its practitioners in news stories



These expressions evoke imagery of manipulation and moral ambiguity, suggesting that public relations stands in tension with journalism’s normative ideals of transparency and truth-telling. As one news story stated, “Public relations has always been journalism’s swarthy cousin, and as I have followed the careers of my classmates, more than a few have ended up on the dark side” (Moore, 2015, August 06). Such language constructs a dichotomy between journalism (as the defender of public interest) and public relations (as an ethically compromised ‘other’). The choice of terms thus functions as an evaluative frame (Entman, 1993, 2007; Reese, 2001, 2007), portraying public relations as questionable while boosting the credibility of journalism.

This viewpoint on the choice of terms as evaluative frames supports Valentini’s (2015) argument that public relations is negatively impacted by metaphors such as ‘spin doctors’ and ‘dark arts’. These phrases can give the impression that propaganda and manipulation are the only aspects of public relations. Valentini (2015) cautioned against linking all public

relations efforts to manipulation, emphasising the importance of managing issues and involving stakeholders as democratic functions. Valentini (2015) asserted that journalism and public relations play a critical role in advancing transparency and fostering public conversation. However, a moral precedent that favours independent journalism over cooperative communication is established when the two communication sectors are compared.

That said, data shows that negative metaphors are less common now. Terms such as 'spin doctor' and 'dark art' appeared in only 19.4% of the stories analysed, mainly in the early years of the study period (2010-2020). There were no occurrences of these terms in the most recent years (2021-2023). Arguably, this change in how journalists discuss public relations reflects a shift in perspective. Today, journalists recognise that negative stereotypes about public relations are outdated and often express regret about how this field is portrayed. The article's mention of "the old stereotype of the spin doctor or Svengali" (Venuto, 2023, June 08) suggests that these stereotypes are no longer relevant in today's media landscape.

This evolving trend aligns with larger historical patterns observed in global media studies. Tankard and Sumpter (1993, August 11–14) performed a longitudinal content analysis and observed a significant decrease in the negative connotation of the metaphor 'spin doctor' in American journalism. The use of this term decreased from 70% of references in 1989 to 25% by 1992. The decline suggests that journalists are changing how they discuss a particular topic. They are now using the term more as a neutral label for people in media management or political communication, rather than to criticise or make moral judgments. This change does not necessarily mean a significant shift in power relations between journalism and public relations. Instead, it may show that journalism has become more accountable. This change may be due to journalists' increased focus on professional ethics and reputation, as they pay more attention to neutrality and professional standards

(Thurman et al., 2016). Society also expects greater accountability, as reflected in the similar ethical codes now used in both journalism and public relations (Christensen et al., 2015). Moreover, senior practitioners in both fields increasingly articulate independent roles rather than simplistic hostility (Moloney & McGrath, 2019).

A decline in negative language could be due to several factors. First, it may indicate a change in the newsroom ethos, as younger journalists, who frequently study public relations and communication, are now more inclined to adopt methods that emphasise cooperation and understanding (Macnamara, 2014). Second, this shift could be in response to public expectations for fairness and inclusivity (Karlberg, 1996). Some news organisations are changing how they discuss issues due to shifts in media ethics and editorial policies. They are now avoiding language that is clearly negative or disrespectful. Third, this may demonstrate a practical understanding of the connection between journalism and public relations. This is especially true in news environments with limited resources, where media often depend on materials created by public relations for their content because they lack the time and resources for independent investigation, a trend observed in research showing high proportions of news content derived from public relations sources and the rise of 'churnalism' in contemporary journalism (Lewis et al., 2008).

From a framing perspective, the ongoing presence and gradual evolution of these metaphors illustrate how our understanding of problems and moral judgments has progressed (Entman, 1993, 2007; Reese, 2001, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). In the past, news coverage often viewed public relations as an ethical issue, using strong images, such as 'the dark side', to convey this idea. Emerging from broader widespread usage and cemented in public discourse after *Star Wars* (1977), this phrase enabled journalists of that era to characterise public relations as morally suspect or corrupt. Even though journalists still have reservations about public relations, these reservations are more frequently expressed subtly—for example, by framing and establishing boundaries—than directly

(Moloney & McGrath, 2019; Obermaier et al., 2018). This change demonstrates how narrative techniques can uphold continuing professional connections while maintaining journalistic authority and critical detachment (Macnamara, 2014; Heath, 2013).

The reduced use of negative metaphors does not necessarily indicate a more positive view of public relations. The following sections indicate that this finding only points to a shift in the form negativity takes within media discourse about public relations. The findings discussed here suggest that scepticism frequently manifests itself indirectly through crisis-focused framing, attribution of manipulative or strategic intent, attention on reputation management, and recurrent narratives about influence, control, or image management. In other words, negativity has become more embedded in our understanding of narratives rather than being expressed through overtly hostile language.

Together, the findings from Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 demonstrate that journalists construct meanings about public relations through both direct evaluative language and symbolic metaphors. However, framing extends beyond individual words and labels. To understand how public relations is positioned within broader narratives, it is necessary to examine the thematic patterns that organise these representations across news stories. The next section, therefore, shifts from manifest framing to thematic framing.

4.4 Thematic Framing of Public Relations: Purposes and Meanings Constructed in News Narratives

There is more to framing than just utilising direct language; it also operates on a thematic level, shaping how the media portrays public relations. Thematic frames, according to Reese (2007), are fundamental ideas that represent prevailing cultural viewpoints and professional beliefs. In the current analysis, these frames reflect how journalists assign purpose and meaning to public relations efforts, whether as image management, relationship building, advocacy, or information dissemination. Each theme reflects a unique pattern of problem

identification and causal attribution, which places public relations within wider discussions of power and legitimacy.

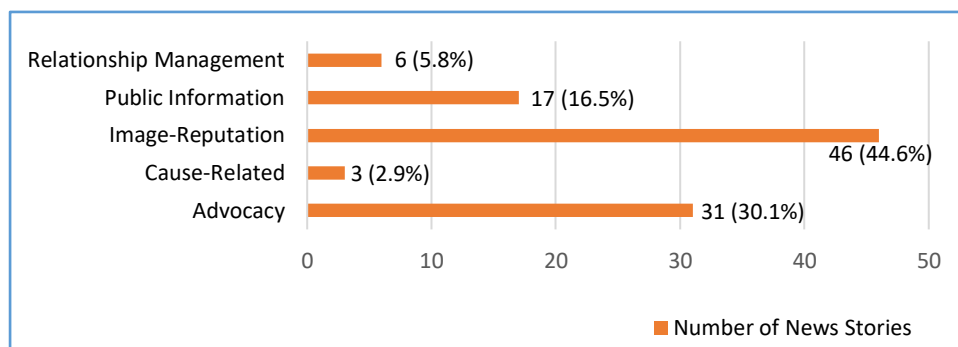
To understand why this happens, this section will look beyond the obvious media content and examine the thought processes and systems in place that shape these perceptions and support these portrayals, linking them to the evidence generated from interviews with journalists. Attribution theory helps in understanding framing analysis by explaining how journalists determine who is responsible for actions, what their intentions are, and how they judge the moral aspects of public relations people and events (Heider, 1958, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012). The thematic patterns identified in this chapter provide an important foundation for understanding the perceptions explored in the interview analysis presented in Chapter 5. Together, the two datasets allow a richer interpretation of how meanings about public relations are constructed and maintained.

4.4.1 Frames of Purpose in Public Relations Coverage

To understand how journalists construct the role of public relations, this section examines the dominant purposes attributed to public relations practices in news coverage. The analysis utilises Hutton's (1999) six public relations frameworks to demonstrate how different types of news and organisational settings impact perceptions of the purpose of public relations. These frameworks include: persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related efforts, image and reputation management, and relationship management. They characterise public relations as a multifaceted practice that includes both strategic and ethical aspects. Hutton's typology demonstrates how public relations is employed in crisis management and reputation building, reflecting the dialogic and integrative aspect of modern practice by emphasising functional orientations rather than communication flow (Jo, 2003). This research utilises Hutton's frameworks, which align with the study's emphasis on the depiction of the purpose and societal role of public relations in media discourse, instead of the flow of communication itself.

However, the analysis revealed that an element of persuasion pervades all other categories, suggesting that public relations, as portrayed by the media, is rarely viewed as neutral communication. Instead, journalists frame it as a deliberate way to influence. In the data analysed, five primary purposes of public relations emerged: image and reputation management, advocacy, public information dissemination, relationship management, and cause-related efforts. The first three purposes accounted for over 90% of the coverage (see Fig. 4.8). These framings collectively indicate how the media interpret the function of public relations, privileging strategic influence over dialogic engagement.

Figure 4.8
The primary purpose of public relations in the news context



4.4.1.1 Image-Reputation Management as the Dominant Frame

Of all categories, image and reputation management was the most prevalent, accounting for 44.6% of the news stories (Fig. 4.8). This finding indicates that public relations is often portrayed as a field concerned with shaping organisational impressions. In practical terms, image and reputation management entails harmonising the organisation's identity, the image it portrays, and how stakeholders perceive it, and ensuring that it is not intrinsically deceptive. According to insights from Benoit's Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, 2014), organisations engage in image management activities to maintain credibility, respond to criticism, and provide explanations. However, media reports often view these efforts with scepticism, a perspective that leads to association of public relations with spin, propaganda, or damage control (Ihlen et al., 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Miller & Dinan, 2007; Tench et al., 2017).

As one illustrative case, Hertsgaard (2018, July 23) reported how the wireless industry “orchestrated a global PR campaign” that misled journalists and policymakers about mobile phone radiation for decades. This news story describes public relations as a way for organisations to protect their interests while avoiding responsibility. It focuses more on public relations as a shield than on its important role in shaping an organisation’s image and reputation. While journalists often see public relations as mainly a reactive role, it also actively shapes how people view an organisation. Image management includes building trust with stakeholders, keeping a positive reputation, and not just countering criticism (Coombs, 2007; Fombrun, 1996; Grunig, 2006; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Similarly, Little (2019, January 13), in their news story, noted that “no organisation seems able to function without specialists to manage how the public perceives it”, revealing how reputation management has been normalised across sectors. These excerpts underscore the interpretive function of media frames: public relations is rendered as an apparatus of perception control, shaping meaning and legitimacy in the public sphere.

Public relations is frequently portrayed in the media as nothing more than image manipulation, which erodes confidence in the field and casts doubt on its legitimacy and societal significance (Macnamara, 2016). Framing of public relations frequently prioritises maintaining its reputation over its broader objectives of building relationships and developing strategies. People may begin to question the value and democratic function of public relations when the media presents only a limited viewpoint. This form of coverage often overlooks the reality that an organisation’s image and reputation are built through interactions and partnerships with stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). Consequently, this may influence how society perceives and evaluates the profession, affecting its credibility, legitimacy, and perceived social value (Macnamara, 2016; Moloney, 2006; Spicer, 1993).

While image and reputation management emerged as the dominant frame, journalists also portrayed public relations as a persuasive activity aimed at advancing organisational

interests. The next section examines advocacy as the second most prominent purpose identified in the dataset.

4.4.1.2 Advocacy as a Persuasive and Ethical Frame

Advocacy (30.1%) was the second most frequent purpose of public relations in the dataset (Fig. 4.8). Media narratives frequently present advocacy as a persuasion tactic, especially during a crisis or controversy. Hutton (1999) defined advocacy as efforts to influence public opinion or behaviour on behalf of a client or cause, generally in response to controversy or opposition. Recent research indicates that advocacy can advance broader societal aims, emphasising that public relations can support group objectives that extend beyond corporate interests. For example, the study on organisational advocacy by Browning and Cheema (2025) described advocacy as the actions organisations take to promote corporate social responsibility and connect with groups focused on social justice issues. It emphasises that advocacy within public relations extends beyond simply resolving crises or disagreements. It can also involve stakeholders, advocate for causes that serve the public good, and help facilitate social change. For instance, Adams (2013, September 23), reporting on the Fonterra botulism scare, noted that exporters called for a “hard-hitting public relations campaign” to correct misinformation in China. The term “hard-hitting” means strong and accurate. It shows a focused approach to communicating that helps the client reach their goals. Framing theory explains this by showing that when the media uses this kind of language, they highlight how public relations works. It is not just about sharing balanced information; it is about shaping the message. In a similar vein, Laufer’s opinion piece on May 8, 2021, cautioned that although advocacy is legitimate “to a point, certain ethical red lines should not be crossed”, or, in other words, there is a risk of going ‘too far’. This viewpoint raises the question of who determines what constitutes ‘too far’ and by which ethical standards. This framework shows the conflict in public relations. Advocacy can help advance causes and support organisational or public goals; however, it can also become manipulative if it twists the facts or damages trust (Baker & Martinson, 2003; Bowen, 2007;

Heath, 2006; L'Etang, 2008). Public relations often seeks to balance three key ideas: advocacy, accountability, and the responsibilities to stakeholders, a balance that comes into play at the point where influence and ethics meet, as discussed by Miller and Dinan (2007) and Fawkes (2018), with support from Hutton (1999).

Beyond persuasion and advocacy, journalists also recognised informational functions of public relations. However, these functions were often interpreted through competing assumptions about transparency and control.

4.4.1.3 Public Information as a Dual Frame of Transparency and Control

The finding that public information framework accounts for 16.5% of the dataset (Fig. 4.8), reflects how public relations aids journalists in obtaining information from organisations, particularly in governmental or local contexts. There are two viewpoints in this framework, however. While some journalists have a favourable view of public relations and emphasise how it promotes access and transparency, others have a negative view, arguing that its methods support bureaucratic supremacy and impede progress. This gap demonstrates that, even when actions are comparable, journalists' assessments of public relations are influenced by their perceptions of intent and control. In Powley's (2013, April 14) news story, council communication was described as including "public notices, consultation and engagement publicity, producing documents, such as the long-term plan and annual reports", portraying public relations as an essential civic service for public awareness. The interviewees in this study were more inclined to attach cooperative or informational intentions when they regularly interacted with transparent, professional practitioners: "*Some communications experts want you to understand the context, even if it doesn't help them directly. At that point, you see the profession at its best*" (J14). Framed this way, public relations functions as an institutional communicator aligned with the public interest (Entman, 1993, 2007; Reese, 2001, 2007). Miller (2019, February 27), in their news story, however, presented a counter-frame: "the rise in public relations personnel can lead to more

barriers preventing information from reaching the public”, suggesting that public relations acts as a gatekeeper, making it harder to access information. Similarly, when journalists see actions as attempts to control or influence situations, they tend to frame them in the news as ‘damage control’ or ‘spin’: “*When it’s not about sharing information but controlling what gets out, you can tell*”, said one respondent (J3). According to Moloney (2006) and Macnamara (2016), such dual framing underscores an apparent contradiction in how public information works: the tools designed to inform can also be used to control its dissemination. As a result, the media often alternates between viewing public relations as essential for sharing information and criticising it for concealing important details.

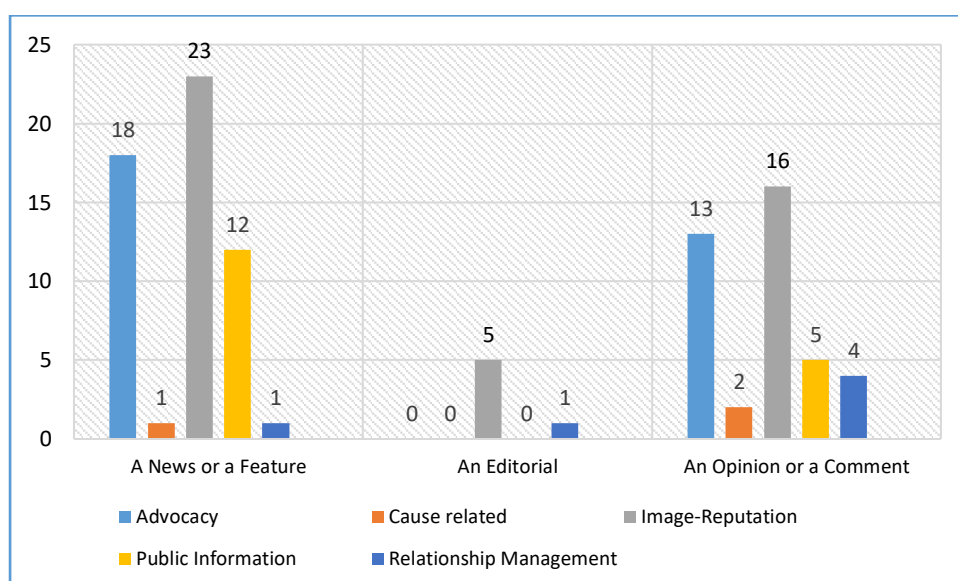
The preceding sections examined dominant purpose frames. The analysis now considers whether these portrayals vary according to news format and organisational context.

4.4.1.4 Media Form, Organisational Context, and Framing Variability

The study further found that the framing of public relations purposes varies systematically across media types and organisational contexts (Figs 4.9 and 4.10).

Figure 4.9

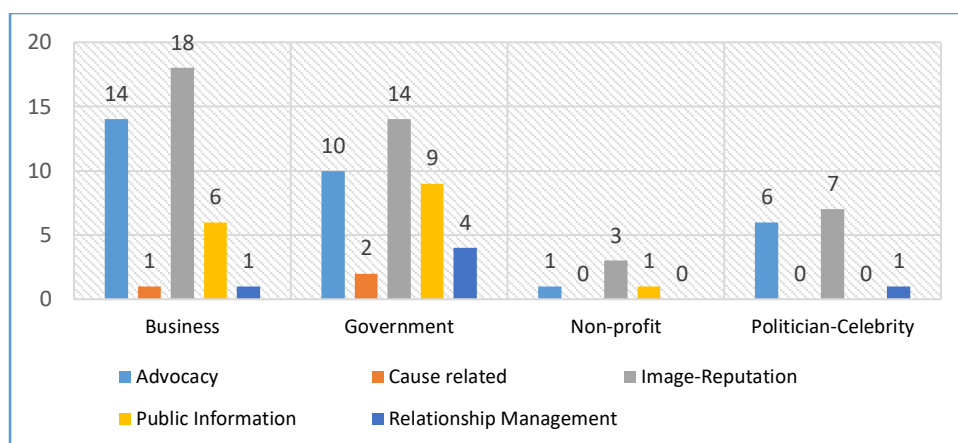
The relation between types of news stories and public relations purposes



Building a positive image and advocacy are suggested as the primary goals of news and feature stories, as illustrated in Figure 4.9. Opinion and commentary pieces, on the other hand, are more likely to discuss relationship management. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that factual journalism seeks to give readers accurate and fair information and that, by focusing on specific problems or presenting subjects in particular ways, it also seeks to sway readers and spark conversations (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Grunig & Grunig, 2013). This distribution is essential to understanding how public relations is portrayed in the media. By emphasising image-reputation and advocacy, news and feature articles often depict public relations in functional, informational terms, reinforcing its role as an organisational communication tool. Opinion and commentary pieces, on the other hand, have been shown to focus on relationship and ethical issues in journalism. They provide ways to evaluate how journalists view public relations practices, whether they are sceptical or supportive. This finding illustrates how public relations is portrayed in the media, depending on the type of content, and can shape public understanding through both factual and interpretive perspectives.

Figure 4.10

The relation between the source of news stories and public relations purposes



In addition to differences across news formats, framing patterns also varied with the organisational settings being discussed.

As seen in Figure 4.10, business media frequently prioritise reputation and advocacy as the primary purposes of public relations, reflecting the critical role of public relations in handling crises and increasing brand recognition, as also noted by Coombs and Holladay (2022) and Dowling (2025). In contrast, building relationships and disseminating crucial information to the public are more common in government communication across all sources, a strategy that seeks to satisfy the public's demands for accountability and openness (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Public relations focus on causes, or corporate advocacy, is still frequently underappreciated, which suggests that journalists often overlook public relations' role in promoting social issues or advancing public-interest initiatives (Ihlen et al., 2009). This underrepresentation reduces public awareness of how public relations can help achieve positive social outcomes while also meeting organisations' goals. Ignoring the advocacy role of public relations means the profession misses chances to link business goals with positive social impact, which can hurt its credibility and strategic value.

4.4.1.5 Synthesis: Framing Public Relations as a Persuasive Strategy

The trends covered in Section 4.4.1 suggest that journalists typically present public relations as a tactical and persuasive endeavour. Despite the presence of informational, relational, and cause-related roles, media coverage mostly focuses on advocacy and reputation management. These trends raise broader issues regarding credibility and the social function of public relations, which are examined further in the analysis that follows.

Journalists often see public relations as a tool for persuasion rather than a tool for relationship management and discourse promotion. This tendency to frame public relations as persuasion rather than dialogue is highlighted by the fact that 74.7% of their focus is on image-reputation and advocacy frames. Hutton (1999) suggested that public relations has many roles. However, the media narratives explored in this study narrow the interpretation of the subject, often depicting it primarily as a means of protecting reputation and managing influence. This finding aligns with previous research that associates the profession with

creating a positive image, employing spin, and maintaining control (Jo, 2003; Macnamara, 2016; Yoo & Jo, 2014b). However, it also suggests that journalistic framing functions as a mechanism of boundary maintenance, emphasising persuasion and scepticism to reaffirm journalism's identity as a watchdog vis-à-vis public relations. For example, a headline from the *NZ Herald* (2011, August 15) said "Riots Fashion: New Adidas PR Disaster" puts the blame on public relations, not the company's leadership, which shows how the media acts as a watchdog by pointing out moral failures within the communicative domain rather than structural issues within the company. Ultimately, the framing of public relations in news discourse reflects a broader cultural ambivalence, recognising its strategic value while questioning its integrity.

While this section examined the functional frames that dominate media portrayals of public relations, emphasising its roles in image-reputation management (44.6%), advocacy (30.1%), and public information (16.5%), the pattern of coverage also entails assessments of legitimacy, ethics, motivation, or power or strategic influence. For instance, emphasising advocacy and image management can encourage suspicion as it suggests that strategic self-interest takes precedence over honest communication. Such tendencies signal a shift from merely defining what public relations 'does' toward shaping perceptions of what it 'represents' within the communicative ecosystem.

Expanding upon this finding, the next section (4.4.2) focuses on the frames of professional identity and meaning that support these representations. It examines how journalists develop various interpretations of public relations by drawing on media-sociological viewpoints (Reese, 2021) and framing theory (D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 1993). Public relations can be viewed in various ways: critical perspectives regard it as a disaster or distraction; ambivalent perspectives see it as a challenge; while positive perspectives view it as a legitimate profession. By examining how media outlets and different types of stories frame public relations, this section helps in understanding that public relations is not a

neutral profession. Instead, it is often seen as a field rife with disputes, shaped by journalists' doubts and power struggles within institutions.

4.4.2 Frames of Meaning and Professional Identity

This section examines how linguistic frameworks in news narratives influence the professional identity of public relations practitioners and the deeper meanings and evaluative perspectives that shape the portrayal of public relations in the media. While the previous section (4.4.1) identified the functional frames that describe 'what public relations does' (e.g., advocacy, information, image-reputation management), this section focuses on the interpretive frames that communicate 'what public relations means', that is, how journalists, through their lexical and narrative choices, construct public relations as either credible (or questionable) or strategic (or superficial).

Drawing on Spicer's (1993) typology of press references to public relations, namely, 'disaster', 'distraction', 'challenge', 'hype', 'merely', 'war', and 'schmooze', the analysis maps the connotative spectrum through which the media attribute meaning to the profession. Spicer's framework was chosen because it offers a productive way of examining how journalist-practitioner relationships manifest in the language of news texts (Jo, 2003). Entman (1993, 2007) explained that framing is the process of focusing on certain aspects of reality to encourage specific interpretations. The language journalists use to represent public relations is important because it shapes how people understand and assess the information they deliver (Sterne, 2010). The categories 'merely', 'schmooze', and 'war' were removed from the current study's adaptation of Spicer's model since the data in these categories were unclear. Cultural forces that pose challenges for New Zealand journalism today may be the cause of this tendency (Kirkwood, 2007; Magrin, 2024). For example, the 'tall poppy syndrome' prevents journalists from self-promotion, which may make it more difficult for them to report emotionally. Along with the expectation of fairness and equality in reporting,

these cultural influences can lead journalists to respond more carefully, thereby affecting how the media portrays public relations activities.

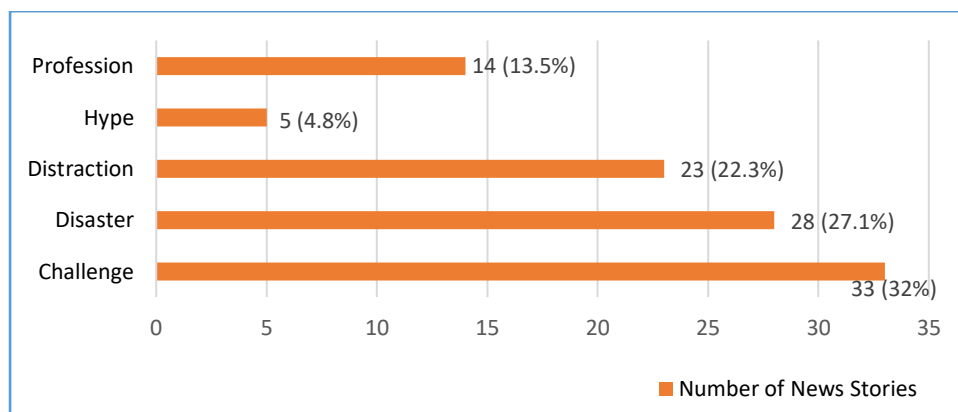
To better reflect modern views, the current study added a new category called 'profession'.

This category portrays public relations as a strategic and ethical field. This modification acknowledges scholarly arguments that the field has matured into a strategic management function (Botan & Hazleton, 2010; Heath & Johansen, 2018) and reflects the gradual institutionalisation of professionalism within communication practice (Fawkes, 2018).

Consequently, five interpretive categories were analysed: 'disaster', 'distraction', 'challenge', 'hype', and 'profession'.

These findings are summarised in Figure 4.11, which shows four dominant frames: 'challenge' (33 stories), 'disaster' (28), 'distraction' (23), and 'profession' (14). Together, these frames constitute more than 95% of all stories examined. The hype frame appeared only sporadically and was excluded from extended interpretation. These categories, when viewed through the lens of framing theory (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999), indicate how news discourse builds public relations as a source of complexity, a sign of increasing legitimacy, a symptom of failure, or an agent of manipulation.

Figure 4.11
The media's meaning ascribed to public relations in news stories.



4.4.2.1 Public Relations as a Challenge

The most common way that journalists view public relations, which appears in 32% of the dataset (Fig. 4.11), is as a vital tool for solving complex issues (challenges). This finding suggests that journalists view public relations as a versatile tool focused on finding solutions and providing guidance and knowledge, rather than merely promoting messages. These stories emphasise the management and advising aspects of the field while downplaying manipulative stereotypes.

Examples from the dataset illustrate this constructive framing. A news story about the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) crisis, involving an investigation of the high number of injury claims turned down by ACC based on a pre-existing degenerative condition, quoted Bronwyn Pullar, an ACC compensation claimant, who wrote to the then Cabinet Minister Nick Smith: "Good luck fighting it in the media. You will need big public relations help on this one. It is everywhere!" (Bennett, 2012, March 23). Similarly, an article quoting Chris Galloway, then Head of Public Relations at Massey University, noted: "...this is where public relations counsel can have a role... to help boards take the temperature of stakeholder opinions..." (Stuff, 2016, April 10). These examples frame public relations as a helpful process that enables organisations to understand their stakeholders better. A phrase used in a news story, "Effective public relations requires long-term, values-based involvement" (Vaisigano, 2020, May 28), illustrates the growing interplay between public relations and ethical, relationship-focused management (Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018; Murtarelli et al., 2021).

Although positive discussions about public relations are not dominant in the dataset, they are emerging. Research suggests that public relations is becoming a more important part of management, which is leading academics and some organisations to rethink how they view public relations (Al Hadeed et al., 2024; Dottori et al., 2018; Tsetsura et al., 2015; Yoo & Jo, 2014a; Zaki et al., 2023). Nonetheless, empirical research in New Zealand indicates that

journalists have varied opinions on public relations (Sterne, 2010). Some view it as a tool for managing relationships and building reputations, while others mainly see it as a means of securing publicity. This trend highlights the continuing differences between journalism and public relations.

While the challenge frame presents public relations as a constructive and strategic activity, not all portrayals are equally positive. The next frame illustrates how journalists frequently associate public relations with organisational failure and reputational damage.

4.4.2.2 Public Relations as a Disaster

The 'disaster' frame appeared in 27.1% of stories (Fig. 4.11). It portrays public relations as either contributing to or failing to prevent reputational crises. This framing emphasises organisational failure and focuses on the consequences of poor decisions. As Entman (1993) and Reese (2001) explained, the way stories are framed shapes how the audience perceives responsibility (causal attribution). By focusing on failures, these stories blame public relations for the damage to their organisations' reputations. For example, a news story stated: "Toilet roll manufacturer Cottonsoft has made a public relations blunder by refusing to give Greenpeace a copy of the tests it claims to disprove the environmental group's allegations..." (Adams, 2011, November 24).

Reporting of a few select incidents reinforces this critical framing. For example, when the United Airlines staff forcibly removed a passenger from an overbooked flight, it was called a "public-relations fiasco" (Koenig, 2017, April 12). Similarly, Adidas faced backlash over the high pricing of the new All-Black jerseys, which was labelled a "public relations disaster" (Mooney, 2011, August 11). Such representations reflect the 'moral blame frame' concept described by Moloney (2006) and Macnamara (2016), where public relations is seen as part of the problem rather than a solution mechanism. Many such news stories portray public relations as a last-minute fix or an unsuccessful attempt to improve an image.

Such perceptions can create an atmosphere of distrust towards the profession (Miller & Dinan, 2008).

Whereas the disaster frame focuses on public relations as a failed response to organisational problems, the distraction frame shifts attention to concerns about intentional message management and selective disclosure.

4.4.2.3 Public Relations as a Distraction

Accounting for 22.3% of stories (Fig. 4.11), the 'distraction' frame casts public relations as a diversionary practice that conceals or reframes unfavourable realities. In Spicer's (1993) view, this frame shows how public relations often replaces genuine substance with superficial displays. This connects to the concept of framing as salience, which means that some information is presented as more important while other details are left out (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001, 2007).

The dataset offers several illustrative examples. A commentary on foreign policy described "public relations flannel" surrounding New Zealand's stance in the US-led war on terror, after the 9/11 terrorist attack that led to the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York (Armstrong, 2011, September 02), signalling communicative insincerity. Another news story observed: "People in PR are not necessarily the enemies of truth. However, they are tasked with promoting clients' interests, which means accentuating the positive and sometimes obscuring the negative" (Stuff, 2019, May 02). This perspective aligns with the findings of Miller (1999) and Lee (2001), who observed that public relations often prioritises image management over transparent disclosure. According to Macnamara (2016) and Fawkes (2018), the emphasis on selective disclosure in these stories contributes to the myth that public relations is a 'superficial solution' that prioritises appearances over morality and is dishonest rather than informative.

Despite the prominence of sceptical portrayals, the dataset also contains evidence of more favourable representations that recognise public relations as a professional and strategic discipline.

4.4.2.4 Public Relations as a Profession

Even though it accounts for only 15.5% of the stories, the ‘profession’ framing suggests public relations as a skilled and ethical field, indicating that media reports view public relations as a planned rather than merely a reactive strategy. A business report, for instance, noted: “Allan doubted that public relations was growing as a sector because people were cautious about spending, but there was plenty of work” (Drinnan, 2012, July 26). This viewpoint suggests that public relations is a professional service that can provide value even during tough economic times. It reflects the profession’s expertise and adaptability, rather than just taking advantage of opportunities. Another news story emphasised professional discipline in crisis response: “The first rule is not to respond off the cuff... collect all the facts” (Allen, 2016, December 20) and “In public relations, timing is everything, and so is understanding the people’s mood” (Carter, 2016, February 23). These news accounts indicate that journalists view public relations as a professional field centred on strategy, ethics, planning, and research (Dowling, 2025; Edwards, 2018; Gregory & Willis, 2022)—an expert-driven approach that helps professionalise the field.

4.4.2.5 Application of Media Frames Across Publication Types and Organisations

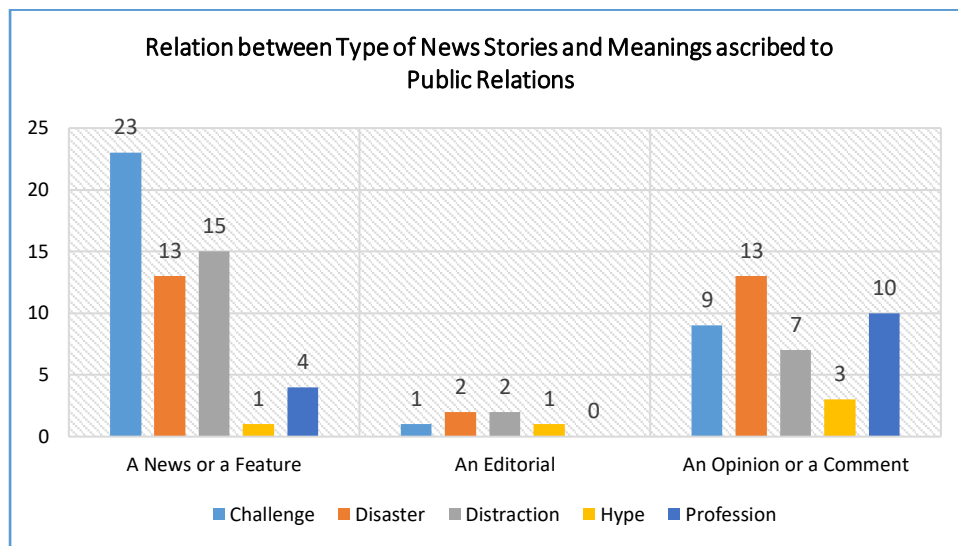
Having examined the dominant interpretive frames individually, the analysis now considers how these meanings vary across different publication types and organisational settings. This comparison helps identify the contextual conditions under which particular representations of public relations become more prominent.

Figures 4.12 and 4.13 illustrate how media frames are used, depending on the type of news story and the specific organisation. The ‘challenge’ frame is most common in news and feature stories. This finding suggests that journalists frequently frame public relations in

terms of strategic or advisory roles, highlighting how practitioners provide guidance, expertise, or solutions to organisations, rather than simply reporting events. In contrast, the 'disaster' frame is present in many types of news stories, especially in business reporting. It emphasises the link between corporate failure and communicative incompetence. The 'distraction' frame appears most often in stories about the government, where public relations is portrayed as a way to hide the truth. However, these stories also show 'challenge' and 'profession' frames that recognise the complexity of strategy and the need for public accountability.

Figure 4.12

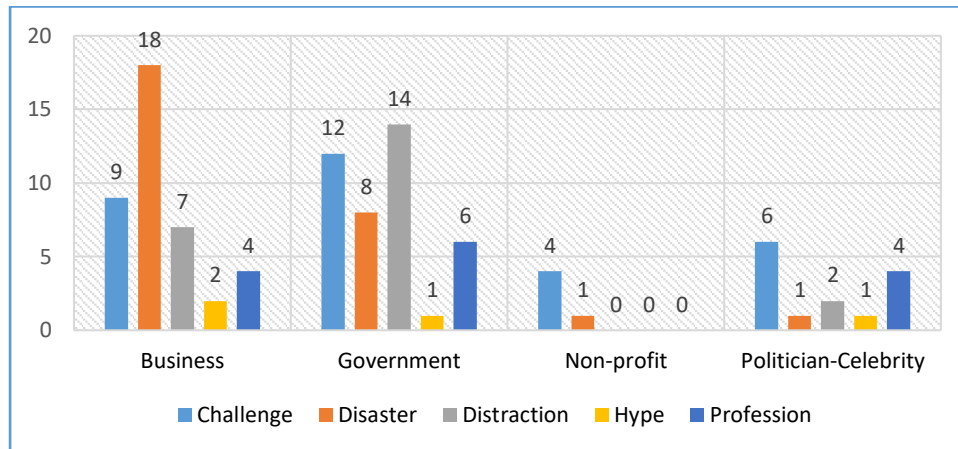
The relation between the type of news stories and the meaning ascribed to public relations



This relationship between the source of news stories and the meaning ascribed to public relations indicates that the institutional setting influences both how practices are carried out and how the media represent them, a finding supported by research from Liu and Horsley (2007) and Liu et al. (2010).

Figure 4.13

The relation between the source of news stories and the meaning ascribed to public relations



Perceptions of power disparities and the significance of the public interest are seen as reasons why public relations in both government and business frequently receive more critical attention (Jo, 2003). The current data shows a clear trend wherein negative frames are more common overall. For instance, a headline, “Candyfloss’ PR exposed in all its cynicism” (Armstrong, 2011 September 02), exposing the manner in which the New Zealand Defence Force purposely misled the public by omission of pertinent fact that the real reason for troop deployments as a UN peacekeeping force was not to help the inhabitants of Bamiyan but to impress the hawks in Washington, typified the ‘damage control’ frame by implying that public relations exists to protect government actors from accountability. Likewise, one journalist described the public relations industry’s job as “*pushing stories that are favourable to an organisation and to defend it against questions from journalists that it sees as being problematic*” (J7), reflecting an attribution of manipulative intent and reinforcing journalism’s watchdog identity. However, there are also balanced and positive messages, particularly in government communication. For instance, a report in the *NZ Herald* (Dickison, 2012, March 14), discussing the conflict between the Port of Auckland and its employees regarding their wages, productivity levels, and the objectives of their negotiations, noted that “the most effective method to convey what was occurring, considering the situation, was via a public relations team”. Similarly, a statement from one

interviewee emphasised the societal role of public relations: “*PR can help us share stories, highlight overlooked aspects, and connect with the right people on civic issues*” (J4). This pattern of journalists’ perception and framing of narratives about public relations reflects Hutton’s (1999) frameworks of ‘public information’ and ‘cause-related’ public relations.

Figures 4.12 and 4.13 indicate that journalists do not consistently use interpretive frames. Instead, portrayals of public relations might differ based on perceived public-interest issues, news genre, and institutional setting. However, critical frames remain more prevalent overall, indicating that scepticism continues to influence a large portion of the public relations conversation in the media.

4.4.3 Synthesis: Framing, Purpose, Meaning, and the Legitimacy Gap

The preceding analysis has shown that journalists use a combination of language choices, symbolic labels, and recurrent narrative motifs to create meaning around public relations. When combined, these trends show a recurring conflict between public relations as a source of influence or reputational management and journalism as a respectable professional activity.

The media frequently utilises adjectives, such as ‘disaster’ and ‘distraction’. In contrast, themes such as ‘challenge’ and ‘profession’ stress the strategic and ethical aspects of the sector. This disparity reflects long-standing critiques that journalism sometimes mixes public relations with spin or damage control (Henderson, 1998; Keenan, 1996; Özorun, 2023; White & Lambert, 2006).

A recurring narrative links press agency and propaganda with public relations, exposing a historical prejudice that still exists in modern reporting. “*PR publishes press releases that may conceal the truth, reveal only a portion of the truth, and are written in a way that they believe to be the most compelling point*” (J6). This sentiment reflects the press agency model identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), which focuses on one-way persuasion (where

truth does not matter) instead of mutual understanding. Even though many scholars have called for a focus on dialogue, relationships, and ethics (Heath, 2001; Macnamara, 2014), this legacy frame continues because it aligns with the adversarial nature of journalism. According to Spicer (1993) and Penning (2008), public relations is often confused with press agency, a notion further reinforced by media terminology as evidenced in news headlines such as “PR influencing public debate” (Gibb, 2018, July 04). Such examples illustrate what Entman (1993) referred to as “diagnostic framing” (p. 52), which identifies a problem and attributes moral responsibility.

This diagnostic framing is precise in crisis reporting. Journalists often blame organisational failures on public relations. After the United Airlines incident, in which staff forcibly removed a passenger from an overbooked flight, one journalist said, “practitioners strike the match and apply it to the fuse” (Crabb, 2017, April 16). Such accounts illustrate that journalists assign blame and causes to practitioners (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999), and do not consider larger system issues (Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2021). For example, within this study, headlines such as “PR disaster” (Kitchin, 2013, March 14), “PR spin” (Herud, 2019, July 09), and “PR sale” (Stuff, 2012, June 28) appeared frequently. What is surprising is that this causality persists even when journalists understand that practitioners work under organisational constraints. As one interviewee observed, “*they might not be in total control of what they send to you because things have to be signed off by senior managers*” (J10). Such attribution suggests that adverse outcomes elicit internal attributions of controllability, thereby intensifying reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Weiner, 1985, 2012).

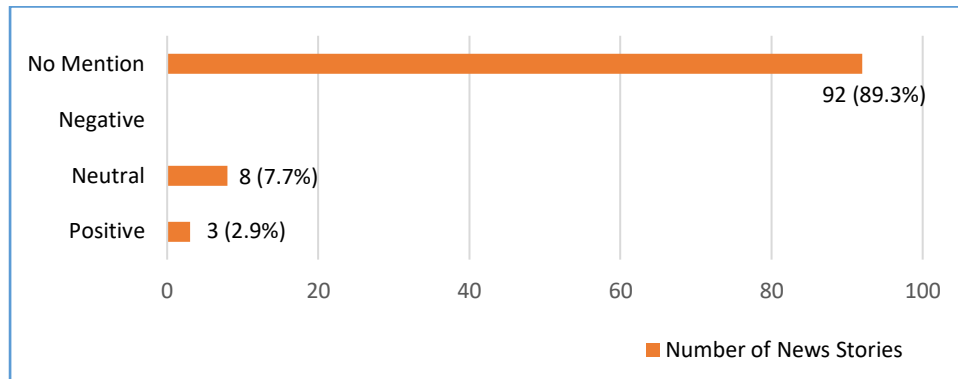
Sensationalist headlines can increase negative views. For example, headlines like “PR Sharks Circle Fonterra” (Drinnan, 2013, August 9) and “Friend Warned Smith He Faced PR Disaster” (Bennett, 2012, March 23) show the news values of conflict and novelty identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O’Neill (2017). This framing refers to what Scrimger and Richards (2003) called journalists’ tendency to use emotional and mocking

language to make public relations work seem less important. Within a commercialised media system (Bazaco et al., 2019; McManus, 2019), conflict-oriented (clickbait) storytelling becomes not merely stylistic but economically driven. These patterns illustrate how economic factors and structures perpetuate a negative mindset of how the news is produced (Brants, 2003; McChesney, 2004).

The data indicate a persistent underlying tension between journalists and practitioners. This relationship has dimensions of both dependence and distrust. Consistent with prior scholarship (Bovitz et al., 2002; Dennison, 2011; Donsbach, 2004; Yoon, 2005), 67% of interviewees in the current study described their interactions with practitioners as 'controlled' or 'manipulative'. "*My negativity is more about you're not giving me what I need*", said one (J15). Another commented, "*If you don't know what message you're trying to convey, you shouldn't be in that job*" (J20). However, where trust and credibility were established, journalists reported more collaborative experiences: "*It's a big thing for a PR person to sort of trust and that's the sort of stuff that makes for a positive and productive relationship between both parties*" (J10). This supports Yoon's (2005) observation that source credibility directly influences framing: suspicion fosters negative stereotyping, while trust leads to balanced coverage.

Although negative, 10.7% of the dataset referenced the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), offering glimpses of professional legitimacy.

Figure 4.14
The number of mentions of PRINZ in news stories



When cited, PRINZ was portrayed as an ethical and regulatory authority, as noted by a news story: “The Public Relations Institute of New Zealand defines public relations as the ‘deliberate, planned, and sustained effort... Proper public relations and communication are open, honest, and transparent’” (Harvey, 2019, February 02). A more recent opinion piece pointed towards the ethical oversight of PRINZ: “It is encouraging to see that the institute has a code of ethics... the low number of complaints suggests that violations are rare” (Laufer, 2021, May 08). These portrayals are consistent with earlier studies suggesting that ethical rules can help public relations become a more responsible profession (Bowen, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006).

The findings indicate a clear pattern. Although journalists understand that public relations can improve communication and decision-making in organisations, stories about public relations often focus on image management and persuasion, overlooking its positive aspects. As a result, media portrayals of the field tend to be sceptical instead of highlighting teamwork and relationship-building.

Together, these results show that three primary factors contribute to negative perceptions of public relations in New Zealand’s media: a history of press agency and publicity, mental shortcuts (such as attribution bias), and institutional pressures (such as professional competition and commercial interests). To clearly distinguish themselves from public

relations, journalists highlight their autonomy by focusing on certain aspects and suggesting that journalism is more significant than the latter, which is perceived as either too self-interested or of lower value. The dominance of frames such as 'disaster', 'hype', and 'distraction' suggests how journalists' professional identity and institutional norms can shape the meanings attributed to events. However, evidence supports ethical recognition, as evidenced by mentions of PRINZ, indicating an opportunity for the public relations profession to shift the media narrative towards one that emphasises credibility and teamwork. The disconnect between public relations' self-definition and journalists' portrayals creates a legitimacy gap, in which professional goals and ethical principles of public relations go unrecognised in the news media.

4.5 Summary

This chapter examined how New Zealand news media understand and interpret public relations through the lenses of framing theory and attribution theory. While attribution theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985, 2012) focuses on how people determine the reasons behind acts, framing theory (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001; Scheufele, 1999) explores how the media changes the meaning of events. The investigation suggested that a combination of institutional forces, historical factors, and interactions between journalists and practitioners can shape perceptions of public relations. These elements collectively can lead to a generally sceptical perception of the field as unethical, shallow, reactive, or manipulative. This viewpoint upholds the ethical norms and professional boundaries of journalism while simplifying the complicated ways in which individuals interact.

Institutional and commercial dynamics can deepen these representational biases. The data suggest that newsroom routines focus on audience engagement and the financial needs of digital news production. As a result, they often favour sensational and conflict-driven news stories. This trend highlights negative views of public relations. Economic pressures can foster negative perceptions. Nonetheless, some media coverage, especially references to

PRINZ, has been neutral or favourable, emphasising an opportunity to raise professional standards in the industry. Although these cases are few, they highlight the importance of credible institutional voices in reshaping public understanding of the field.

This chapter shows that social factors, power dynamics, stereotypes, and journalists' self-perceptions can influence how the media portrays public relations in New Zealand. The overall view is primarily negative, but it can change. When journalists and practitioners treat each other with respect, they create opportunities for better news stories. The next chapter will explain what journalists-practitioners' interactions reveal about journalists' perceptions of public relations.

Chapter 5: Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations

5.0 Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous chapter's examination of how public relations is portrayed in New Zealand's news media by focusing on journalists' perceptions and how they interpret and assess public relations work. Whereas Chapter 4 examined how news sources create meanings through language and narrative framing, this chapter focuses on the cognitive and experiential aspects that support those depictions. The chapter examines interviews with twenty-one journalists from the *NZ Herald*, *Stuff*, and the *Otago Daily Times*, three mainstream New Zealand news outlets. It examines how workplace routines, financial constraints, professional norms, and relationships can influence the changing dynamics between journalism and public relations.

The previous chapter applied framing theory to understand how the media shapes narratives. This chapter uses attribution theory to explore how journalists determine the causes, intentions, and responsibilities behind public relations actions (Heider, 1958, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012). Attribution theory offers a framework for analysing how journalists perceive practitioners' intentions and dependability by categorising them as cooperative, manipulative, or obstructive. In doing so, it bridges the connection between the representational frames identified in media texts and the interpersonal judgments that inform them (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

This chapter explores two research questions: RQ2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?) and RQ3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?). It examines how journalists perceive public relations by discussing how they address issues of influence and trust, and how factors, such as newsroom economics and the role of digital media, can shape their perceptions. It illustrates how journalists' experiences and workplace

culture can influence their perceptions by connecting them to the related ideas of framing and attribution.

5.1 Theoretical Lens: Attribution Theory in the Context of Journalistic Perceptions

Attribution theory, a social psychology concept, explains how people interpret the reasons behind events and behaviours. Harold Kelley developed it in 1973 after Fritz Heider first presented it in 1958. In 1985 and 2012, Bernard Weiner made further contributions to the theory. This study used Weiner's Attribution Theory (1985, 2012) to frame an understanding of how journalists interpret public relations actions, as it explains how individuals identify causes, figure out motives, and determine who is responsible for what happens. It aligns with the study's objective, which is to explore how journalists perceive public relations and what influences those perceptions. While Heider (1958) and Kelley (1973) laid the foundations of attribution theory, Weiner (1985, 2012) extended it by showing how judgments about responsibility, intention, controllability, and repeatability shape attitudes and evaluations. This was particularly relevant because journalists frequently evaluated public relations in terms of practitioners' motives, competence, credibility, and accountability. Weiner's framework also complements framing theory. Framing theory helped explain how public relations is portrayed, while attribution theory helped explain why journalists assign particular motives, intentions, responsibilities, and evaluations to practitioners. Therefore, Weiner's framework provided the most suitable lens for analysing the attributional reasoning underlying journalists' perceptions of public relations (Weiner, 1985, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Applied to this study, the framework helps illuminate how journalists perceive public relations (RQ2). Some see public relations as helpful and considerate. Others, however, might view it as self-serving or dishonest. Journalists rely on a variety of sources to understand events, including professional ideals, industry norms, organisational

requirements, journalistic practices, and prior public relations experiences (Entman, 1993; Igben & Ilaya, 2021). At the same time, attribution theory also clarifies why these perceptions arise and where they originate (RQ3) by linking personal cognitive evaluations to portrayals of public relations in the media. The framework links personal beliefs, newsroom routines, professional standards, and daily interactions, shaping journalists' understanding of public relations.

5.1.1 Core Concepts of Attribution in Media Contexts

Attribution theory has since been used in a variety of fields, such as media studies and crisis communication, to examine how experts and viewers assign blame and evaluate intentions (Coombs, 2007; Kim et al., 2009). In the realm of public relations research, attribution theory helps explain how journalists and the public assess communication and whether the communication feels authentic, manipulative, intentional, or shaped by external factors (Lerbinger, 2006, 2018; Macnamara, 2014). Three key dimensions underpin the attribution theory framework (Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018):

1. *Locus of causality* helps determine whether individuals believe actions stem from internal factors (such as personal traits) or external factors (such as the environment or a situation). For example, journalists might believe that selective access to information is driven by selfish interests or influenced by rules and organisational pressures (Lerbinger, 2006, 2018; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018).
2. *Stability* is about whether individuals view behaviours as consistent or changeable across situations. For example, if practitioners often rely on standard press releases, journalists may consider this a stable practice. However, if there is a miscommunication, journalists might see it as a one-time issue caused by a crisis or heavy workload (Callard, 2011; Sterne, 2010).
3. *Controllability* relates to the degree to which individuals feel in control. According to White and Hobsbawm (2007) and Macnamara (2014), many journalists consider

practitioners self-centred and unethical when they perceive activities such as withholding information or trying to manipulate media coverage as deliberate. Journalists view transparent communication as shaped by external factors, such as corporate responsibilities or a lack of information, rather than as evidence of practitioners' malicious intent.

These judgments of practitioners' actions have moral and social consequences for both journalists and practitioners. For journalists, their interpretations of public relations behaviour shape how they enact their own professional ethics, particularly their commitments to accuracy and accountability. When journalists view public relations as manipulation, they tend to respond with greater scepticism to maintain their credibility, and this shift in attitude can negatively affect practitioners' reputations and alter how the media views their trustworthiness (Belz et al., 1989; Entman, 1993).

Journalists frequently believe that public relations activities result from controllable internal motivations. People's interpretations of acts might be influenced by their perceptions of motives (Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018). Journalists may view behaviours as unethical if practitioners appear self-serving, selectively share material, or strictly limit access. This perception may harm trust. On the other hand, if internal motives seem selfless or focused on the public interest, they may improve trustworthiness. In other words, it is not controllability alone that shapes trust, but whether journalists judge the motive behind the action as aligned with or opposed to their own professional values.

5.1.2 Relevance of Attribution Theory to Journalists' Evaluations of Public Relations

Journalism and public relations have a complex relationship. Attribution processes help journalists understand what practitioners are doing and why. Journalists routinely infer the intentions behind public relations activities, such as media releases and crisis responses, and assess them based on their expectations of transparency and truthfulness (Fawkes,

2014; Sissons, 2012). Journalists are less likely to trust public relations when they perceive its acts as manipulative or self-serving. On the contrary, they perceive practitioners as reliable partners who exchange information when these behaviours are perceived as beneficial or informative (Macnamara, 2010; Verčič et al., 2017).

Recent research consistently shows that these attributions can influence professional boundaries and perceptions. Koch et al. (2020) noted journalists' scepticism towards often hold negative views of public relations, particularly concerning practitioners' ability to influence agendas. This perspective widens the divide in professional identities and deepens the ethical gap between the two. Likewise, Ji et al. (2025) observed that journalists trust practitioners based on two main factors: the quality of their message and how journalists attribute their intentions and responsibility. These findings support Weiner's (2018) idea that individuals' causal attributions of intent affect their feelings and behaviours, such as scepticism or willingness to collaborate.

Attribution theory is therefore particularly well suited to examining how journalists rationalise the enduring tension between dependence and autonomy in their interactions with practitioners. Framing theory explains how meaning is organised and communicated in public discourse (Entman, 1993, 2007; Goffman, 1974), but it does not account for the cognitive reasoning processes behind journalists' decisions. Role theory describes the requirements associated with each work (Biddle, 1986), whereas intergroup theory demonstrates how professional identities establish boundaries between various groups (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001). However, neither framework takes into account how people allocate blame, accountability, or intent at the human level. Attribution theory fills these gaps by examining how journalists interpret public relations pressures while balancing workplace demands and ethical standards

The attribution theory framework is applied in the present study to understand journalists' evaluations of public relations. According to attribution theory, these evaluations involve

causal inferences about the motives, intentions, and responsibility of practitioners, categorised as either internal (dispositional) or external (situational) attributions (Weiner, 1985, 2012). When journalists believe practitioners' behaviours stem from self-interest motives or manipulation (internal attributions), they tend to perceive public relations negatively. This perspective reinforces their scepticism and causes them to maintain a distance from public relations as a professional practice and from the messages or sources associated with it. When journalists see public relations actions affected by external pressures (such as legal requirements or organisational rules), they tend to have a more positive view of those actions. Internal motives can also be viewed positively, but only when they are interpreted as prosocial or aligned with journalistic values (e.g., a genuine willingness to collaborate). In other words, it is the perceived intent, not simply whether it is internal or external, that shapes journalists' evaluations of public relations.

The attribution theory framework demonstrates how journalistic procedures, budgetary limitations, professional constraints, and interpersonal dynamics work together to shape the evolving dynamics between public relations and journalism. Together, these elements can influence how journalists view results, including how credible public relations is and how important it is to journalism. This framework thus integrates individual cognition with professional ideology and situational practice. It suggests how attributional reasoning affects the relationship between journalists and public relations.

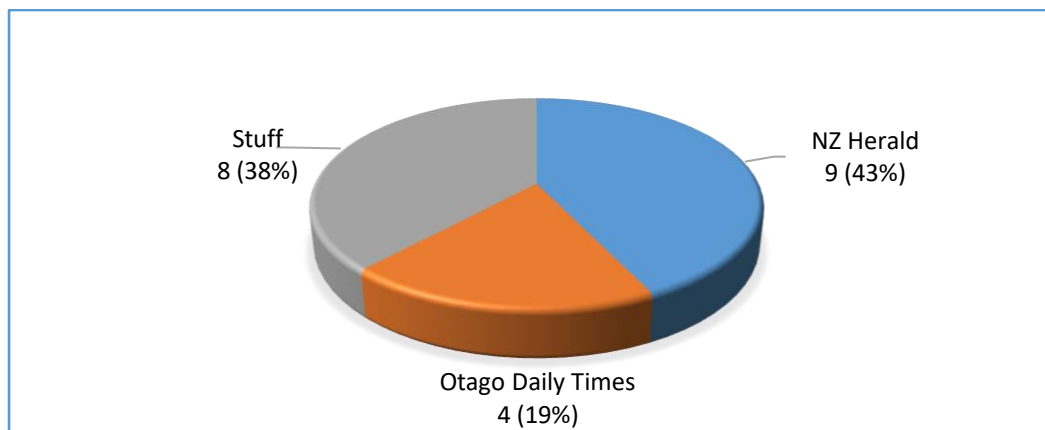
5.2 Participant Profile and Research Context

This section provides contextual information about the journalists who participated in this study, including their organisations, work experience, roles, and exposure to public relations, to help connect with them and understand their perceptions of public relations based on their professional backgrounds.

5.2.1 News Outlets Employing the Interviewees

The distribution of interviewees across the three leading New Zealand news outlets reflects the mainstream news ecosystems in New Zealand's media environment (discussed at length in section 3.2.3.1) (Fig. 5.1).

Figure 5.1
Number of interviewees recruited from the *NZ Herald*, *Stuff*, and the *Otago Daily Times*



A larger proportion of interviewees was from the *NZ Herald* (43%) and *Stuff* (38%). At the same time, the *Otago Daily Times* accounted for 19% of interviewees. Knowing the distribution of interviewees is important for the study, as prior research shows that journalists' organisational context affects their editorial choices and professional standards (Eldridge et al., 2025; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

5.2.2 Interviewees' Work Experience in Journalism

The interviewees had between 5 and 33 years of professional experience. For analysis, this experience was grouped into four categories: 6–10 years, 11–15 years, 16–20 years, and 20+ years, to reflect recognised stages of journalistic socialisation and career development. These categories draw on established models of journalistic socialisation and career progression (Deuze, 2005; Donsbach, 2008; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado, 2015; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, 2020), which show that journalists' autonomy, role conceptions, and newsroom responsibilities evolve predictably over time. Research shows that journalists

start by gaining basic skills and confidence in their work (6–10 years) (Donsbach, 2004; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, 2020). As they gain experience, they take on more responsibility and enjoy greater independence (11–15 years) (Deuze, 2005). Eventually, they can influence editorial decisions (16-20 years) (Mellado, 2015) or take on leadership roles (20+ years) (Donsbach, 2004). These categories show important changes in how journalists see their roles, make decisions, and handle tasks in the newsroom. These changes can influence how they understand and react to public relations.

Figure 5.2
Distribution of interviewees' work experience in journalism

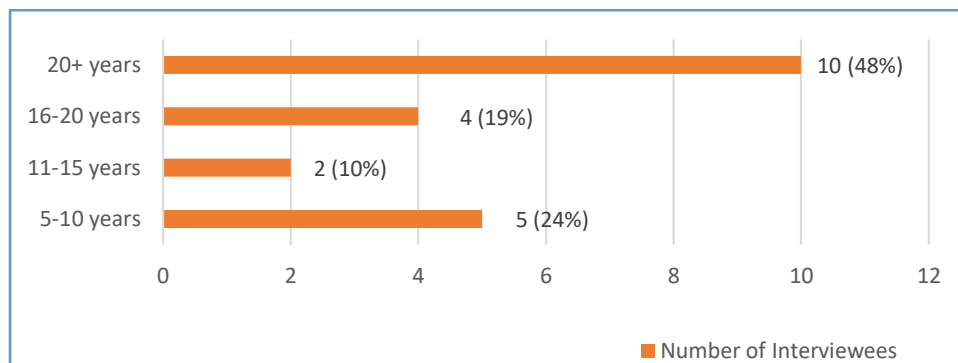
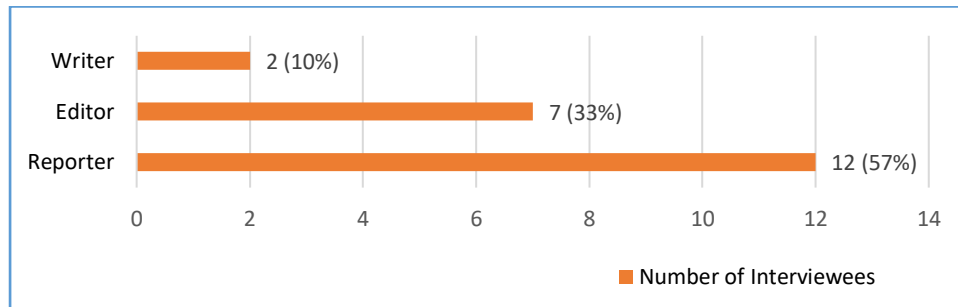


Figure 5.2 shows that most participants (67%) have more than 15 years of experience, and nearly half (48%) have worked in journalism for more than 20 years. Extensive professional experience provides participants with a broader, more varied set of heuristics, shaped by long-term exposure to diverse organisational contexts and practitioner behaviours. Most journalists use heuristics to assess public relations tactics, but seasoned journalists also draw on broader experience and industry knowledge to make more informed decisions.

5.2.3 Current Job Titles Held by Interviewees

The majority of interviewees served as reporters (57%), followed by editors (33%) and freelance writers (10%) (Fig. 5.3).

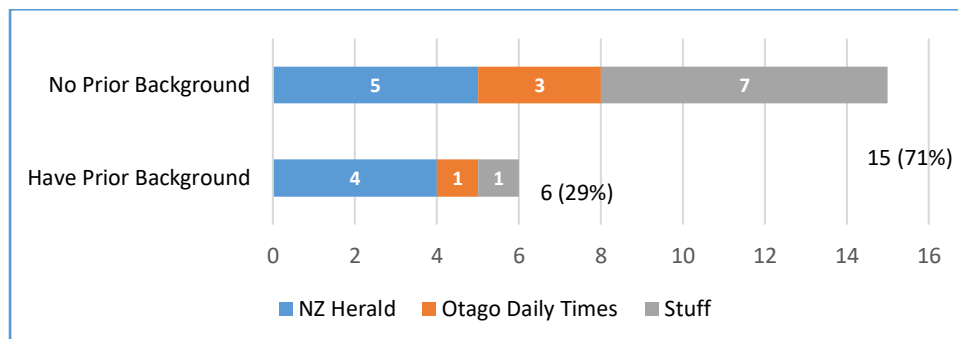
Figure 5.3
Job titles held by the interviewees



5.2.4 Education, Training, or Experience in Public Relations

The study assessed interviewees' background in public relations by asking them about their formal education, training, or work experience in the field. Figure 5.4 shows that 71% of interviewees had no formal education or practical experience in public relations.

Figure 5.4
Interviewees' background in public relations (education, training, or professional experience)

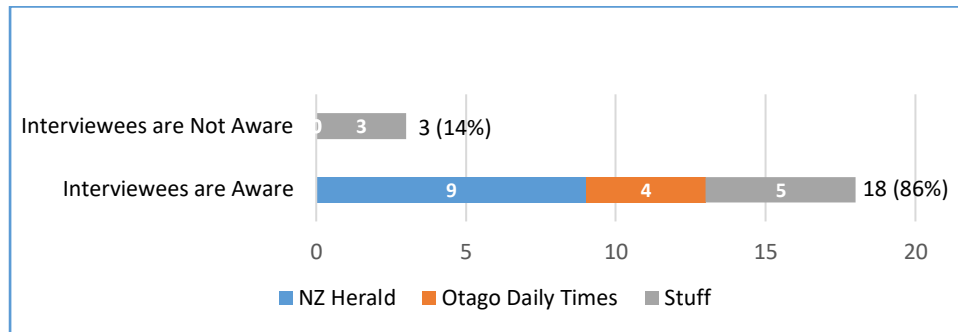


The absence of a public relations background may cause journalists to view public relations primarily through their own journalistic lens, relying on personal experience and standards rather than an insider's perspective (Coombs, 2022; Heider, 1958).

5.2.5 Interviewees' Awareness of PRINZ

Interviewees' awareness of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) was also recorded, with Figure 5.5 indicating that 86% of participants were familiar with the organisation.

Figure 5.5
Interviewees' awareness of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ)



When journalists are familiar with professional public relations organisations, it helps them understand the legitimacy and role of the field. This familiarity can shape their attributions about public relations practice and the intent of the organisations involved (Heath, 2010; Moloney, 2006). Understanding participants' professional backgrounds reveals how their daily work in newsrooms and interactions with practitioners can shape their views on public relations.

5.2.6 Demographic and Professional Antecedents (Experience, Role, and Position as Attribution Priors)

The study's findings demonstrated a correlation between public relations content use and experience (novices rely on more, and experienced rely on less) and position (editors use more than reporters) (See Figs 5.6 and 5.7). This pattern can be explained through role conceptions (Beam et al., 2009; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, 2020; Weaver et al., 2018).

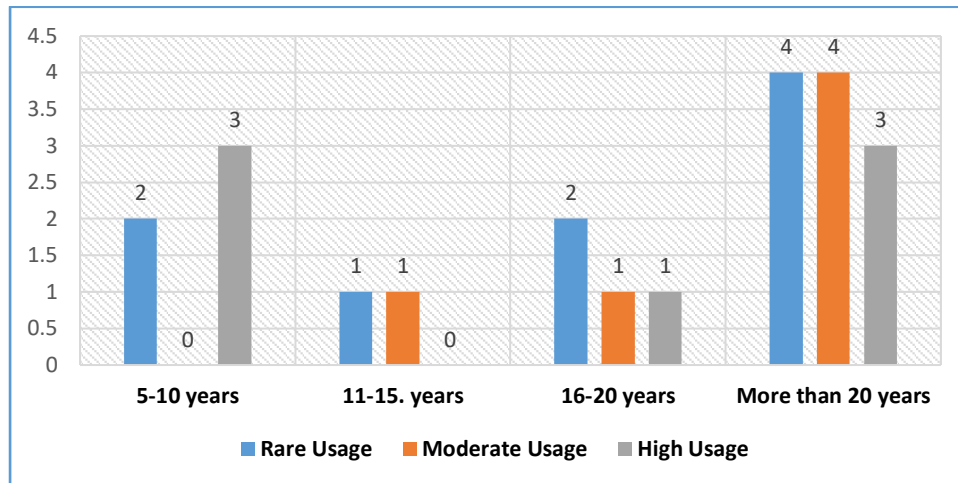
Beginner reporters, who usually serve as interpreters or opponents, depend more on public relations content. This reliance on public relations content likely stems from their limited experience (and a lack of established methods) to find independent information.

Experienced journalists, especially senior reporters and editors, carefully select and use public relations materials without relying on them. This finding suggests that both work experience and job roles can influence how journalists understand and use this material.

Research indicates that those who interpret and mobilise public relations material for public use do so less often than those who share it (Sinaga & Wu, 2007; van Dalen et al., 2012).

Figure 5.6

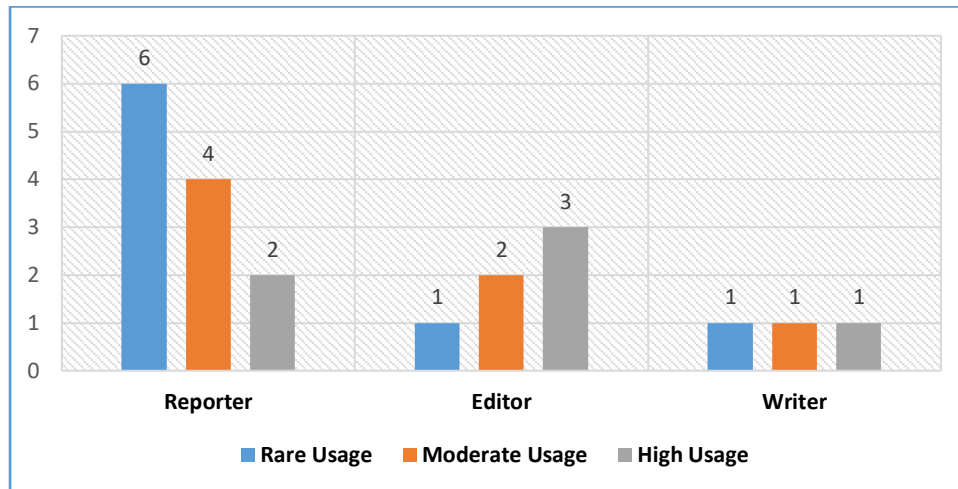
The relation between journalists' work experience and public relations content usage



According to attribution theory, professional schemas serve as mental shortcuts, or priors, that influence how journalists understand the motivations behind public relations' activities (Entman, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Heider, 1958; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). The interview data show that journalists in adversarial or interpreter roles frequently describe public relations efforts as self-serving or manipulative. These descriptions illustrate that journalists in these roles make internal, intentional attributions if practitioners act out of personal or organisational motives rather than situational constraints. Senior reporters and editors, as information disseminators, often point out several factors. They talk about tight deadlines, the value of public relations materials, and the pressures from their organisations. These factors show how their situation affects their work. They were more amenable to public relations content and incorporated it selectively rather than automatically questioning its intent. These patterns in the data demonstrate that the professional role a journalist occupies can influence the type of attribution they make when evaluating public relations behaviour, providing an explanatory link between career stage, role conception, and content use.

Figure 5.7

The relation between journalists' current jobs and public relations content usage



Editors' heavier dependency is also situationally attributed to issue complexity and job demands (Donohue et al., 1973), which can improve perceptions of public relations (Pincus et al., 1993), even as it conflicts with studies that found reporters use more public relations content (Sinaga & Wu, 2007; van Dalen et al., 2012). The consistent theme is that roles and positions can shape how journalists attribute and perceive situations.

Having described the contextual information about the journalists who participated in this study, the analysis now turns to the everyday interactions through which journalists' perceptions of public relations are formed and reinforced.

5.3 Journalists' Practical Engagement with Public Relations and Content

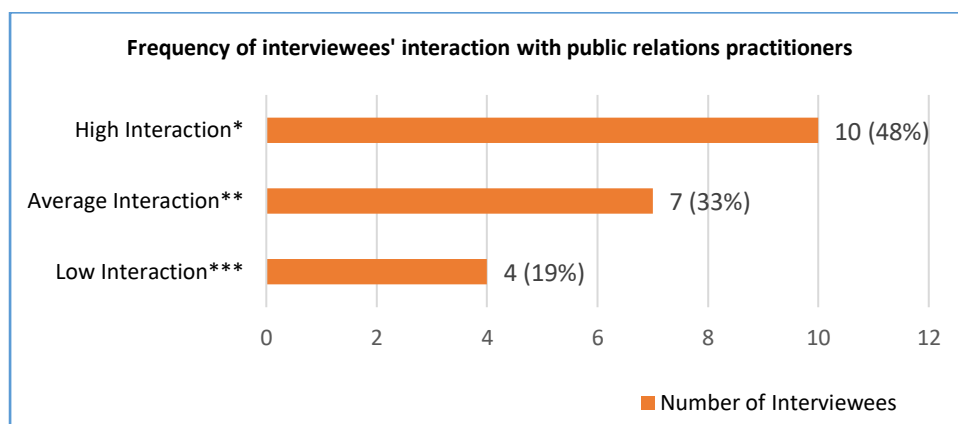
The evidence presented in this section shows that journalists' practical engagement with public relations, through routine interactions for the exchange of information and negotiation of access, can shape how they perceive practitioners' intentions, competence, professionalism, and trustworthiness, directly addressing RQ2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?). These close encounters allow journalists to evaluate how practitioners act, for they may interpret these actions as helpful, self-serving, limited by organisational rules, or indicative of their credibility (Grunig &

Hunt, 1984; Sterne, 2010). At the same time, such encounters illuminate why these perceptions arise and where they originate, addressing RQ3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?). The experiences they gain from their interactions can shape their perceptions of the role and legitimacy of public relations.

5.3.1 Frequency and Nature of Interaction

Figure 5.8 indicates that 81% of interviewees engage with practitioners at average to high levels—typically two to four times a week.

Figure 5.8
Frequency of the interviewees' interaction with public relations practitioners



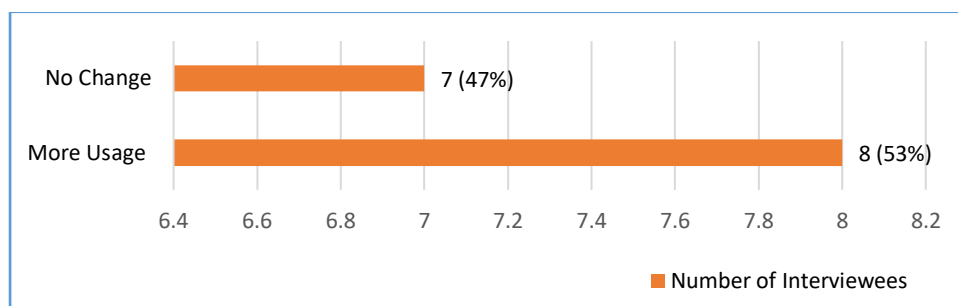
"I have some dealings with public relations people, but mainly with communications staff at the government and parliament...who have a good understanding of how a system works and can provide the details that are important to us" (J12). This remark from an interviewee highlights the crucial role of government communicators in providing explanations and formal statements. Journalists rely on these practitioners for timely news when resources are limited (Callard, 2011; Pincus et al., 1993). Similarly, when journalists see actions as attempts to control or influence situations, they tend to frame them in the news as damage control or spin: *"When it's not about sharing information but controlling what gets out, you can tell"*, said one respondent (J3).

According to an attributional viewpoint, cooperative behaviours (such as timely responses and accurate briefings) are seen as reliable and collaborative, whereas obstructive or formulaic tactics are seen as driven by self-interest (Lerbinger, 2006, 2018; Macnamara, 2014).

5.3.2 Use and Evaluation of Public Relations Content

The way journalists use public relations content can illustrate the interaction between practical demands and professional judgment. Interviewees reported varied engagement with this content (Fig. 5.9). Most (67%) use it infrequently, only after giving context and verifying it: *“When they provide information, we will first check it”* (J6). The interview data suggest that journalists cross-check and contextualise public relations content, highlighting a cautious approach driven by concerns over bias and agenda-driven messaging.

Figure 5.9
Interviewees’ public relations content usage



Journalists’ engagement with public relations content reflects a balance between practical newsroom pressures and professional caution. Interviewees described public relations material as something they *“use very rarely... one per cent”* (J13) or *“only for breaking news”* when speed matters (J4). Even then, they emphasised verification, *“we will first check it”* (J6), showing that public relations content is perceived as potentially biased and requiring contextualisation (Davies, 2008; Lewis et al., 2008). Journalists often judge practitioners’ skills based on the information they provide. Clear and relevant details, along with offers of exclusivity, are seen as positive signs. Journalists appreciate that these practitioners understand their needs, as one interviewee stated, *“they know what journalists need”* (J11),

while another mentioned that “*exclusivity... allows me to have something no one else has*” (J19). In contrast, unrelated press releases result in unfavourable comments. For example, one interviewee described them as “*deliberately deceitful or completely ignorant... they’re just doing a spin job*” (J5), reflecting criticisms found in the research of Callard (2011) and Lerbinger (2006, 2018).

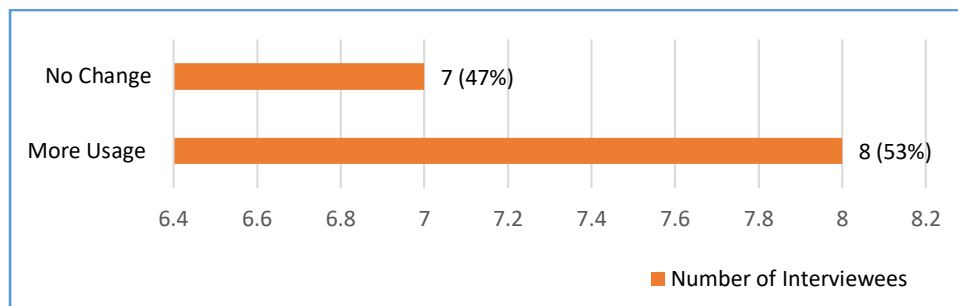
In terms of attributional reasoning, trust is enhanced when timely, high-quality information is linked to internal, controllable factors such as understanding of news values and cooperative goals. By contrast, “*completely pointless emails*” (J8) and “*incessant calls*” (J13) are also attributed to internal factors, but in this case, journalists perceive them as stemming from low competence or self-serving motives. Both positive and negative evaluations rely on internal attributions, but how journalists feel about them depends on what they think the practitioners’ intentions and abilities are. Research shows that excessive unsolicited pitching can erode credibility and cause frustration (Lake, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2015). Journalists see this behaviour as a failure on the part of practitioners. Some believe that practitioners frequently make decisions that disrespect the newsroom and violate professional standards. Whereas, they view external variables that are difficult to avoid as systemic pressures, such as deadline pressure or organisational constraints. This distinction leads to understanding rather than doubt and thus helps explain why repetitive or poorly targeted public relations efforts intensify mistrust: they are viewed as intentional rather than circumstantial.

As a result, deeper causal explanations (RQ3) are reflected in journalists’ explanations of their use of public relations content (RQ2). While responsible, news-aligned activities are attributed to practitioner competence and good intent, formulaic or intrusive communication is linked to internal inadequacies in skill or ethics. These attribution patterns help explain the coexistence of reliance and distrust that characterises journalist-public relations interactions.

5.3.3 Changing Trends in the Use of Public Relations Content

The study findings show that reliance on public relations content has increased over time, reflecting structural pressures such as the 24/7 news cycle, smaller newsroom teams, and the professionalisation of public relations (Fig. 5.10).

Figure 5.10
The trend in public relations content usage over time



One interviewee said, “*Nowadays, there are many more quick stories... press releases often act as the starting point for a story*” (J2). Another interviewee said, “*We use public relations content...we would want to know what our readers want... it’s sort of hard to report on everything because there’s never enough journalists*” (J21), implying that they strike a compromise between the demands of the newsroom and independent reporting. Journalists often use perceived transparency and commitment to journalistic values to assess the practitioners’ credibility (Macnamara, 2019; Perreault et al., 2024; Pincus et al., 1993).

Interpretations of the data presented in Figures 5.8-5.10 show the frequency of journalists’ interactions with practitioners, the nature of those interactions, the quality of the content, the pressures in the newsroom, and how these factors influence journalists’ perception of public relations. How often journalists engage with practitioners and choose content, and the changing needs of newsrooms, can influence whether they view practitioners as team players or self-serving gatekeepers. For instance, an interviewee commented on their growing interaction with practitioners: “*There are four PR/Comms people to one journalist. So, it makes sense that we would see more of it now...we do have to rely on press releases*”

(J6). While another interviewee's remark, "*it is a lot more cynical than it was perhaps, that there is a deeper understanding that they can control the narrative to a large degree*", reflects the growing influence of public relations (J11). These perceptions suggest that relationships between journalists and the public vary depending on the situation.

When considered collectively, the results in Section 5.3 indicate that journalists' perceptions are based on regular professional interactions rather than just theoretical presumptions. Journalists' assessments of practitioner reliability and intentions are influenced by a variety of factors, including frequent interaction with practitioners and reliance on public relations content. These experiences reveal that perceptions emerge through an ongoing process of attribution, whereby journalists interpret communicative behaviours as evidence of either cooperation or manipulation. Although the practical underpinnings of those perceptions have been the focus of this section, the next section looks at how journalists translate these experiences into more general conclusions about the role and value of public relations as a profession.

5.4 Perceptions of Public Relations: Value, Role, and Professional Boundaries

The analysis in this section distinguishes between institutional attributions (those applied to the public relations industry as a whole) and individual attributions (which concern specific practitioners and interactions).

5.4.1 Cognitive and Normative Evaluations of Public Relations— Interpreting Institutional Attributions

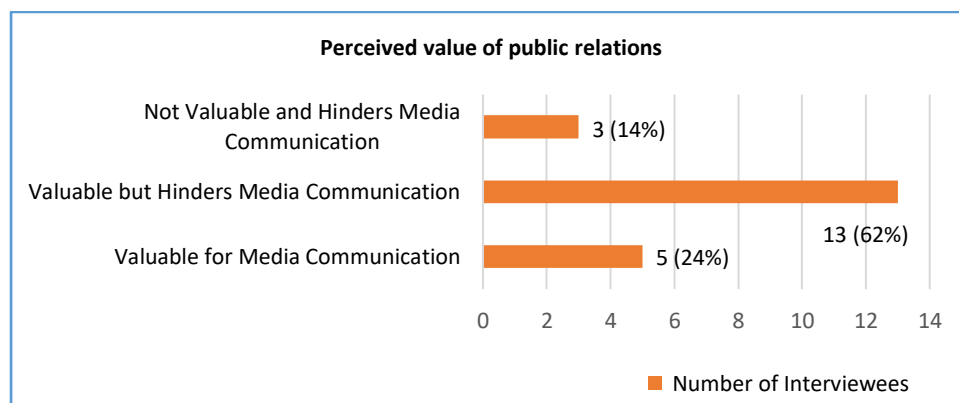
In this section, attribution theory is applied to distinguish between cognitive evaluations (how journalists perceive and understand public relations as a system) and normative evaluations (how they judge its legitimacy and adherence to professional and ethical norms). Institutional attributions refer specifically to the beliefs journalists hold about public relations as a social institution. Public relations is seen as a framework shaped by specific norms and practices

that guide how communication is created and shared in society. It is seen here as a social institution because it has clear professional standards, defined organisational roles, important responsibilities, and shared normative expectations, be it in media relations, corporate governance, or policymaking (Staines et al., 2023). Institutional attributions represent journalists' perceptions of the general role and legitimacy, emphasising the industry rather than the actions of individual practitioners (Barnoy, 2022; Reza & Nurhaliza, 2022). This section explains how journalists understand fundamental public relations concepts such as agenda-setting, reputation management, cause advocacy, and information sharing. It also examines how this understanding can impact their relationships with public relations.

5.4.1.1 Perceived Value of Public Relations

A central theme emerging from the interviews concerns how journalists attribute the value (or lack thereof) of public relations within the news production process. In this study, as deduced from the data, interviewees employed both internal (dispositional) and external (situational/institutional) attributions when assessing the usefulness and legitimacy of public relations, resulting in three distinct evaluative positions: (a) public relations is valuable, (b) public relations is valuable but hinders journalism, and (c) public relations is not valuable at all (see Fig. 5.11).

Figure 5.11
Interviewees' perspectives on the perceived value of public relations



Journalists' views on public relations provide clear insights into RQ2. Interviewees had mixed opinions about the value of public relations. Some relied on it pragmatically, while others were professionally sceptical. Most interviewees (86%) see public relations as valuable in news production. They believe that public relations helps them work more efficiently, especially when dealing with tight deadlines and limited resources. They emphasised that it was the support provided by public relations, rather than any intrinsic shortcomings in newsrooms, that enabled them to manage these structural pressures effectively. As one interviewee stated, "*It is helpful for journalists to have something ready due to a lack of time and resources*" (J14). Such reasoning shows a situational attribution, which corresponds to Weiner's (1985, 2012) concept of external causality. It implies that a journalist's behaviour is influenced more by external factors than the journalist's own individual character.

At the same time, 72% of interviewees indicated ambivalence, implying that while public relations can be useful, it often hinders journalistic work. For instance, as one journalist put it:

Sometimes it's helpful, but sometimes it's obstructive... You need to get a comment from the right person within the organisation to balance your story, who you might not track within time...so they can be helpful in that regard... But then other times they're obstructive in terms of stopping you from getting access or speaking to someone (J1).

This ambivalence reflects a form of mixed attribution. On the one hand, journalists justify their cooperation with public relations through external, situational factors, such as time pressure or insufficient staff in the newsroom, which illustrates that journalists attribute their actions to external causality. On the other hand, when public relations creates difficulties, journalists shift to internal dispositional attributions, blaming practitioners' behaviours (e.g., slow responses or attempts to control access and information). Attribution theory explains how they establish mental boundaries to uphold their professional identity, justifying their reliance on sources while maintaining a moral superiority. Moloney (2006) and Tilley and

Hollings (2008) described this mindset as a defensive ideology, meaning a set of beliefs and rationalisations that journalists use to protect their professional identity.

Journalists' decisions are influenced not just by their beliefs but also by their daily interactions with practitioners. A smaller group (14%) denied that public relations has any value. To them, public relations exists only for manipulative or unethical purposes: "*I don't have much professional respect for PR as an industry*" (J13). This perception reflects a dispositional attribution—these journalists attribute the perceived problems in public relations to inherent flaws in the industry rather than to external or structural factors. For instance, one interviewee remarked, "*public relations industry's job is to defend their organisation against questions from journalists that it sees as problematic... So I don't think it is helpful for our society*" (J7). This attribution mirrors Sissons' (2012) finding that scepticism remains a core feature of New Zealand journalism's occupational identity.

Regardless of their sceptical views, many journalists exhibited what Macnamara (2019) described as 'PR acculturation', a process of selectively legitimising specific practitioner inputs while dismissing others. Rather than simply rejecting public relations outright, journalists integrate certain public relations materials into their workflow while distancing themselves from others, indicating how public relations practices become normalised within newsroom culture. The dataset supports this pattern. For instance, one interviewee noted: "*I can develop a good relationship with a practitioner who might have a better understanding of what I'm trying to achieve and that their role shouldn't necessarily be as the gatekeeper of the information*" (J7). While another remarked, "*Some are quite flaky, and I think obstructive with whom you obviously won't be having a good relationship*" (J8). Journalists often say that positive interactions happen because of factors related to the situation, such as shared goals or good teamwork. In contrast, they blame negative interactions on the practitioner's personal flaws, such as incompetence or gatekeeping. This focus on personal traits suggests a kind of 'attribution bias', particularly the fundamental

attribution error, that is, when people focus too much on personal traits when they judge why someone else acted negatively (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977). At the same time, journalists' tendency to attribute their own actions to external circumstances aligns with the self-serving bias, in which people protect their self-image by explaining their behaviour in ways that are favourable to themselves (Mezulis et al., 2004; Miller & Ross, 1975).

Journalists use these attributional mechanisms to keep their professional independence and autonomy (Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 2001).

Several interviewees attributed the persistence of 'churnalism', the uncritical reproduction of practitioner-generated content (Davies, 2008), to factors within the newsroom environment rather than to individual shortcomings. As one interviewee remarked, "*You're not doing journalism but rather churnalism... repeating what someone's telling you without looking into what's behind it*" (J20). These explanations, referring to organisational routines, resource constraints, and editorial expectations, are external situational or institutional attributions that can shape journalists' behaviour. This awareness of involvement at the institutional level connects with the views of Davies (2008), Sissons (2012), and Verčič and Colić (2016). They also highlight that the conditions that lead to churnalism are created by structures rather than by individual choices.

At the same time, interviewees mentioned that external pressures affect their work, including the volume and the urgency of the content they create. These factors make the challenges within the newsroom even greater. In this way, journalists' scepticism operates on two interconnected fronts: internally, at the institutional level (within the newsroom), and externally, in relation to practitioner influence. Such framing highlights that the main issues affecting professional freedom and trustworthiness in journalism are not journalists' personal traits. Instead, they stem from systemic pressures and a lack of accountability in media organisations (McChesney, 2013; Turner, 1978). With this frame of mind, journalists can stay independent while acknowledging that they need help with specific tasks.

These findings highlight a significant paradox that recurs throughout the chapter. While acknowledging the usefulness of public relations, journalists typically challenge its legitimacy and goals. The juxtaposition of scepticism and dependence highlights the attributional complexity that underlies relationships between journalists and practitioners. There is a persistent tension that influences later assessments of professional boundaries and trust since public relations is seen as both an essential organisational resource and a potential source of influence.

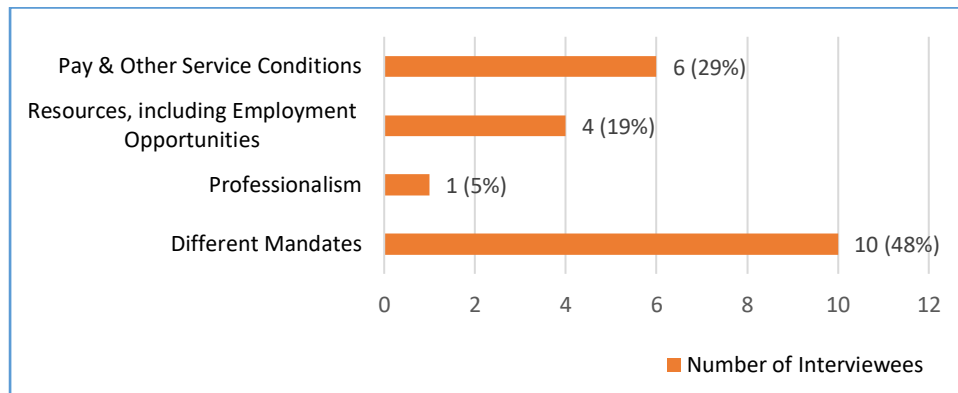
5.4.1.2 Conflicting Interests Between Journalism and Public Relations

Whereas the previous section looked at whether journalists perceive public relations as valuable, this section investigates why they believe tensions persist between the two professions. Professional boundaries are crucial to identity formation, so it is critical to comprehend these perceived conflicts. Journalists frequently explain their professional function in terms of other communication professions, especially public relations. As a result, assessments of conflict are not just observations of workplace relationships but also manifestations of how journalists perceive and defend their professional identities.

Interviewees widely perceived an enduring conflict of interest between the two professions. Figure 5.12 summarises the three dominant comparison points raised by interviewees: (a) divergent mandates, (b) pay and work conditions, and (c) resources and employment opportunities.

Almost half (48%) of the interviewees stated that the tension comes from different goals: public interest versus client advocacy. They believed that public relations focuses more on protecting the organisation's image than on telling the truth. "*Their focus is on doing right by their clients... journalism isn't motivated by money... We care about the effects of a story and the impact of that information on people and getting it out there*" (J5).

Figure 5.12
Interviewees' perspectives on the factors allowing for a comparison between journalism and public relations



This attributional pattern shows that journalists describe their motivations as serving the public and being committed to ethical standards. In contrast, they paint practitioners as mainly focused on making money. Although journalists describe practitioners' motives as 'external' to journalism's value system, these motives are, in fact, internal attributes of practitioners, as they relate to practitioners' own goals rather than situational pressures. Journalists often face a conflict between making money and serving the public interest. To cope with their lower pay, they view their work as a moral choice. They believe that journalism is a better, more ethical practice than profit-driven jobs (Deuze, 2005; Tilley & Hollings, 2008). Thus, the divide they construct is less about external versus internal causes and more about maintaining a moral identity that justifies their position within an unequal, commercially pressured media environment.

Economic differences, as perceived by 29% of those interviewed, who claimed that tensions between the two professions are often due to better pay and working conditions in public relations. This difference was viewed as a practical issue rather than a moral one: "*One of my good friends went from working as a newspaper journalist to government comms...she now earns almost three times what she did as a journalist. She works nine to five, gets holidays, and has a life*" (J14). The interviewee stated that rather than being the result of personal choices, their dissatisfaction with their profession is caused by external factors,

including low salary, fatigue, and a lack of prospects. *“You reach a point in your life where you ask if it is worth working for this tiny pay packet when you’re working holidays, night shifts, and weekends”* (J5), another interviewee observed. Such situational attributions rationalise ethically ambivalent career shifts. This idea relates to Weiner’s (1985, 2012, 2018) belief that people base their actions on their circumstances when they feel stressed. As another interviewee also mentioned: *“Integrity was a more important attribute among journalists, and it’s not so much like that anymore. However, when you’re on a relatively low hourly rate and have mouths to feed, Integrity probably doesn’t mean that much”* (J11). These findings support the work of Fedler et al. (1988) and Sallot and Johnson (2006). These authors observed that journalists often defend their choices to stray from the ideal by pointing to external pressures rather than admitting moral failings, which is an important way to understand how they justify changes in professional boundaries.

Three interviewees (14%) mentioned the vast differences in resources (beyond pay and working conditions), including employment opportunities, that distinguish the public relations profession from journalism. As one put it: *“There are never enough journalists. There are all these public relations people”* (J21). This finding is consistent with well-established research demonstrating that, although journalism has shrunk and its workloads have increased, public relations has grown in both workforce and organisational capability (Davis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2008; Macnamara, 2014). Instead of blaming their own failings for this discrepancy, journalists attribute it to an external, institutional element. The rise in public relations work is linked to staffing shortages in newsrooms and the rapid expansion of the public relations sector. By emphasising these shortages, journalists position themselves as structurally constrained rather than professionally dependent on public relations. In other words, they frame their increasing reliance on practitioner material not as a compromise of their editorial independence, but as a result of reduced resources within their own organisations, thereby claiming independence from public relations influence. However, in reality, they often rely

more on content created by practitioners due to high workloads and limited staff in newsrooms.

Overall, the data suggest that journalists deal with the contradiction between needing public relations and being sceptical of it through a combination of internal and external attributions. They attribute perceived problems in public relations, including manipulation and gatekeeping, to internal, dispositional causes, thereby protecting journalism's moral authority. Conversely, they attribute their own engagement with public relations to external, situational pressures, such as declining resources and economic realities. This balancing act helps maintain what Macnamara (2019) referred to as journalism's discursive and ideological claim to independence and public-interest service, even when actual working conditions limit that independence. At the same time, it recognises the growing dependence between journalists and public relations.

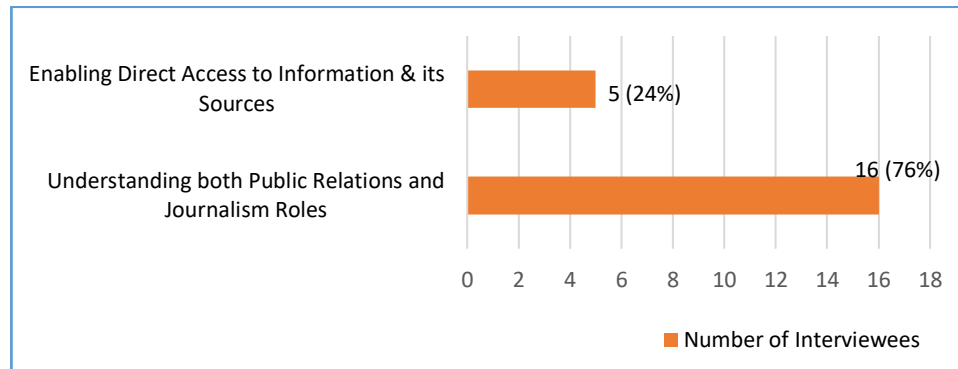
5.4.1.3 Journalists' Perceptions of Ideal Public Relations

Interviewees frequently cited characteristics they value in public relations work when defining 'ideal' public relations. They discussed the significance of being responsive and journalists' role understanding, rather than using the word 'ideal' public relations. They contended that these characteristics promote better teamwork and a shared sense of professional norms. Most of them (74%) identified role understanding, that is, knowing how journalism operates and what journalists need, as the defining feature of ideal public relations. In comparison, another 24% prioritised direct access to information and sources (Fig. 5.13).

Many interviewees viewed transparent and responsive practitioners as intrinsically aligned with journalistic values. An interviewee commented on their perception of what makes good public relations: *"Transparency, accuracy, and understanding of what the public wants and needs to hear from their comms, not what the company customer wants"* (J6). Another

added, “Good public relations is when it is helpful and timely, maintains information flow and connects you to your desired information source” (J1).

Figure 5.13
Interviewees’ perspectives on what makes for good public relations



These evaluations showed that journalists tended to have positive views when they saw practitioners as driven by a shared commitment to public service rather than by a focus on enhancing their clients’ image. This distinction shapes how journalists judge practitioners based on their behaviour. They praise those whose actions align with journalistic values and criticise those who seem overly promotional. When journalists do this, they help separate journalism from public relations. They support the view that journalism is grounded in strong moral values (Deuze, 2005; Tilley & Hollings, 2008).

Underlying these judgments are what Fiske and Taylor (1991, 2020) called category-based attributions: evaluations made based on group membership rather than direct personal knowledge. Practitioners with backgrounds in television or newspapers were viewed as more trustworthy and in tune with the newsroom needs: “*The good guys are the ones from TV or newspapers... they get it*” (J15). Here, shared professional background functions as a categorical cue that journalists interpret as signalling relevant skills, compatible work cultures, and good intentions. Journalists see practitioners with a shared professional background as more genuine and competent. This dynamic can be understood through social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004), which holds that people derive part of their self-concept from

the social groups they belong to. According to this theory, individuals categorise themselves and others into 'in-groups' (groups they see themselves as belonging to) and 'out-groups' (groups they see as different). Prototypical traits reinforce these categories, the characteristics that define the in-group and guide evaluations of members' behaviour (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Turner et al., 1987).

Social identity theory posits that individuals often favour in-group members, perceiving them as more trustworthy and competent. This tendency helps explain why former journalists are seen more favourably: because they belong to the journalistic in-group due to their shared professional background, journalists believe they 'get' newsroom expectations and have a deeper understanding of journalistic norms than practitioners without such a background. Prior scholarship similarly suggests that journalists attribute higher credibility to practitioners who share professional norms and training (Callard, 2011; Sterne, 2010).

Conversely, practitioners without newsroom experience were described as lacking the "*instinct*" or "*awareness*" needed to support journalistic work (J7). These attributions show how individuals categorise others into groups. To keep their group unique, individuals highlight differences and downplay similarities (Brewer, 1999). Those who act in ways that reinforce their own group identity, because such behaviour affirms the norms and traits that define the group. For journalists, qualities such as instinct, news judgment, and awareness of newsroom constraints function as prototypical characteristics of the journalistic in-group (Deuze, 2005; Macnamara, 2019; Tilley & Hollings, 2008). Practitioners who possess these qualities are seen as more capable and trustworthy, an approach that journalists use to evaluate skills and objectives based on common experiences (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020). It also highlights how journalists maintain boundaries to reinforce their moral and professional identity in contrast to public relations (Davies, 2008; Deuze, 2005). Journalists tend to favour colleagues who demonstrate typical journalistic skills. This favouritism supports the ethical and professional standards that define their role in the field.

Limited access to information, in contrast, triggered negative dispositional attributions:

“Relinquish some of its control!... One of the most frustrating aspects of journalism today is that I do not have direct access to the people who hold the information” (J7). Journalists see gatekeeping not as an important part of organisations, but as a way to obstruct information.

This view aligns with the findings of Sterne (2010) and Sissons (2016), who argued that this bias supports the view that public relations hinders transparency instead of promoting it.

This section shows that the scepticism, occasional approval, ambivalence, and moral judgment in RQ2 come from how people make attributions in RQ3. This involves judging someone’s intent, whether they could control their actions, how well their identity matches the situation, and the constraints of the situation. These factors explain why journalists view public relations in a certain way and why they resist change. The next section examines how changes in public relations, such as digital transformation and trends in organisational communication, influence journalists’ perceptions. It organises how these changes influence their independence, roles, sense of personal significance, and perceived autonomy in the changing media environment.

The ideal public relations described by journalists offers crucial information about the circumstances in which legitimacy can be granted. The findings indicate that journalists do not categorically oppose public relations. Instead, they assess practitioners against journalistic standards, such as accuracy, responsiveness, transparency, and respect for editorial independence. This finding contributes to the explanation of why journalists’ perceptions are still conditional: when practitioners are seen to put organisational interests ahead of public communication, distrust arises, but acceptance is given when they support journalistic objectives.

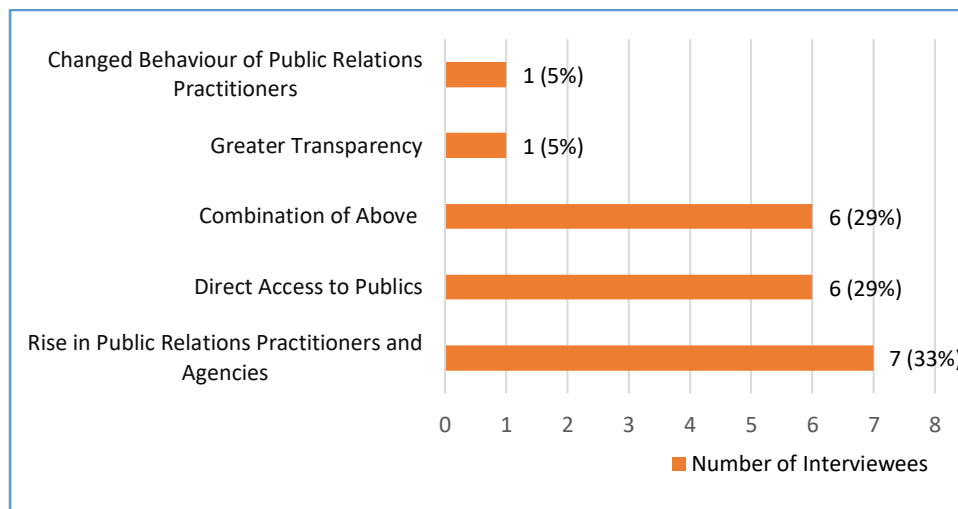
5.4.1.4 Impact of Public Relations Evolution on Journalism

After looking at journalists’ assessments of public relations as it exists today, the analysis now looks at how journalists perceive changes in the field over time. Because perceptions

are dynamic, this temporal dimension is crucial. They change in tandem with broader shifts in digital technology, organisational communication, and media systems. Analysing these transitions makes it easier to determine whether journalists' perceptions are largely influenced by current events or by longer-term changes in power dynamics and professional relationships.

The findings reveal that journalists overwhelmingly attribute the transformation of their profession to the evolution of the public relations industry. As illustrated in Figure 5.14, journalists attributed shifts in power, blurred professional boundaries, declining newsroom autonomy, and accelerating production pressures within newsrooms to the rapid expansion and increasing sophistication of the public relations industry.

Figure 5.14
Interviewees' perspectives on changes in public relations over time



One-third of interviewees mentioned that the rapid growth of practitioners and agencies is a key change in the field. This finding supports Waisbord's (2018) idea that the rise of public relations has created 'communication chaos', referring to the large number of carefully crafted messages that overwhelm the media, making it difficult for journalists to distinguish what is newsworthy from what is merely promotional material. This situation impacts journalism's gatekeeping role. In principle, gatekeeping is positive because it enables

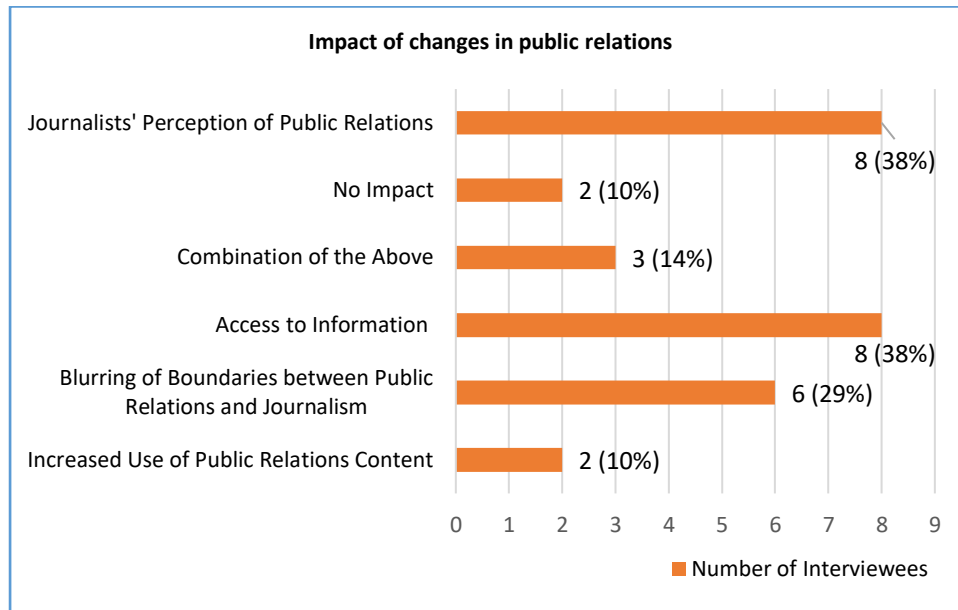
journalists to filter and prioritise information for the public. However, when the volume of public relations content increases while newsroom resources decline, journalists' capacity to perform this filtering role is significantly weakened. Their capacity to serve as impartial news judges is hence severely limited, which raises concerns about the lack of inspection and the fuzziness of the distinction between news and promotional content: "*When I first started in journalism, there weren't professional communications or public relations people... certainly not on the scale it is today*", a journalist noted (J7). This sense of loss of control is compounded by public relations' ability to bypass traditional media through digital channels. Nearly 30% of participants described bypassing conventional media as a major change: "*We're left running around scrambling, checking all their social media, and we feel like we're losing control or that we're chasing them*" (J18). Another interviewee commented: "*They're getting their message out without having to go through mainstream media*" (J14). Journalists see this bypassing of traditional news channels as contributing to the weakening of journalism's gatekeeping role, not because gatekeeping is inherently good, but because they understand this function as central to holding powerful actors to account. This perception connects with the findings of Sterne (2010) and Macnamara (2016), which showed that digital public relations is changing who controls public communication. These developments indicate not only a shift in control, as journalists no longer decide which information reaches the public, but also a broader erosion of journalistic independence, insofar as journalists feel increasingly constrained by public relations-driven information flows.

When practitioners communicate directly to audiences via social media or owned channels, journalists interpret this behaviour as 'intentional disintermediation' aimed at agenda control: "*plugging into people directly now*" (J4). This behaviour seems to stem from strategic motives rather than structural changes. For journalists, this raises concerns about public accountability, not because journalism is universally seen as fully accountable, but because they view their mediating role, such as questioning claims and providing scrutiny, as an important mechanism for holding communicators to account. Journalists worry that

circumventing the press eliminates opportunities for oversight, allowing planned messages to reach the public without independent review. As one interviewee noted, “*The media plays an important role in fact-checking*” (J18). Macnamara (2014) and Iturregui-Mardaras et al. (2020) described this situation as a decline in democratic function and public trust. The moral dimension here is pronounced: attribution shifts from mere professional competition to societal harm, intensifying negative affect and reinforcing journalists’ boundary protection.

A second theme centres on the attribution of adverse outcomes, particularly the challenges posed by reduced access to information and the blurring of boundaries between editorial content and public relations material (Fig. 5.15). Over one-third of interviewees (38%) perceived that public relations practices now hinder access, with several describing slower, more mediated information flows: “*There are so many practitioners working at the moment with different notions...It’s gone too far and is no longer helping journalism... It is slowing the process down*” (J8). Such statements locate causality squarely within public relations’ control, portraying it as an obstacle to journalistic independence.

Figure 5.15
Interviewees' perspectives on the impact of changes in public relations



Nearly one-third (29%) of interviewees were concerned that content created by practitioners is mixed into mainstream media, making it hard to distinguish between advocacy and reporting. One interviewee noted, “*More often, public relations people write articles for mainstream publications... it blurs boundaries*” (J4). Such viewpoints align with previous studies about the use of pre-packaged content created by practitioners (Sherwood et al., 2019; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). According to one interviewee, “*there are four PR/Comms people to one journalist*” (J6). These views reveal a broader struggle over who shapes public discourse, highlighting the confusion journalists feel about their own role. Journalists emphasise their role as watchdogs, confirming claims and holding people accountable. However, when practitioners engage directly with the public, they worry about losing control over information, highlighting the complexity of their work as they choose to hold people accountable for their power. However, their discomfort with direct communication shows they still want to influence how stories reach the public. From a critical perspective, this situation can be read as a form of professional hegemony, in which journalists see themselves as the legitimate interpreters of public information. Consequently, they tend to attribute problems to systemic forces, such as the expanding influence of public relations,

rather than to their own practices or institutional constraints. This framing emphasises the idea that practitioners have an excessive impact on the creation and presentation of information, even though journalists themselves hold a disputed role in the battle for narrative authority.

At the same time, some participants acknowledged that public relations' digital evolution has increased transparency, "*improved professionalism and responsiveness*" (J19). These internal attributions recognise individual skills rather than changes in the system. They separate ethical behaviour, which is within their control, from the external forces that they cannot change (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018). This argument may appear to contradict their earlier concerns about the sheer volume of practitioners and the pressures this places on journalism. However, rather than being inconsistent, it reflects journalists' ambivalence: they can criticise the expanding scale and influence of the public relations industry while still recognising that, at an interpersonal level, digital tools enable some practitioners to communicate more efficiently and accountably. Research shows that digital communication technologies, such as direct channels and real-time updates, improve responsiveness and transparency between journalists and practitioners (Macnamara, 2014; Robson & James, 2013). Thus, journalists differentiate between system-level pressures, which they view negatively, and individual-level behaviours, which they may evaluate more favourably. In other words, improved digital practices give journalists the evidence they need to make judgments about individual practitioners' character. This allows them to distinguish between ethical behaviour, which they believe practitioners can control, and the structural constraints of the communication system, which they see as beyond practitioners' control.

Research shows that there has been a significant change from hostility to practical cooperation in many areas (Callard, 2011; Curran, 2010, 2013; Jones, 2011; Macnamara, 2019; Pincus et al., 1993). This shift is driven by fewer resources for journalism and by the growing capabilities of public relations. Social media's proliferation of communication

channels has enabled disintermediation and faster access (Cantalapiedra-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Iturregui-Mardaras et al., 2020; Macnamara, 2019). For instance, when asked about their perception of the impact of changes in public relations over time, one interviewee noted: *“There are more influences, there are also more demands for information online now, and because of that demand for information, we do have to rely on press releases”* (J6). Another interviewee remarked on the advantages of public relations resorting to social media-driven channels as one of the evolutionary changes in the field, *“Practitioners can communicate directly with their consumers...get their message across, and I think that’s great because that also helps journalists to find information I want before I put in a query”* (J21). Attribution-wise, journalists are rethinking the reasons behind practitioners’ actions. They still dislike manipulation and gatekeeping in the media. However, they now often blame their dependence on public relations on unpredictable, hard-to-control factors, such as the constant news cycle and staff layoffs. This change in view, which softens their criticism while remaining sceptical, helps explain the mixed characterisations of relationships observed in the study. In this way, the evolution of public relations affects how journalists work. It helps them understand the pressures that shape their profession. These findings help answer RQ2 by showing how journalists see changes in public relations. They also support RQ3 by highlighting the reasons behind their judgments.

The findings in this section indicate that journalists have mixed feelings about the growth of public relations. On one hand, they see it as a challenge to the traditional authority of journalism, as public relations practices can reshape how information is shared with the public. On the other hand, they acknowledge that they may enhance their professional abilities and effectiveness by adapting to new communication environments. Their viewpoints make this ambivalence quite evident. They are concerned about how much power practitioners have on public information, even while they recognise the advantages that advances in public relations can offer. These opposing viewpoints demonstrate how

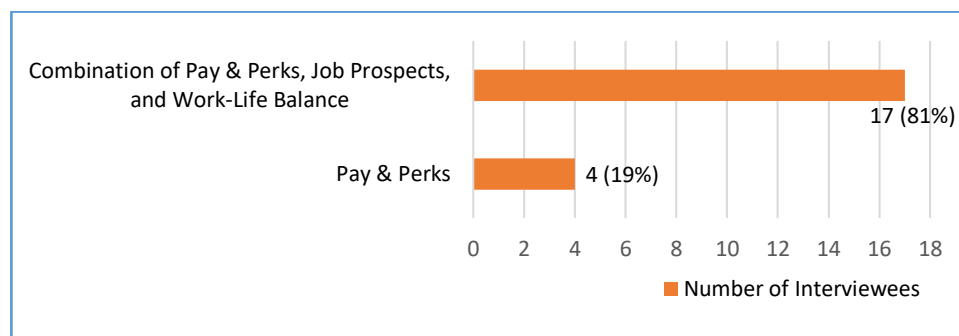
journalists are influenced by their actual experiences in the industry as well as broader concerns about preserving their professional independence.

5.4.1.5 Evolving Career Preferences: From Ideals to Pragmatism

Many interviewees shared their thoughts about their careers when they faced tough ethical choices and workplace pressures. They often talked about how moving from journalism to public relations shifted their focus from journalism values to decisions driven more by money and practicality. Importantly, this framing shows how journalists view career changes through their own beliefs, rather than as an unbiased difference between journalism and public relations. It reveals how they view career transitions through journalism standards while comparing this to what they believe are the economic realities of working in public relations.

Figure 5.16

Interviewees' perspectives on the reasons behind the trend of journalists transitioning to the public relations industry



Over 80% mentioned a mix of better pay, benefits, work-life balance, and career opportunities as their motivation (Fig. 5.16). One interviewee summarised this pragmatism: *“More money, better hours, more family-friendly hours, and more jobs in the field”* (J9). Nearly one-fifth (19%) mentioned money as the sole reason, highlighting economic causality as the dominant explanatory frame. In this case, journalists make external attributions, that is, blaming systemic inequities rather than personal shortcomings. Their explanations align with prior research, which shows that journalists have

historically left the newsroom for better financial conditions in public relations (Cutlip, 1994, 2013a; Fedler et al., 1988). The findings also show that many journalists are unhappy with newsroom culture. According to Fisher (2014, 2016) and Macnamara (2014), this dissatisfaction stems from high stress, long hours, and lower-quality editorial work. Ponsford (2017, November 14) found that journalism trainees in the UK chose to switch to public relations after realising their work mainly involved repackaging content rather than investigative reporting. This situation illustrates what Weiner (1985, 2012, 2018) described as a scenario in which journalists perceive the causes (poor conditions) as beyond their control, yet believe that institutional reforms could bring about change.

Journalists' narratives reflect a process of rationalisation across all subthemes discussed above. Journalists frequently explain their career transitions by highlighting external factors that influence the industry across all subthemes. By demonstrating how journalists evaluate public relations and value those evaluations, this pattern relates to RQ2 and RQ3. Digital media, commercial pressures, and reductions in newsroom staff are all posing problems for journalism (Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Mathews et al., 2023; Weiner, 1985, 2012). To retain a favourable self-perception even when they deviate from recognised norms, journalists frequently use self-preservation and job security as justifications for their decisions (Heider, 1958; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004).

The respondents' interpretations of career changes in journalism were interesting to observe. Some perceived these changes as a reaction to dwindling funding for journalists, emphasising the challenges facing the field, while others saw it as a commendable ethical action. Social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004) helps explain this variation. Because individuals are motivated to maintain a positive view of the groups they belong to, journalists who interpret public relations career moves as pragmatic rather than moral compromises can protect journalism's professional identity and preserve a sense of alignment with its claimed ethical principles (Deuze, 2005;

Tilley & Hollings, 2008). In this sense, journalists' perceptions of their professional identities are influenced by external factors such as job insecurity and unstable finances. Journalists employ attributional reasoning to strike a compromise between the necessity to adjust to changing work conditions and the high ethical standards of journalism (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 2018). They explain their career choices by pointing to external factors rather than blaming personal weaknesses or moral failures.

At a broader level, journalists' negative or ambivalent institutional perceptions of public relations reflect long-standing cultural narratives that predate their personal experiences. The literature review indicates that public relations is often seen negatively by the public. The use of strategies like flattery and gift-giving (Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sallot & Johnson, 2006), attention-seeking stunts (McNair, 2017; Moloney, 2006), as well as the notion that these actions amount to free promotion (Macnamara, 2014, 2016), are a few causes of this unfavourable opinion. Additionally, poor working conditions and journalists' shift into public relations further contribute to this perception (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Additionally, traditional adversarial portrayals of public relations continue to persist (Adams, 2002; Callard, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Sterne, 2010; White & Hobsbawm, 2007). These long-standing narratives function as dispositional priors, that is, pre-existing cognitive schemas that can influence how new information is interpreted (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Ross, 1977). In other words, journalists draw on culturally established assumptions about public relations when forming judgments about practitioners, leading them to interpret current behaviours through the lens of historically entrenched beliefs. It is in this context that Sterne's (2010) argument becomes relevant: journalists' hostility toward public relations is shaped by both real experiences and the expectations established by these historical narratives, which can lead to exaggeration or overgeneralisation. Likewise, Coombs and Holladay (2007) explained that when practitioners display even minor forms of unhelpful or obstructive behaviour, these actions are filtered through pre-existing negative attributions and overgeneralisation of entrenched

beliefs. Thus, the earlier negative stories and stereotypes persist because they are continually reinforced, making them resistant to change.

This section's institutional-level study shows that journalists assess public relations according to their opinions about the field's value, professional advancement, standards of practice, and legitimacy. The public relations industry's structure and ethical standards, for example, can influence these opinions. Journalists recognise public relations' benefits within newsrooms but express concerns regarding its motives and impacts, seeing it as both beneficial and possibly detrimental.

However, institutional explanations alone do not fully capture the relational dynamics through which journalists experience and negotiate public relations in everyday practice. The following section, therefore, turns from these institutional-level attributions to the individual-level attributions that characterise direct journalist-practitioner interactions. It looks at how journalists evaluate transparency, assess trustworthiness, build or maintain trust, and decipher the apparent objectives of certain practitioners. These assessments are linked to particular actors rather than impersonal institutions, illustrating how personal experience mediates larger structural and normative narratives.

5.4.2 Relationship Dynamics and Attributional Interpretations— Interpreting Individual Attributions

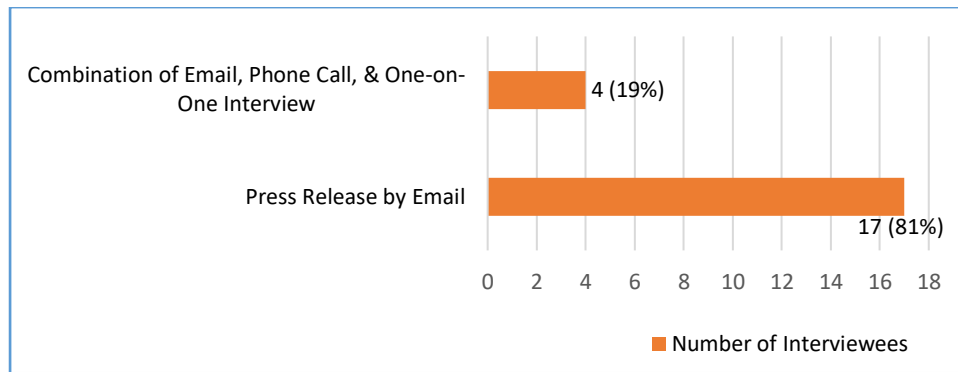
Although journalists see public relations as a vital component of the media ecosystem, their relationships with practitioners are just as important. Whether journalists view these practitioners as reliable collaborators or dishonest intermediaries depends on the practitioners' professionalism and reliability. In accordance with attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018), journalists try to distinguish between external dispositions (e.g., workload, client influence) and internal dispositions (e.g., intention, ethics, and skills) that drive practitioners' behaviours.

This section moves from institutional evaluations of public relations to the interpersonal level, examining how journalists interpret the behaviour of individual practitioners in everyday professional encounters. It looks at how journalists attribute accountability and motive to practitioners' actions, and how these assessments affect relationship quality, trust, cooperation, and scepticism, using attribution theory as an interpretive lens. By identifying journalists' impressions of practitioners, the section answers RQ2, and by elucidating the attributional mechanisms that give rise to those perceptions, it answers RQ3.

5.4.2.1 Journalists' Interactional Experience with Practitioners

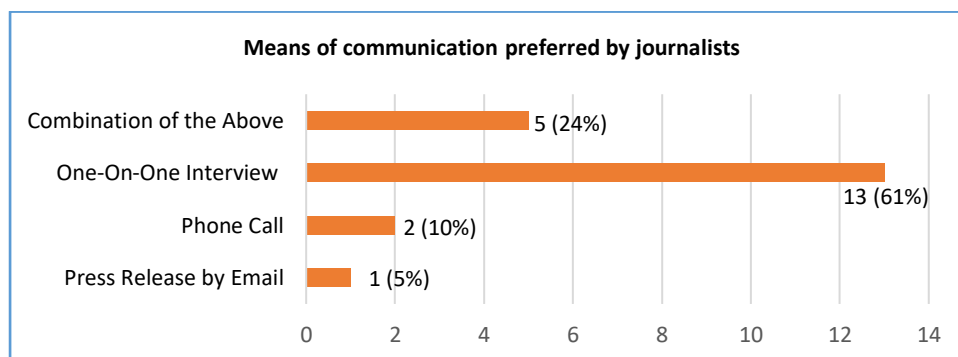
Interviewees often had mixed feelings about working with practitioners. They valued practitioners' help in organising tasks; however, they also expressed frustration regarding how, at times, practitioners attempted to manage the narrative through pre-packaged content or by obscuring information. Most interviewees acknowledged that, whereas practitioners might increase productivity, they can also obstruct communication and restrict journalists' perception of their professional independence. In this sense, independence refers to the ability of journalists to make editorial decisions, independently verify material, and choose news stories based on professional judgment rather than extraneous interests. When practitioners dominate information flows or frame issues in ways that are difficult to interrogate, journalists feel that their capacity to act independently, particularly in selecting and scrutinising information, is constrained.

Journalists have mixed feelings about their experiences. Positive experiences are attributed to advantageous conditions, whereas negative experiences are seen as reflections of personal traits, such as viewing public relations as manipulative. This asymmetry in attribution helps explain why journalists both recognise the importance of public relations and doubt practitioners' motivations.

Figure 5.17**Interviewees' perspectives on the means of communication preferred by practitioners**

The preferred modes of communication further illuminate these perceptions. While 81% of interviewees said practitioners mainly rely on press releases (Fig. 5.17), 61% of journalists preferred one-on-one interviews (Fig. 5.18).

Interviewees viewed the heavy reliance on press releases as a self-serving strategy to manage narratives, rather than as a logistical efficiency. “It *would be far more credible*”, according to one interviewee, “*if they facilitated a one-on-one meeting between journalists and the person they want to question*” (J15). Such views can reinforce a perception of public relations as strategically controlling rather than transparent, a recurring theme in their evaluations of professional competence and intent.

Figure 5.18**Interviewees' perspectives on the means of communication preferred by journalists**

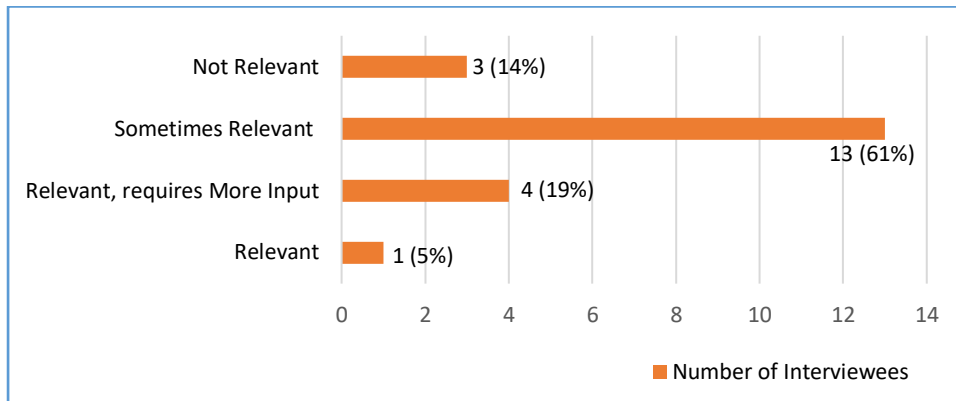
Interviewees suggested that organisational gatekeeping, rather than individual goodwill, drives control over information in interactions with journalists. As one interviewee explained:

“It’s becoming more and more rare to speak to the person to whom answers are being attributed. I think that’s a negative thing. I see it as a way to control messaging from an organisation and prevent journalists from getting more detailed and candid answers” (J2).

Journalists view the system as a barrier to transparency, raising concerns about how stories and narratives are managed. Journalists portray themselves as impartial arbiters of public information at the same time. They claim a valid role in controlling societal narratives, unlike practitioners. This claim demonstrates a blatant bias: journalists criticise practitioners for controlling organisational messaging while defending their freedom to filter and explain information. A close look at these answers shows an inconsistency. Journalists and practitioners both control how information is shared. However, journalists see their role as holding others accountable, while practitioners are viewed as trying to manipulate information. In effect, interviewees maintained a moral distinction that reinforced their professional identity, even though the mechanisms they criticised were similar to those they used themselves. This bias illustrates how journalists rely on in-group favouritism and self-serving attributional reasoning (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004) to protect their ethical self-image while downplaying their own role in controlling narratives.

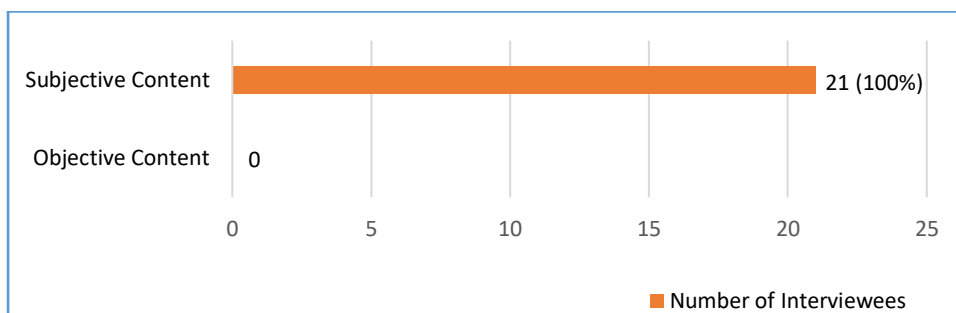
More than half of the interviewees (61%) regarded public relations content as ‘sometimes relevant and sometimes not’ (Fig. 5.19).

Figure 5.19
Interviewees' perspectives on the relevance of the public relations content



Although some interviewees valued the background material, most believed (rightly so) that it was structured to prioritise organisational interests. “*Interesting information can be buried under the message the PR company is trying to push us,*” one observed (J9). Furthermore, all interviewees asserted that public relations information is manipulated to suit their clients’ interests (Fig. 5.20), describing practitioners as “*a spin machine*” (J6). Journalists often view public relations with scepticism and tend to use critical language that highlights bias and strategic intent (Aronoff, 1975; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; White & Hobsbawm, 2007).

Figure 5.20
Interviewees' perspectives on the objectivity of the public relations content



The rationale for these evaluations relates to RQ3. These statements indicate that journalists attribute bias to practitioners’ motives rather than acknowledging the public relations duty to advocate for their clients. This interpretation illustrates an attribution bias, showing how journalists view others in the field of communication. As members of the in-

group, journalists frequently view public relations campaigns through their own ethical prism and consider them dishonest rather than necessary, reflecting in-group/out-group biases and the tendency to interpret others' actions according to one's own professional norms (Deuze, 2005; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Tilley & Hollings, 2008; Turner et al., 1987). In-group thinking shapes opinions of the out-group, influencing assessments of practitioners' competence and ethics through attributional reasoning and social identity processes. How people favour their own groups and judge others according to professional standards can be explained by social identification processes (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner et al., 1987), which may cause journalists to view practitioners as less moral or reliable. This asymmetrical moral evaluation happens even when journalists judge the same behaviours that they themselves frequently engage in (Deuze, 2005; Tilley & Hollings, 2008).

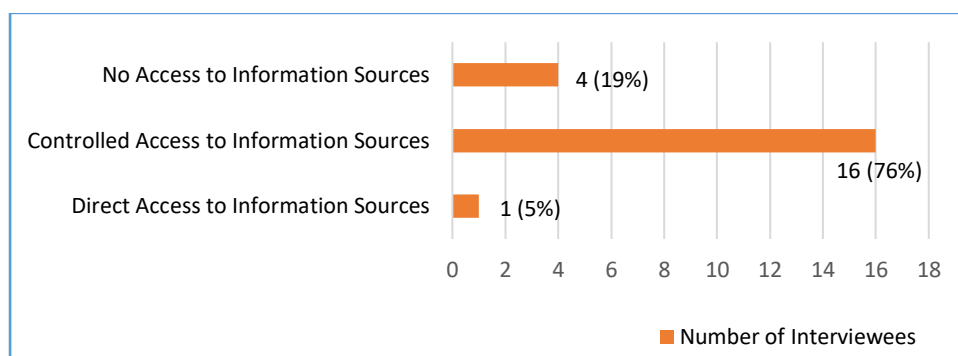
Journalists frequently interpret public relations behaviour through the lens of intentionality, meaning whether practitioners act to inform or to manipulate. When journalists see content as selective or promotional, they attribute it to internal, controllable, and self-serving motives: the interviewees said things like, "*It [public relations content] is very much skewed, done to suit themselves, which is the antithesis of journalism*" (J10). They might also feel, "*They're trying to trick me or simply manipulate information*" (J16). These internal attributions frequently result in unfavourable perceptions of public relations, falsely characterising it as spin (Callard, 2011; Lerbinger, 2006, 2018; Sterne, 2010). These ideas demonstrate how scepticism can become emotionally charged and stable. Journalists may see practitioners' motives as self-serving, which can lead to frustration and distrust. When people have repeated interactions and hold on to past experiences influenced by their personal views and group behaviours, it leads to similar emotional responses (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner et al., 1987). In other words, once journalists categorise public relations' behaviour as manipulative, these judgments

are resistant to change, shaping future interpretations of practitioners' actions and maintaining a persistent sceptical stance.

The findings suggest that journalists' perceptions of practitioners' intentions change when the latter are forthright and honest, demonstrate a desire to engage, and provide context. In such cases, practitioners are perceived as wanting to work together rather than merely attempting to control how they are perceived. Gatekeeping and message shaping are seen as situational rather than inherently dishonest. Perspectives on transparency and collaboration arise from differing professional standards, interaction cues, and assessments of whether actions reflect stable motives or situational needs. All these findings show that journalists' sceptical, often negative perceptions of public relations (RQ2) arise from deeper attributional processes (RQ3) in which intent, controllability, and professional in-group norms strongly influence how practitioner behaviour is interpreted and evaluated.

Access to sources emerged as a central friction point. Three-quarters of interviewees said practitioners act as gatekeepers, blocking direct access to decision-makers (Fig. 5.21).

Figure 5.21
Interviewees' perspectives on the journalists' access to information sources



“One of the most frustrating aspects of journalism today”, one interviewee remarked, “is that I do not have direct access to the people who hold the information” (J7). Interviewees frequently interpreted control by practitioners as an intentional restriction of access or information flow, rather than as a routine or necessary part of organisational communication.

Heider (1958) and Weiner (1985, 2012) claimed that this way of thinking encourages mistrust, as journalists feel their independence is limited, making it harder for them to verify and clarify information independently. Independence means having the freedom to make decisions and act as a protector by keeping influential people accountable (Deuze, 2005; McChesney, 2013; Tilley & Hollings, 2008).

Control becomes a major point of friction because it creates tension between journalists' perceived duty to the public and practitioners' perceived motives, who are seen as prioritising organisational interests over transparent information sharing. According to Sissons (2016), these practices can limit journalists' independence. They limit the information that is accessible, affect how stories are told, and make it more difficult to verify facts independently. According to research, trust can be damaged when journalists believe they have limited power due to selective disclosure or gatekeeping; they may become sceptical and have defensive attitudes as a result (Lerbinger, 2018; Macnamara, 2016; Sterne, 2010).

For RQ3, when access is mediated or restricted, journalists interpret it as an intentional obstruction that violates professional autonomy: "*one of the most frustrating aspects... [no] direct access to the people who hold the information*" (J7); "*It's an act of obstruction to put layers of PR people*" (J10). Because the cause is seen as internal and controllable, negative perceptions endure (Callard, 2011; White & Hobsbawm, 2007). Delays in responses or Official Information Act (OIA) requests are primarily interpreted as intentional avoidance and therefore controllable: "*Instead of giving us simple answers... they avoid the Official Information Act... resulting in delays*" (J6). These attributions suggest that the OIA processes frequently limit access to information (NZCCL, 2025).

Journalists are generally able to accept delays when they are attributed to practitioners' heavy workloads or procedural issues. For instance, one interviewee said,

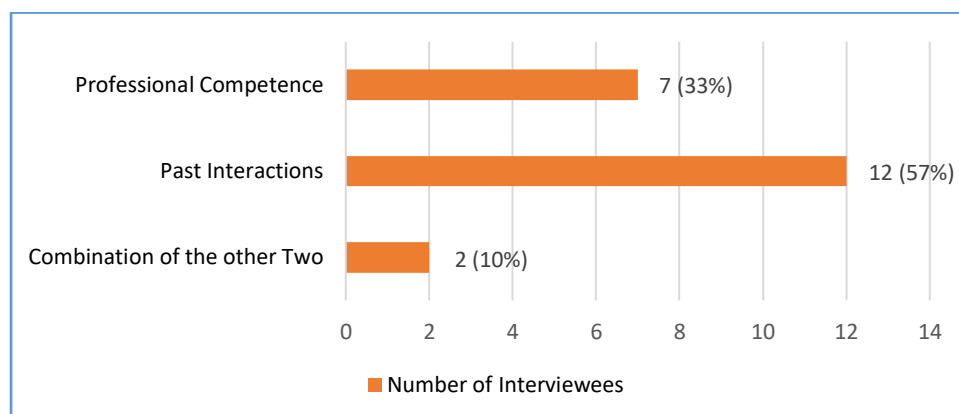
I think there's always this mutual trust if a PR person can kind of reach over the wall a little bit and take a journalist into their confidence and say, "Look, I can't tell you the full story here, but you're on the right track, this is something you need " (J2).

This viewpoint reallocates the responsibility from the practitioners. Journalists are more likely to collaborate when practitioners promote information accessibility or respond quickly, leading them to view control as situational rather than manipulative. Therefore, it can be concluded that journalists' perspectives (RQ2) are influenced by how they see access dynamics (RQ3): obstacles foster mistrust and personal guilt, whereas facilitation results in favourable evaluations.

Trustworthiness was most frequently linked to past interaction quality (57%) and professional competence (33%) (Fig. 5.22). One interviewee commented on judging practitioners' credibility: *"It's very much about the past interaction with a particular person and how well you have worked together"* (J2).

Figure 5.22

Interviewees' perspectives on the factors contributing to the credibility of practitioners



Attribution theory explains how personal experiences influence perceptions of others: positive experiences enhance credibility, while negative ones can lead to views of bias or incompetence (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018). Perceptions of

practitioners often ranged from cynicism to trust, with practitioners' perceived goals and dependability having a greater impact than the overall structural background. This difference in viewpoint stems from their assessments of the causes of these interactions and from their personal experiences. To understand why journalists perceive practitioners' behaviours as either positive or negative, it is necessary to examine how journalists attribute intent and responsibility.

Figure 5.23 illustrates that journalists' perceptions of practitioners are shaped not simply by the behaviours they observe, but by the attributional logic they apply when making sense of those behaviours.

Figure 5.23

How Attributions Shape Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations Practitioners

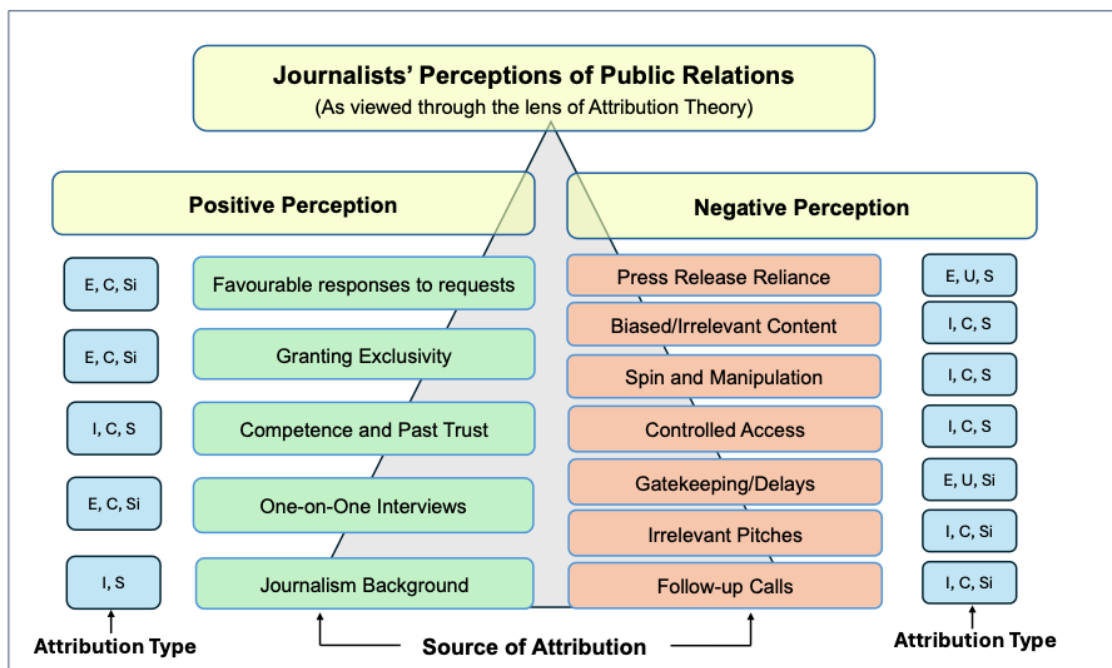


Figure legend: Attribution dimension key

Abbreviation	Meaning	Description
I	Internal	Attributed to practitioners' motives or character
E	External	Attributed to organisational or systemic factors
C	Controllable	Actions practitioners can directly influence
U	Uncontrollable	Constraints or forces beyond practitioners' control
S	Stable	Practitioners' habitual behaviours
Si	Situational	Practitioners' context-specific behaviours

Specifically, journalists made external attributions when they blamed systemic or organisational factors (e.g., newsroom pressures), and internal attributions when they attributed behaviour to practitioners' motives or professionalism.

A detailed justification of the attribution types applied to each behavioural item in Figure 5.23 is provided in Annexure I.

The attribution types assigned to each item in the figure reflect how journalists interpret the source, intent, and consistency of practitioners' actions. Behaviours that people see as motivated by personal traits, stable, and under control are associated with positive perceptions, such as providing exclusivity or helpful responses to requests. These behaviours are typically seen by journalists as the result of a practitioner's professionalism or steady dependability. Relying on press releases or limiting access often leads to negative opinions. When interpreting these types of issues, journalists typically cite two primary sources. On the one hand, practitioners' poor pitching performance is an internal issue. On the other hand, there are external influences, such as client-imposed restrictions or internal organisational approval procedures. Here, 'uncontrollable' refers specifically to factors that limit the practitioner's autonomy, even though journalists may still experience the resulting behaviour as obstructive or unhelpful.

Figure 5.23 shows that journalists' evaluations of public relations are less about the behaviours themselves and more about how those behaviours are explained. Examining through the lens of attribution theory, journalists look for intent, control, and consistency in every interaction. These observations affect how journalists judge practitioners' trustworthiness and competence because the same communicative practices are interpreted differently depending on who performs them and for what perceived purpose. Figure 5.23 shows how tensions can last in the relationships between journalists and practitioners. Misunderstandings occur not just because of different professional beliefs, but also because of how journalists interpret practitioners' behaviour. This model highlights that perceptions

come from attributions. To improve interactions between journalists and practitioners, it is important to focus on both what practitioners do and how journalists are likely to interpret those actions.

Journalists view some practitioners' behaviours, including the choice of what information to share, as under practitioners' control. Journalists view certain other behaviours, including constraints imposed by practitioners' organisational structures, as uncontrollable. Similarly, some practitioners' behaviours were seen as stable (showing consistent patterns in practitioners), while others were seen as situational (connected to specific events or contexts). When journalists view practitioners' actions as driven by internal, cooperative motives, such as professional skills or a desire to help with objective reporting, they perceive them positively. As one interview noted: *"I have my needs properly understood by publicists and PR people, we're kind of pulling in the same direction"* (J11). These internal attributions regard practitioners as reliable and trustworthy collaborators due to the alignment of their actions with journalistic principles of transparency and public service. Granting exclusivity, responding promptly, or providing practical context are seen as internally driven behaviours that signal shared professional values: *"Most journalists find PR people quite helpful at times. I know a lot of stories will come through from certain pitches...just helps to build context"* (J9).

Conversely, when journalists attribute practitioners' behaviour to external motives, such as commercial bias or organisational gatekeeping, they form negative perceptions because these motives suggest that practitioners prioritise their own or their clients' interests over journalistic values such as transparency and independence. For instance, an interviewee said, *"a common interaction is the public relations people want to control something that will go into our publications to protect their clients' interests, and we're very reluctant"* (J15). These external attributions suggest that practitioners often feel restricted. They appear to prioritise the needs of their institutions or clients instead of serving journalists or the public.

These patterns help clarify how journalists differentially assess practitioner behaviour in interpersonal encounters.

The analysis also clarifies why these perceptions arise and where they originate. Attribution theory explains how journalists evaluate practitioners' behaviour. People tend to be more critical of others when they think their behaviour is motivated by self-interest or deliberate manipulation. This internal attribution implies personal control and accountability for the behaviour (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 2012). This same pattern appears in journalists' interpretations: when they often assume that when practitioners act selectively, they are driven by selfish motives. This assumption leads to criticism of those practitioners and strengthens negative stereotypes about public relations. When journalists see that an individual's behaviour is influenced by factors beyond their control, such as corporate policies or resource limitations, they are usually more understanding. When people think that a person's actions are more impacted by their environment than by their character, they are more likely to be forgiving (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Ross, 1977). In such cases, journalists are more likely to see practitioners as working within situational constraints rather than acting in bad faith.

However, journalists do not always have full knowledge of the situation, and their attributions often rely on assumptions or prior beliefs about public relations as a profession. Attribution theory explains that people use their existing knowledge and expectations to fill gaps in understanding, which implies that journalists rely on familiar stories and group norms to make sense of unclear behaviour (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). As a result, journalists may choose to be lenient at times. They are more forgiving when a person's actions fit an explanation that matches their view of the situation. However, when motives are suspicious or go against journalistic standards, they tend to blame the person's character rather than their motives. Ambivalent perceptions arise when journalists are unsure of the locus of causality: they might view connections as "*sometimes it's helpful and*

sometimes it's obstructive" (J1) or consider public relations content to be "*usually quite relevant but sometimes it can be just a way of saying something that suits their best interests*" (J4) and switch between internal and external attributions, demonstrating their uncertainty about control and intent. These shifts show that journalists' perceptions stem from both their personal experiences and larger organisational and institutional contexts. Journalists see these factors as influencing practitioners' behaviour. Attribution theory helps explain how journalists form attitudes towards public relations. It shows how their reasoning leads to trust, scepticism, or mixed feelings about practitioners. This theory answers 'what' journalists think about public relations (RQ2) and 'why' they have those thoughts (RQ3).

The analysis shows how journalists' perceptions of practitioners are shaped by their individual experiences. From an interpersonal communication perspective, forming these opinions is greatly influenced by getting to know someone. When trying to establish understanding and trust, familiarity is essential. In line with the proverb 'the unknown is unloved', journalists who have little interaction with practitioners tend to rely more on stereotypes and dispositional assumptions (Berger, 2014; Berger & Calabrese, 1974; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Hewstone & Giles, 1997; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004). Regular and helpful interactions provide journalists with better information about a situation, reducing uncertainty and helping them make better decisions (Berger, 2014; Berger & Calabrese, 1974; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020). When uncertainty is lower, journalists are less likely to see negative behaviour as a personal flaw. Instead, they are more likely to view a practitioner's actions as influenced by the situation or as a team effort.

All these findings indicate that journalists seldom take practitioners' behaviour at face value. Rather, they use attributional reasoning to actively analyse communicative behaviours, determining if a behaviour is indicative of professional skill, organisational constraints, strategic intent, or intentional manipulation. As a result, depending on how journalists understand the underlying reasons, comparable behaviours can result in noticeably different

assessments. This process helps explain why public relations perceptions remain conditional and sceptical. Although journalists acknowledge the usefulness of practitioners, they nonetheless evaluate their behaviour using a framework heavily impacted by presumptions about control, motivation, credibility, and professional skills.

Building on this understanding, the following section examines how these attributions accumulate into broader relational schemas, that is, how journalists conceptualise their overall relationship with practitioners as either collaborative, transactional, or adversarial within the communication environment.

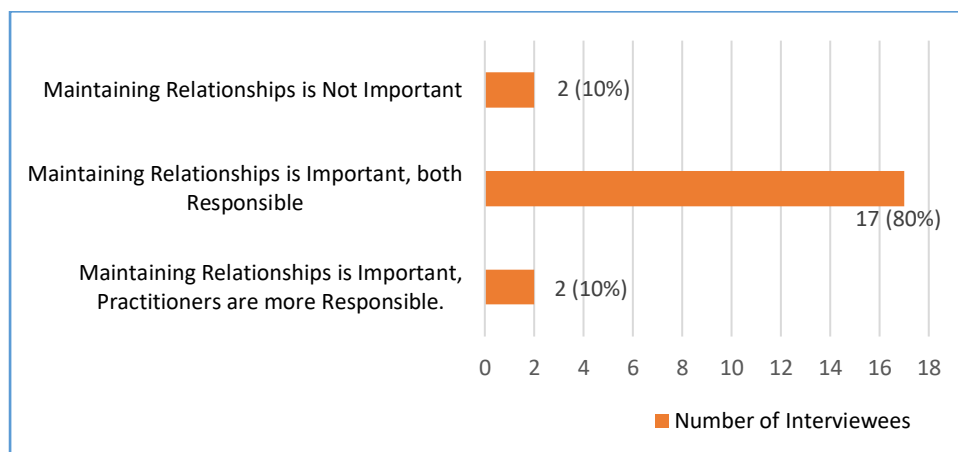
5.4.2.2 Journalists' Perceptions of Their Relationship with Practitioners

Journalists' perceptions of their relationships with practitioners are shaped less by structural divisions between the two professions and more by how they attribute practitioners' motives in daily interactions. Journalists interpret practitioners' actions by connecting them to external influences, such as organisational oversight, commercial interests, incompetence, or structural limitations, and internal influences, including collaboration, professionalism, mutual respect, or ethical considerations. These attributions influence how relationships are viewed, whether as cooperative, adversarial, or ambiguous (RQ2).

The findings indicate that journalists do not perceive all practitioner relationships in the same way. Rather, relationship characterisations emerge from recurring attributional patterns. Where practitioners are viewed as responsive and professionally competent, journalists tend to form cooperative interpretations. Where practitioners are perceived as restricting access, managing information strategically, or prioritising organisational interests, relationships are more likely to be characterised as adversarial. Between these positions lies a substantial middle ground in which journalists acknowledge both the usefulness and limitations of practitioners, resulting in ambivalent or pragmatic relationships. The following discussion examines each of these relationship forms in turn.

Cooperative Relationships (Internal Attributions of Professionalism and Goodwill): Most interviewees (80%) said that building good relationships with practitioners is very important. They believed that rather than being a tactical choice, maintaining the quality of these relationships is a shared responsibility (Fig. 5.24). One interviewee said, “*You can have more honest conversations about the story if you have a stronger relationship.*” *Both parties gain from it* (J19). Internal attributions of purpose are reflected in these impressions, in which practitioners’ collaboration and openness are seen as sincere displays of professionalism and kindness.

Figure 5.24
Interviewees’ perspectives on the importance of their relationship with public relations practitioners



Interviewees attributed positive relationships to trust and understanding (39%), awareness of newsroom needs (28%), timeliness (22%), and accessibility to sources (11%) (Fig. 5.25).

One interviewee observed, “*Because we have a good relationship, I get good, timely information from them*” (J21), demonstrating that building strong relationships is important.

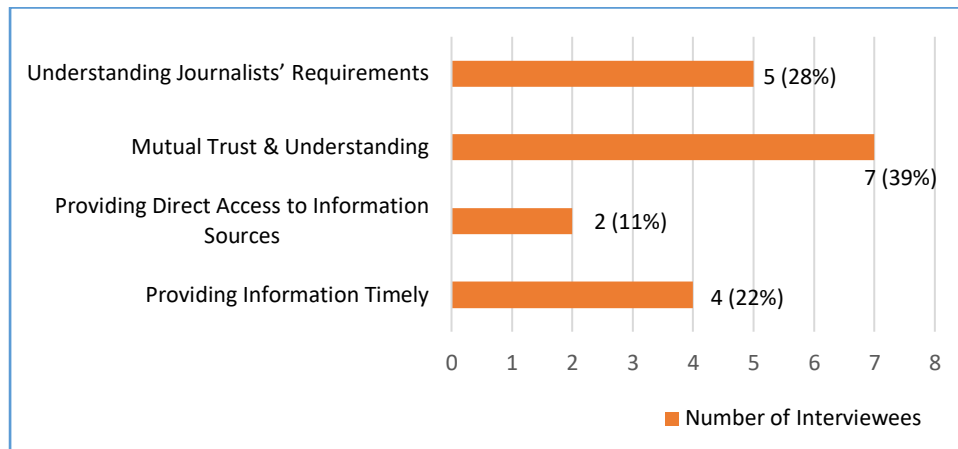
Interpersonal communication theory provides a more appropriate framework for understanding journalists’ and practitioners’ relational dynamics. Research shows that interpersonal relationships rely on qualities, such as openness and responsiveness, the factors identified as central to positive relational development in interpersonal communication (Berger, 2014; Berger & Calabrese, 1974; Burgoon et al., 2021; Knapp et al.,

2020). These ideas are consistent with the interviewees' narratives: journalists saw practitioners' rapid reactions and open communication as acts of kindness. Instead of seeing them as deceit or manipulation, they see them as constructive.

In contrast to organisational-public relationship (OPR) theory, which studies the dynamics between organisations and the public (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), interpersonal communication theory is more pertinent to the interactions between journalists and practitioners (Burgoon et al., 2021; Knapp et al., 2020). This contention has been recognised by public relations scholars who examined interpersonal relationships. As noted by Hellsten and Theunissen (2019), the nature of the relationships and the level of empathy between journalists and practitioners are critical to the quality of their interactions. Similarly, Sterne (2010) and Sissons (2016) showed how personal characteristics affect whether engagements are more collaborative or are characterised by control and strategy. Overall, research on interpersonal communication shows that when journalists engage directly and constructively, their scepticism can lessen. Positive interactions build trust and help others view practitioners' intentions favourably.

In this context, journalists judge practitioners according to interpersonal relationship standards, including openness, responsiveness, accuracy, context, and consistency. These standards derive from general principles of interpersonal communication, namely trust-building, uncertainty reduction, and cooperative relational maintenance. However, journalists have clear expectations about how practitioners should act during their interactions. As stated above, research in public relations shows that journalists judge practitioners based on these behaviour cues (Hellsten & Theunissen, 2019; Sissons, 2016; Sterne, 2010). When practitioners meet expectations, journalists see their actions as cooperative and respectful. When they do not meet these expectations, say by controlling information, journalists view the interaction as manipulative.

Figure 5.25
The reasons attributed by the interviewees for a positive relationship with public relations practitioners



Even journalists who kept a professional distance recognised the value of skilled and trustworthy practitioners. As one interviewee noted: *“a good PR and comms person can actually become a trusted, reliable source of information as well and point us to the right people to talk to in their industry”* (J6). This view suggests that practitioners are not seen as adversaries, but rather as sources of information, so long as their intent is interpreted as being internally motivated by collaboration and respect for journalists' integrity.

These findings indicate that positive relationships between journalists and practitioners depend less on professional affiliation and more on behavioural cues that promote trust and reduce uncertainty. Journalists are willing to set aside more general cynicism when practitioners continuously demonstrate responsiveness and awareness of newsroom requirements. Therefore, rather than the absence of professional differences, collaboration arises from the skilful management of such disparities through reliable interpersonal communication.

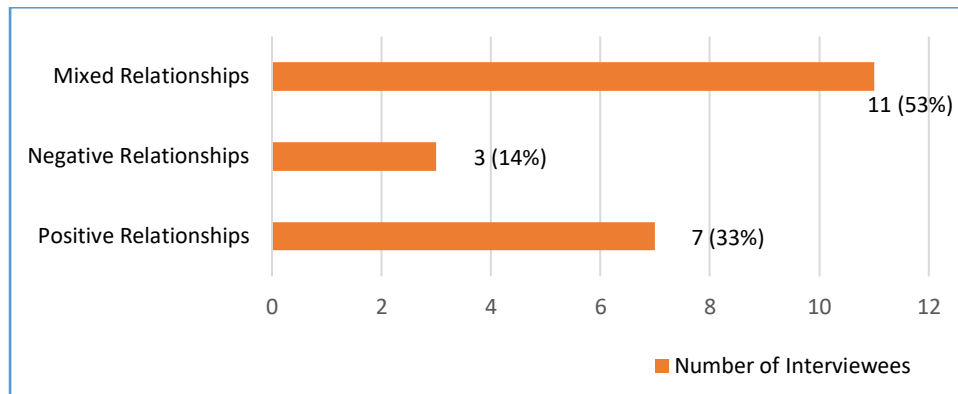
Adversarial Relationships (External Attributions of Control and Bias): About 14% of interviewees reported negative experiences with practitioners. They often blamed these issues on two main reasons. One reason was internal actions, like intentionally withholding

information or blocking communication. The other reason was external factors, such as organisational gatekeeping or strict communication rules. One interviewee remarked, "*My perception of the relationship is mainly negative because public relations practitioners control the information I seek*" (J10). The latter external attributions reflect perceptions of public relations as an instrument of control rather than a communication partner. This view is standard in media and public relations studies (Moloney, 2006; Moloney & McGrath, 2019; Sherwood et al., 2019). According to Daft and Lengel (1986) and Knapp et al. (2014), a transactional connection in interpersonal communication is an exchange of specific resources, such as information or access, rather than the development of a long-term relationship. It is important to note that transactional exchanges are not always manipulative. They can be effective, especially in professional settings where quick decisions are often needed. In these cases, building strong relationships can be difficult. Interviewees were more concerned about the imbalance in these transactions than about the transactions themselves. They believed that practitioners prioritised coverage for their objectives over journalistic ethics or information needs. Journalists' perceptions of practitioners' honesty can be affected by this impression of bias. Journalists perceive interactions as cooperative rather than strategic when practitioners answer queries honestly and provide clear and accurate information. However, when the content appears to be chosen or too promotional, journalists view the relationship as 'transactional' in a bad sense; it is successful but lacks professionalism and respect. Conflict and confrontational circumstances can increase as a result of this negative framing of the interaction.

Antagonistic confrontations often arise when journalists believe that practitioners' excessive control over information signals that institutions are trying to control stories and hinder their ability to investigate. These beliefs support journalism's values and its image as an impartial watchdog dedicated to uncovering the truth.

Ambivalent Relationships (Mixed Attributions and Pragmatic Coexistence): More than half of the interviewees (53%) described their relationships as ambivalent, characterised by both positive and negative experiences (Fig. 5.26).

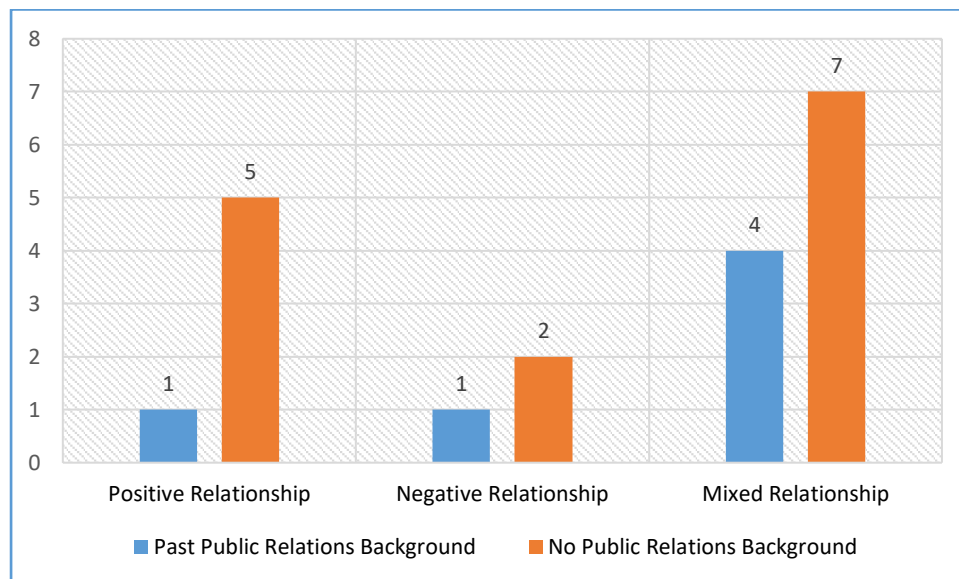
Figure 5.26
Characterisation of interviewees' relationships with public relations practitioners



“*Trust, reliability, and mutual respect*” were typically cited as the reasons for positive relationships (J14). Ethical behaviour and internal professionalism are linked to these attributes, as one interviewee commented, “*I have a love-hate relationship with PR people. They can be helpful at times or annoying or obstructive at others*” (J1). Such views illustrate how journalists’ perceptions are organisationally fluid, depending on situational factors such as organisational demands or time pressure. Interestingly, the journalists’ prior public relations experience did not affect their evaluations of relationships (Fig. 5.27), indicating that journalists base their judgment of relationships more on their interactions rather than their public relations background. This finding aligns with Sterne (2010) and Callard (2011), who argued that trust in media-public relations relationships is built situationally rather than structurally, that is, trust emerges from how practitioners behave in specific encounters (e.g., whether they respond promptly or communicate transparently), rather than from the institutional structures or professional histories that each side represents. In other words, journalists decide whether to trust practitioners based on what happens in the moment, not on formal role expectations or the broader reputation of public relations as a field.

Figure 5.27

The relation between journalists' relationship with public relations practitioners and journalists' public relations background



The prevalence of ambivalent linkages suggests that a positive-negative divide cannot fully describe the journalist-practitioner relationships. Journalists typically operate in a complex setting where practitioners can either help or hinder their work, highlighting the growing interconnectivity of the two professions, despite scepticism.

This analysis also helps answer RQ3. Attribution theory shows that journalists' views are not based on clear divisions between journalism and public relations. Interviewees reported that relationships improved when they saw practitioners as responsive and aware of newsroom limits. When journalists provided extraneous content, lied, altered their articles, or violated journalistic standards, relationships deteriorated. Depending on their experiences and the context of their interactions, journalists' perspectives change. Industry-level factors, such as new technologies and dwindling newsroom resources, have an impact on how these ideas evolve. However, the majority of journalists now recognise that the lines separating their many responsibilities have blurred. Because of quicker production cycles and budgetary constraints, many journalists increasingly view practitioners as valuable collaborators in news production. Attribution theory helps explain how journalists interpret practitioners'

actions in these new situations, even though it cannot explain this change. This change primarily addresses issues facing the media industry, including staff reductions and higher workloads. Even when they are sceptical, journalists often rely on public relations for information. The dynamic between journalists and public relations is growing more collaborative, not because of the rationale behind this dependency, but because of shifts in the industry.

The relationship patterns discussed in this section indicate that journalists' assessments of practitioners are influenced more by continuous interpretations of behaviour and intent than by rigid occupational boundaries. Ambivalent relationships reflect both perceptions. Cooperative relationships occur when practitioners are seen as supporting journalistic work. Adversarial relationships occur when actions are seen as attempts to control information. These results suggest that trust is built over time and is affected by how people view professionalism and openness. Trust is not a fixed part of the relationship between journalists and practitioners.

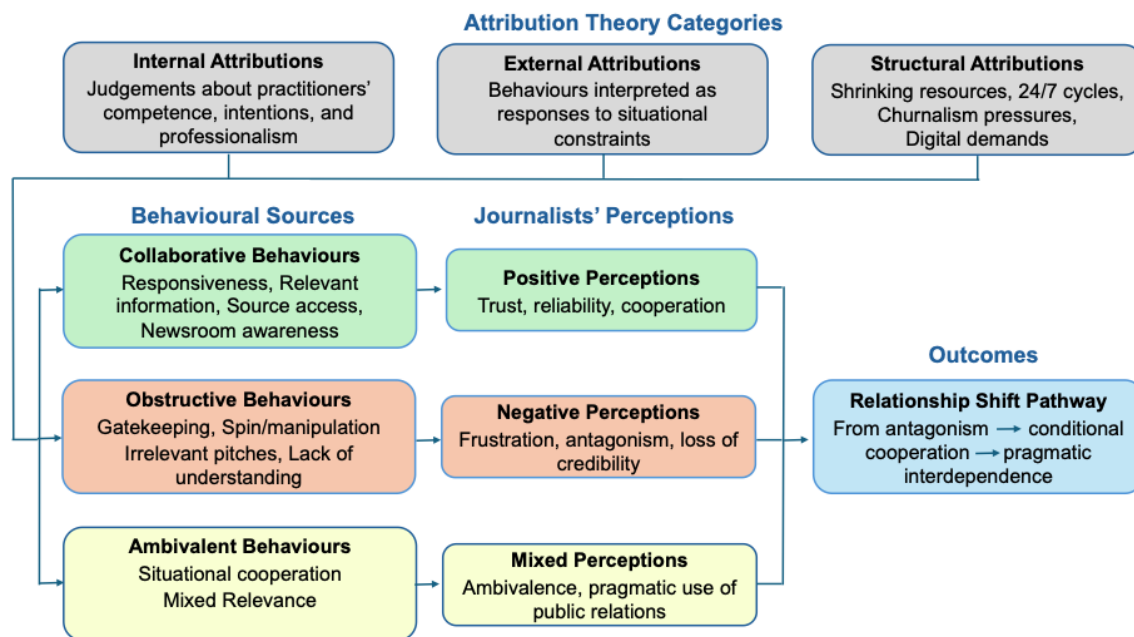
Thus, RQ3 is addressed by showing that journalists' relationship judgments stem from their interpretations of intent, control, and situational limits. These interpretations help journalists understand public relations in a changing media environment.

5.5 An Attribution Pathway for RQ2 and RQ3

This chapter investigated how journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners (RQ2) and why these perceptions take the forms they do (RQ3), drawing together the relevant findings and situating them within the conceptual attribution model presented in Figure 5.28.

Figure 5.28

Conceptual model of the attribution pathway for journalists' perceptions of public relations in New Zealand



The analysis of RQ2 shows that journalists have strong opinions shaped by their experiences. They express feelings, such as trust, cooperation, annoyance, deception, and uncertainty. The ongoing disputes in their roles are reflected in their communication. Some journalists recognise the value of being relevant and approachable, and others raise concerns about obstruction and distortion, expressing a mix of positive and negative feelings based on personal experiences and professional standards.

5.6 Summary

This chapter, which examines how New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations both as a profession and in their day-to-day interactions with practitioners, directly addresses RQ2 (How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?). It uses the attribution lens visualised in the conceptual model (Figure 5.28), which maps how journalists interpret public relations behaviour through interconnected internal, external, and institutional attributional layers. It demonstrates how structural disparities as well as everyday interactions influence journalists' perceptions of

their relationship with practitioners. Journalists perceive practitioners as helpful and favourable when they customise their pitches and deliver the desired information on time. Negative opinions, however, can result from information concealment or delays. As a result, journalists may have mixed feelings about practitioners, seeing them as both helpful and obstructive depending on the situation. Thus, RQ2 is answered by identifying these attribution-based relationship types and the conditions under which they emerge.

The chapter also answers RQ3 (What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?). Attribution theory suggests that journalists' perceptions of practitioners are shaped by their behaviour, whether influenced by external factors (such as organisational control) or internal factors (such as professionalism). Journalists' perceptions of practitioners' motives and accepted norms all affect their levels of confidence and scepticism. These views are becoming more prominent as the industry changes, with a rise in smaller news outlets and a greater dependence on outside information. At the heart of it all, though, is how journalists interpret their experiences and the reasons behind practitioners' actions, which ultimately shape their perceptions of public relations. This attributional interpretation of practitioners' behaviour explains not only how journalists perceive public relations but why they hold these perceptions, thereby addressing RQ3.

Overall, the findings indicate that journalists' perceptions of public relations in New Zealand are influenced not only by practitioners' actions but also by journalists' interpretations of the reasons behind those actions. This connection is shown in the attribution pathway (Fig. 5.28). This conceptual model provides an integrated explanation of both the persistence of scepticism and the emergence of more collaborative, strategically interdependent relationship dynamics. This understanding of attribution and perception connects to the next chapter, which examines how these trends are reflected or contested in media portrayals of public relations.

Chapter 6 Integrating Framing and Attribution: From Journalists' Perceptions to Media Portrayals of Public Relations

6.0 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings across the analyses presented in Chapters 4 and 5, drawing connections between journalists' perceptions of public relations (as revealed in interviews) and how those perceptions are articulated through framing devices in news texts. Its purpose is to bring together the recurring patterns found separately in the earlier chapters, such as scepticism toward public relations, assumptions about strategic intent, and the framing of public relations as image management, and show how these patterns connect within a broader explanatory framework to larger issues about journalism, public relations, and media power.

The combination of framing and attribution theories provides insight into how public relations meanings are shaped and challenged in journalism. It also shows that stabilised patterns are reinforced through daily newsroom routines and socialisation processes. The chapter explains that framing and attribution are socialised into how journalists and practitioners develop their identities. According to Deuze (2005) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), the journalism's goal is to protect the truth and promote the public good. Public relations focuses on improving communication and facilitating information sharing between organisations and their audiences (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L'Etang, 2008; Macnamara, 2016).

This chapter, therefore, consolidates the thematic, textual, and interpretive patterns identified in Chapters 4 and 5, offering a holistic explanation of how journalists understand their experiences with public relations and how this understanding influences their media portrayal. The following sections revisit the key findings, relate them to broader scholarship, and explain how journalists' meaning-making practices contribute to a stabilised image of

public relations in the news. This synthesis provides the basis for a deeper discussion of the interplay between framing and attribution, which is developed in the next section.

There are four sections in this chapter. The relationship between framing and attribution is established in Section 6.1 as the primary interpretive mechanism linking media portrayals to journalists' perceptions. The way attributional judgements are incorporated into textual and cognitive frames is examined in Section 6.2. Professional identity and boundary maintenance are covered in Section 6.3, and these dynamics are placed within larger institutional and power frameworks in Section 6.4. These sections work together to provide a comprehensive description of the creation and sustenance of media portrayals of public relations.

6.1 The Framing-Attribution Interplay

Framing theory helps in understanding how news narratives construct specific views of reality by emphasising some aspects of an event or individual while omitting others (Entman, 1993, 2007; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Reese, 2001, 2007). As demonstrated in Chapter 4, media coverage in New Zealand commonly frames public relations as a disaster, a distraction, hype, or a necessary evil in democratic communication. These frames focus on negativity and scepticism, highlighting issues of influence and control. The dataset provides evidence that highlights journalists' concerns about a decline in media independence and an increase in power imbalances in the communication field: "the wireless industry's PR campaign misleading consumers and policymakers" (Hertsgaard, 2018, July 23) or noting "the demise of journalism" alongside "the rise of public relations" (Allen, 2018, July 03). According to Deuze (2005) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), these news stories show that public relations often runs counter to the values of openness and truth-seeking. At the same time, they can reinforce the idea that journalism serves to protect the public interest.

Attribution theory explains how such frames develop and persist by describing how individuals interpret causes, intentions, and responsibility for events and actions (Heider,

1958; Kelley, 1973). Journalists, when looking to understand the intentions and credibility of information sources, routinely rely on attributional reasoning to make sense of actors, motives, and causal relationships within news events (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). These judgment calls, which determine how responsibility and meaning are assigned in news reports, affect how journalists choose sources, structure their stories, write, and use framing techniques such as metaphors and cause-and-effect connections (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1994). Chapter 5 noted that journalists often evaluate practitioners based on what they think their motives are. The statement of one interviewee shows that when journalists see practitioners as self-serving, they attribute external motives like pushing a specific narrative or trying to control the situation: *“When something is too polished, it’s not journalism, it’s control. We can see when they’re trying to manage the story”* (J8). These attributions become the raw material for recurring frames that later appear in news stories.

Conversely, when journalists work well together, they tend to view situations with greater understanding and fairness. Interviewees shared examples where practitioners helped ensure accuracy and clarity: *“The top communication experts assist you in understanding the story accurately and ensure you possess the correct information... It’s not just about the perspective given; it changes depending on the person you are engaging with”* (J16). Such accounts highlight how personal cognitive processes (attribution) can influence and sometimes change larger communication trends, known as framing. In New Zealand’s closely connected media scene, journalists and practitioners often feel both suspicion and appreciation towards one another. These mixed feelings show the complicated relationships they have (Leitch & Neilson, 2010; Tilley & Hollings, 2008).

Within this small and relationally dense media system, journalists’ cognitive evaluations and the frames they construct can carry outsized influence on public understanding of public relations. Journalists often believe that public relations lacks ethics. This belief shapes their view of the industry. The public’s opinion of public relations as manipulative or shallow can

be influenced by this reporting, which creates trends in editorial practices and professional cultures. This pattern corresponds with findings on framing and attribution in journalism (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1994; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) as well as research on the development of newsroom priorities (Berkowitz, 1993). According to institutional theory, professional behaviour is influenced by norms that progressively emerge from shared understandings inside organisations. These shared interpretations can influence workplace behaviours (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 2000; Scott, 2013). In journalism, enduring patterns of reporting affect the long-term views of the profession (Hanitzsch, 2007; Ryfe, 2013; Schudson, 2001, 2019). This body of research supports the notion that such representations in the media can become deeply entrenched in culture.

The insights discussed in this section indicate that the negative image of public relations in New Zealand's news media does not stem solely from bias. It results from a mix of thoughts, professional habits, media structure, and organisational-level constraints and incentives. The way journalists present stories shapes their opinions about public relations. Attribution influences how journalists view practitioners, leading to persistent biases and mixed emotions. This interplay complicates practitioners' efforts to change ingrained attitudes. The chapter, therefore, conceptualises this dynamic as the framing-attribution interplay—a theoretical lens that links the findings of Chapters 4 and 5, providing a foundation for interpreting the recursive model that follows.

6.2 Cognitive Frames and Causal Attributions in Journalistic Discourse

Having established the broader interplay between framing and attribution, the discussion now moves to the cognitive level of analysis. This section examines how journalists' interpretations of practitioners' motives are translated into recurring media frames. Conversely, the recurrent frames in the media environment can influence how journalists themselves internalise and reproduce understandings of public relations in their daily

practice. In this sense, media portrayals are not just external reflections of journalistic thought. They are established ways of attributional reasoning built into the news production process.

Interviewees often accused practitioners of having self-serving or strategic intentions. They made these claims, especially when communications seemed overly professional or crisis-focused. *“When the focus shifts from sharing information to managing what gets released, you can sense the difference”* (J3), an interviewee said. This finding aligns with Entman’s (2007) concept of moral attribution of blame, which holds that individuals assess communication based on both the information provided and the ethical intentions behind it. When journalists see actions as attempts to control or influence situations, they tend to frame them in the news as damage control or spin. This cognitive linkage between motive (attribution) and meaning (framing) explains why image-reputation management emerged as the most dominant frame (44.6% of news stories) in Chapter 4. When journalists suggest that practitioners have strategic or misleading motives, they view practitioners’ work as a way to manage or fix damage to a company’s reputation. Hertsgaard (2018, July 23) used the expression “orchestrated global PR campaign”, highlighting public relations as a strategic approach to boost reputation. However, according to this journalistic perspective, reputation is only about enhancing one’s image or resolving issues. Reputation, however, is a component of a larger picture comprising image and culture, according to organisational studies research (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Instead of relying on quick fixes, managing reputation takes ongoing effort to understand and shape it (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). This difference shows that journalists have a narrow view of public relations practice. This trend reflects what Coombs (2007) described as strong attribution of crisis responsibility, especially in preventable crises. Reputation management and crisis management are different areas, but they often come up when journalists see a threat to reputation, which can lead to thoughts about blame or responsibility in a crisis. By emphasising deliberate actions, the journalists frame public relations as the primary force responsible for distorting public

perception. This finding reflects a common tendency among individuals to blame visible actors during uncertain times (Weiner, 1985, 2012), which could also extend beyond public relations.

Similarly, Adams' (2013, September 23) coverage of the Fonterra botulism scare emphasises the need for a "hard-hitting public relations campaign". In this framing, Adams sees public relations as a tool for responding to and mitigating damage to a person's or organisation's reputation. The news story implies that organisations use strong advocacy not just to promote their ideas but to rebuild public trust and protect their image. How organisations portray that advocacy is seen as less important than improving reputation. Such framing highlights how the media often views public relations mainly as a way to fix an image. An interviewee's statement, "*We are aware that during a crisis, public relations specialists treat their messages appropriately, defending rather than explaining*" (J9), illustrates the influence of journalists' interpretive frameworks on their narratives about public relations. In the interview, the interviewee expanded on this point, noting that public relations communication is often viewed as protective, risk-averse, and focused on controlling damage rather than on transparency. This interpretation shows a common trend in the interviews: journalists often believe that practitioners in high-pressure situations act defensively. This belief affects how they report on public relations actions. In line with Matthes and Kohring's (2008) conceptualisation, these are cognitive frames, that is, internal mental structures that guide how journalists interpret the motives and credibility of public relations before these views become visible in textual frames. Therefore, these standard cognitive frames converge into the dominant media frame when several journalists independently (and repeatedly) assign manipulative or strategic objectives to public relations.

The dataset also uncovers differences in attribution that align with varying relational experiences. Interviewees were more inclined to ascribe cooperative or informational

intentions when they regularly interacted with transparent, professional practitioners: *“Some communications experts want you to understand the context, even if it doesn’t help them directly. At that point, you see the profession at its best”* (J14). According to attribution theory, people are more inclined to think that someone’s motivations and actions accurately represent who they really are when they know them and engage with them frequently. In this instance, interviewees did not perceive the practitioners’ conduct as an attempt at situational manipulation, but rather as an indication of true professionalism, consistent with relational and interpersonal identity theory, which suggests that ongoing interactions shape people’s identities and the meanings they give each other (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Jenkins, 2014). According to public relations research, positive, long-lasting connections between journalists and practitioners foster credibility and trust, which leads to more positive perceptions of the practitioner’s intentions (Jeffers, 1977; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Supa & Zoch, 2009). These relational processes explain why interviews and media coverage, especially from the government, where communication roles were clearly defined, often led to cooperation or neutral views. Powley’s (2013, April 14) news story on council communications, for example, describes “public notices, consultation and engagement publicity” as valid ways to share information with the public. In this view, public relations is framed as part of the government’s information provision rather than as a threat to transparency. Collectively, these examples illustrate that journalists do not hold a single, fixed view of public relations. Instead, they move between doubt (seeing public relations as manipulative) and acceptance (seeing public relations as informational), depending on the motives they attribute and the contexts in which public relations appears. This oscillation demonstrates how critical and neutral frames can coexist and surface simultaneously in both journalistic practice and media texts, as well as the whims in which these decisions are made.

Journalists face ethical dilemmas when it comes to strategic messaging, as they worry it may misrepresent facts to influence public opinion. *“PR people don’t lie outright, but they shape the truth,”* one respondent stated, *“Journalists become wary as a result”* (J5). All

communication involves selectivity, which Burke (1966) called “terministic screens” (p. 45), where choosing one representation inevitably deflects others. In this study, journalists often viewed their own choices as neutral, while they criticised public relations choices as biased. This bias asymmetry leads to an unfair double standard where journalists criticise public relations for bias but seldom reflect on their own reporting biases (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1978).

When journalists recognise a strategic purpose and question the ethical implications of public relations message, these judgments shape how they construct the news narrative. In these situations, strategic communication is seen not just as organisational, but as an effort to influence how people view its image or public perception. This is where the process of attributing meanings helps shape how information is presented. For example, stories were labelled as a “PR disaster”, “PR distraction”, or as part of an “orchestrated PR campaign”, signalling a frame in which public relations is positioned as a reputational shield or a manipulative device rather than a communicative function. Journalists often suggest that organisations have questionable motives. This framing creates a message that focuses on organisations managing their image, and presents public relations as a means to protect organisations rather than to inform the public.

These findings suggest that journalists use both framing and attribution as cognitive processes to understand public relations. These interpretations, though, are not created in isolation. The professional identities of journalists, as well as their understanding of the distinctions between journalism and public relations, also influence them. How these identification processes support the creation and sustenance of media portrayals is examined in the following section.

6.3 Framing, Attribution, and the Boundaries of Professional Identity

While the previous section focused on cognitive processes of interpretation, this section shifts attention to the role of professional identity. It examines how journalists' understandings of their roles influence their evaluation and portrayal of public relations.

Many journalists view public relations as a means to influence public opinion, often seeing it as manipulation, which clashes with journalism's democratic role. These feelings highlight broader concerns about who holds power and controls information, consistent with Herman and Chomsky's 'Manufacturing Consent' (1988), which mainly looks at how media, government, and companies work together and shows how money and influential people or institutions can control the flow of information and limit what the public can discuss. Although their thesis is not about public relations per se, it helps explain why journalists pay attention to strategic communication because it can affect how people understand important issues. Journalists view communication, message control, and differences in resources as part of a larger system; however, they see themselves as defenders of truth and aim to balance the influence of strong communicators. This thinking is also evident in recent research showing that propaganda, public relations, marketing, and advertising actively influence attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs rather than just providing objective facts. Rubin (2022) examined how persuasive strategies are used in contemporary public relations and marketing to influence public opinion and behaviour. Credibility signals, strategic framing, and emotional appeals are some of these strategies. This approach makes it difficult to distinguish between propaganda and advertising. Recent studies that demonstrate how social media marketing and influencer campaigns can impact consumers' opinions of businesses, their purchase choices, and their overall level of involvement provide credence to this claim (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). These results are consistent with public relations theory, which holds that communication strategies are intended to alter attitudes and behaviours (Bernays, 1947, 1955).

By viewing public relations in this way, journalists emphasise its societal impact and bolster their credibility as responsible gatekeepers of information. Research shows that journalists see themselves as watchdogs, acting as a link between influential organisations and the public (Waisbord, 2013, 2018). Journalists often critically highlight public relations practices to keep their independence and protect the public interest (Gandy, 1982; Moloney, 2006). Studies further indicate that journalists balance scepticism toward public relations with recognition of its strategic value (Tilley & Hollings, 2008). They see themselves as the gatekeepers of truth while also needing access to information and sources (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Wright, 2005). This balance enables them to critically analyse public relations in their media coverage and aids in the formation of their professional identities. Journalistic storytelling affects audience perception and narrative development, as demonstrated by framing theory (Almakaty, 2025; Entman, 1993, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). Whereas attribution theory emphasises the unique difficulties in public relations and journalism, it highlights why journalists have different perspectives on the two disciplines (Mirsadeghi, 2013; Weiner, 1985, 2012, 2018). This dynamic can also be understood through social identity theory (Hogg et al., 2017; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004), which highlights how journalists maintain a positive professional identity by distinguishing themselves from practitioners as an out-group. The distinction between in-groups and out-groups is important. Journalists may become sceptical of public relations when it supports the organisation. They may become less conscious of their own viewpoints and the extent to which they rely on public relations for information as a result of this bias (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Reich, 2015). Journalists must evaluate their work, or else they risk putting morality ahead of objective reporting, which can result in moral judgments, preconceptions about public relations strategies, and narratives that deceive the audience. Despite their claims to independence and ethics, journalists' social identities may inadvertently affect their transparency and impartiality, endangering public confidence.

Chapter 4 explains how news articles use strong contrasts, such as “PR wars” and “PR disaster”, to show the difference between unbiased reporting and intentional persuasion. Headlines such as “Friend Alerted Smith About PR Disaster” and “PR Sharks Surround Fonterra” use powerful words like “disaster” and “sharks”, which make practitioners look bad. Although journalism is frequently seen as a source of truth, the way it discusses public relations can give the impression that the latter is manipulative. When journalists criticise public relations, they imply that it has ulterior intentions. This practice is ironic since, despite their claims to convey facts, journalists deliberately select their words to influence the public’s perception of the public relations profession. One interviewee shared this view: *“Journalists are here to tell the truth, while PR is meant to make people look good”* (J8). This statement draws attention to the implicit ranking of acceptable behaviour (Van Dijk, 1998), with truth-telling at the top of the list, and illustrates the attributional imbalance in the dynamics between journalists and public relations: journalists perceive public relations as self-serving, but they also feel they are fulfilling a moral and public obligation. Coombs and Holladay’s (2007) notion of the moral divide in the communication professions refers to the way journalists and practitioners are positioned on opposite sides of an ethical boundary. This divide is created through assumptions about intent: communication is judged as legitimate when it is seen as serving the public interest, and illegitimate when it appears to advance organisational or self-interested goals. Journalists often see their work as a search for truth and aim to be independent. They strengthen this view by comparing themselves to practitioners. Journalists often see themselves as honest but view public relations as a means to distort facts, which creates a moral divide, supporting their belief that their own communication is more ethical.

Some interviewees mentioned that commercial pressures are making it hard for journalists to keep their professional integrity, as the lines between different roles are blurring.

Journalists may make decisions that compromise established norms of fact-checking and independence due to business constraints, such as limited newsroom resources and strict

production deadlines. These constraints can encourage shortcuts, such as relying more heavily on public relations material, publishing lightly edited press releases, or prioritising stories that serve organisational or commercial interests over those that serve the public interest. As a result, journalists become more vulnerable to organisational constraints and external influences, which erode the clear moral and professional distinction they seek to draw between journalism and public relations. This issue in modern journalism is reflected in an interviewee's statement, "*Newsrooms use PR tactics—packaging stories and pushing narratives—but we like to think we're not in the persuasion business*" (J15). This tension between journalistic practice and professional self-conception reflects Hanitzsch's (2007) argument that journalistic professional identity is relational, that is, defined not only by internal norms and values but also by contrast with other groups and perceived threats. Journalists build their identity by standing up to groups, such as governments, businesses, and practitioners. Journalists see these groups as threats to their ability to report independently. By establishing boundaries with these groups, journalists reinforce their self-image as neutral and ethically better. They do this even while recognising the pressures that blur these roles in real life. This construction of professional identity can also be explained by the creation of an in-group versus out-group divide, where the in-group is perceived as morally superior to the out-group (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004). According to social identity theory, individuals and groups enhance their self-esteem by positively differentiating their own group from others. In journalism, journalists present themselves as objective and ethical. They attempt to cultivate a favourable perception of their profession. Whereas they often see practitioners as focused on persuasion or manipulation.

Because journalists often believe they act with good motives, such as telling the truth and helping the public, they frequently view themselves as morally superior. On the other hand, they consider practitioners to be dishonest or self-serving. This bias involves ranking groups and characterising them. The values of the in-group are seen as the standard for judging the

out-group (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004). As a result, journalists believe they serve the public interest, while public relations is viewed as a less ethical profession. Such boundary work protects journalistic identity but also limits self-reflection by obscuring how journalism itself employs persuasive tactics or succumbs to commercial pressures.

Framing theory examines how individual larger systems shape individual identities. In journalism, journalists enhance their profession's image by emphasising their commitment to facts and truth, often portraying public relations as crisis management and ethically questionable. This contrastive identity construction creates a rivalry where each group defines itself in relation to the other, with journalists appearing more credible and trustworthy than practitioners. For example, in a commentary about the United Airlines incident (Crabb, 2017, April 16), the journalist argued, "PR people are the ones who strike the match and apply it to the fuse". Similarly, a headline from the *NZ Herald* (2011, August 15) said "Riots Fashion: New Adidas PR Disaster". These attributions hold public relations accountable rather than the organisation's leadership, illustrating how the media serves as a watchdog by highlighting moral failures in communication rather than structural problems within the organisation. Blaming public relations in these situations shows what Entman (2007) termed selective moral evaluation, which means examining particular individuals while neglecting more significant systemic problems. Journalism focuses on conflicts and breaks complex subjects down to create clear, engaging stories. Well-organised information helps the audience understand and trust the news. This storytelling method enables journalists to report on events accurately and hold influential people responsible. However, this moral selectivity also feeds preconceptions that mask the moral aspects of modern public relations (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018; Macnamara, 2014).

Journalists' attributions of intentional obfuscation also serve as a cognitive shortcut under conditions of information uncertainty. When journalists are unsure of communicative motives, they tend to be sceptical: "*If I'm not sure if I'm being spun, I assume I am. That's*

how you protect yourself" (J4). This kind of thinking is consistent with Lee's (2019) concept of anticipatory distrust, which contends that people assume communicators, including practitioners, have ulterior intentions or behave dishonestly. Viewing public relations material as unreliable, journalists often approach encounters with practitioners with this perspective, which can lead to negative thoughts. This cynicism has the potential to obscure the actual substance and produce instinctive 'shortcuts' that limit sophisticated assessments and strengthen moral divisions. Even when practitioners are being honest, this tendency makes it hard for them to be trusted. It is a tricky situation where good intentions do not always shine through, and the result is that trust between the public and public relations is further eroded. Research consistently shows that the public often questions the motives behind public relations activities, interpreting them through a lens of scepticism and perceived self-interest (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; Macnamara, 2016). Even well-intentioned communication can therefore be dismissed as manipulative or strategic, reinforcing long-standing trust deficits between the profession and its audiences.

However, there are other instances in the dataset where interviewees recognised common professional ideals. Some of them noted that competent practitioners "*care about getting the facts right because their credibility is at stake, too*" (J10) and "*understand deadlines and balance*" (J2). These comments show that how journalists give credit is not fixed. Instead, they adjust their views based on how well practitioners meet their needs. In reality, positive feedback is often self-serving: a 'good' practitioner is someone who provides accurate information quickly and understands what journalists find essential to make their work easier. When public relations behaviour aligns with journalistic norms, such as truthfulness and responsiveness, journalists tend to evaluate practitioners more favourably.

These interactions also shape how journalists understand their own role. Journalists often compare their work to the work of practitioners. This analogy emphasises the unique qualities of journalism, especially its focus on independence and public service. Research

shows that journalists shape their professional identity by comparing themselves to practitioners, whom they often see as a contrasting group (Hanitzsch, 2007; Zelizer, 1993). Journalists uphold the principles that characterise their job and fortify their identity by highlighting these distinctions, a process known as boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). The way that journalists express their personal and professional identities is influenced by how they relate their comprehension of professional motives to the storytelling process. Group dynamics and peer comparisons influence how they interpret these motivations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Media texts can also shed light on this intricate framing. Harvey's (2019, February 02) news story cites PRINZ's characterisation of public relations as "open, honest, and transparent", an instance of representation of ethical professionalism in public relations. Only 10.7% of the sample, however, recognised PRINZ, which suggests that PRINZ's limited institutional visibility makes it more difficult for journalists to access insider or professional perspectives on public relations practices and ethics, which might offer a counterpoint to the critical framing prevalent in media coverage (Bowen, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006).

The above findings suggest that journalists' views of public relations are shaped by their personal experiences, attitudes, and the way they develop their professional identities. These personal factors do not work alone; they are also influenced by larger institutional frameworks that affect how newsrooms operate and how communication power is shared. The next section looks at these structural influences.

6.4 Institutional Frames, Power Imbalances, and the Politics of Legitimacy

Building on the discussion of professional identity and boundary work, this section examines the broader institutional conditions within which these identities are produced and maintained. This section examines how framing and attribution work together to show that the marginalisation of public relations in media discourse is not only a matter of perception

but is reinforced through everyday journalistic practices. Notably, the relationship between journalism and public relations involves power differences that journalists often highlight to protect their role. These power dynamics exist on several levels. First, practitioners usually have more organisational resources, such as time, specialised communication staff, and strategic information support, which can put journalists at a disadvantage, especially in newsrooms with fewer resources (Davis, 2003; Gandy, 1982). Second, journalists believe they have a unique power: they can influence how people think. They do this by framing stories, setting agendas, and acting as a link between institutions and citizens (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Journalists use their symbolic power to support their role in controlling information and to show their independence. They frequently view public relations as either a means of influencing public discourse or a threat to their freedom (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Moloney, 2006). As a result, the perceived power disparity encompasses more than simply resources; it also includes concerns that are brought to the public's attention, who is deemed legitimate, and who gets to define what things mean. Journalists work hard to manage these aspects to maintain their professional identity. Instead of showing a fundamental imbalance, these views allow journalists to see themselves as protectors of truth and public accountability. They often view public relations as less clear or less valid. Gitlin (2003) noted that media routines highlight certain voices while ignoring others, reinforcing journalists' professional legitimacy.

6.4.1 The Structural Context: Commercialisation and the Newsroom-Public Relations Interface

Interviewees often linked their perceptions of public relations to the changing economics of journalism. Smaller newsrooms, lower advertising revenues, and greater demand for content have led journalists to rely on ready-made material from practitioners (Gandy, 1982; McChesney, 2004; Moloney, 2006; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). Due to time and budget constraints, journalists frequently find it difficult to verify information, which forces them to rely on press releases and materials from public relations sources (Davis, 2003; Singer,

2005). Nevertheless, this reliance on public relations comes with mixed feelings. Journalists need to be independent but often face budget constraints. One interviewee observed, “*PR materials are well-made and quick to use, but it makes you uneasy when you know you’re being fed something. You need content, but you don’t want to go along with it*” (J11). This contradiction is consistent with Reich’s (2015) characterisation of journalists’ reliance on sources: they rely on public relations and other media sources for information, yet cast doubt on them to protect their independence as professionals. This conflict is strengthened by the belief that public relations has greater power to shape what news is reported (Davis, 2003; Franklin & Carlson, 2010). However, journalists attribute their reliance on public relations as a response to external pressures, such as shrinking budgets and public relations influence, and not as a decline in their own professional ethics.

Media coverage of corporate crises further illustrates this paradox. Statements such as claims that the Defence Force “misled the public by omission and public relations flannel” about its activities in Afghanistan (Armstrong, 2011, September 02) attribute communication strategy, rather than operational failure, as the core issue. It is easier for journalists to assign responsibility when they focus on public relations, mainly because practitioners are frequently viewed as intentional actors. When elucidating complex events, journalists can emphasise the strategic motivation behind them. Research on how media attribute responsibility shows that journalists often focus on clear individuals or groups when faced with uncertainty, and they tend to do this when these agents seem to try to sway public opinion or control how they are perceived (Coombs, 2007; Entman, 1993). This approach simplifies complex organisational or systemic issues by locating responsibility in the actions of a communicative intermediary rather than in broader structural factors. Studies of information subsidies also show that journalists often view public relations materials as attempts to influence stories, which prompts people to consider the public relations source’s accountability and motivations more carefully (Davis, 2003; Gandy, 1982). In this way,

focusing on public relations provides journalists with a handy explanatory anchor, enabling them to craft cohesive stories while preserving their character as impartial watchdogs.

While commercial pressures explain one dimension of the journalism-public relations relationship, they do not fully explain how journalists maintain authority within public discourse. To understand this, it is necessary to consider the symbolic power that journalism exercises through news production and framing practices.

6.4.2 Power and Symbolic Capital in News Discourse

The relationship between journalism and public relations can also be interpreted through Bourdieu's (1998) concept of symbolic power, which involves the ability to shape how others see (and understand) the world and to influence their beliefs and values through language and shared meaning. This concept highlights how journalists gain authority by shaping social reality. Arguably, journalists act as gatekeepers of public discourse and have the power to legitimise or delegitimise various communicative actors by providing media visibility (Carlson, 2017; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Despite its strategic communicative skills and ability to sway public opinion, public relations has a subservient position in this industry because it relies on media presence (Gandy, 1982). As practitioners engage directly with audiences via social media, eschewing established means, the media landscape is becoming less stable. Because public relations no longer depends solely on journalists, interviewees are concerned about losing control over information distribution. While journalists still influence public discourse, their traditional role in connecting people to information is being challenged.

The media texts in the dataset show the power of language. Phrases like "PR disaster" and "damage control" can convey the idea that public relations is more about fixing a bad reputation than it is about having candid conversations. In contrast, journalists are seen as investigators and moral adjudicators, as evidenced by three news stories that highlight the interaction between journalism and organisational communication. The cases are: the media

coverage of the United Airlines incident where a passenger was removed (Koenig, 2017, April 12), reporting on Nicky Hager's findings about Defence Force transparency (Armstrong, 2011, September 02), and the analysis of the Southern District Health Board's (SDHB) decision to outsource services (Goodwin, 2015, May 08). Investigative authority is asserted through scrutiny of opaque decision-making, from questioning why United failed to avert a crisis "totally the creation of United", to praising Hager's "assiduous research and inquiries" that "expose" Defence Force misrepresentation, and to the SDHB case, where information "had to be eked out by media inquiries". Journalists play an important role in explaining and analysing corporate messages. For example, United's term "re-accommodate" is seen as a soft way to talk about a crisis. The Defence Force's "candyfloss image" is seen as a way to hide important information, and the DHB's decision is viewed in the context of public doubts about outsourcing. Most importantly, journalists also make moral judgments about these issues. For instance, United's apology is condemned as "sanitised, say-nothing, take-no-responsibility", the Defence Force's behaviour is described as "cynical" and reaching a "nadir" of accountability, and the SDHB's communication is labelled "abysmal" and "grossly unfair".

This power imbalance in language use supports the argument made by Shoemaker and Reese (2013) that journalists have greater authority within social organisations and that practitioners must continually assert their impact. For instance, in a *Stuff* news story about the coverage of the Christchurch rebuild communications campaign (Meier, 2015, July 24), the author blames the failure of public communication on "PR spin". This perspective overlooks the origins of the strategy and its performance. Journalists often blame practitioners and attribute intent to them to demonstrate that they (journalists) defend the truth and hold the public accountable, unlike practitioners, whom they consider to manipulate the truth.

Attribution theory helps explain how journalists maintain a positive moral self-presentation by externalising responsibility for communication failures, often onto practitioners. This tendency is reinforced by social identity dynamics, as journalists draw on in-group favouritism and out-group derogation to protect their professional identity and preserve a sense of ethical superiority (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner, 1978). Journalists see themselves as a group focused on truth and public service (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2011). They see public relations as a separate group that uses strategic persuasion and manages organisational interests (Davis, 2003; Macnamara, 2014; Moloney, 2006). Research in media studies shows that the division between journalism and public relations is central to how journalists understand their role. Studies on boundary work have shown that journalists construct symbolic and professional distinctions to protect their autonomy and authority (Carlson, 2017; Lewis, 2012). According to research on journalistic role perspectives, journalists use comparisons with communicators such as practitioners to define their professional identities, which include truth-telling and serving the public interest (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007). Research specifically on the journalism-public relations relationship further shows that journalists rely on these distinctions when evaluating public relations as an external, strategic, and often distrusted out-group (Davies, 2008; Gandy, 1982; Macnamara, 2014). In this way, attribution and social identification processes work together: journalists support their in-group credibility and defend their place in the larger media power structure by attributing danger, prejudice, or manipulation to the public relations out-group. Journalists often defend their work because they feel their professional reputation is under threat. Their sense of self is closely tied to their job identity, which drives them to react this way. Social identity theory suggests that when a professional group faces perceived threats, its members prioritise self-enhancement and positive distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner, 1978).

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest that institutional power dynamics as well as personal assessments influence how public relations is portrayed in the media. Certain

public relations portrayals are reinforced concurrently by commercial demands, professional norms, symbolic authority, and identity maintenance. This illustrates how larger conflicts over legitimacy and control of public discourse are entwined with the framing of public relations.

6.5 The Recursive Cycle: Institutional Frames and Attribution Feedback

Looking at these interactions together reveals a pattern in how people understand and give meaning to situations. Journalists' views on public relations motives, whether they see them as coming from inside or outside an organisation or as being based on norms or functions, affect how public relations is portrayed in public. These portrayals create frames that, when included in media discussions, support established power structures within the media field, such as journalistic authority over defining newsworthiness, the profession's claim to moral legitimacy, and its historical gatekeeping power in shaping public discourse (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Carlson, 2017; Hanitzsch, 2007). For instance, these ideas influence how the media work and shape what the public expects when journalists blame public relations for unethical behaviour or poor communication. This cycle of perception eventually leads to a lack of trust in the profession. It ensures that future public relations-related events are interpreted through pre-existing schemas—the cognitive structures people use to organise knowledge, guide attention, and interpret new information (Axelrod, 1973; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020). Because they offer pre-made assumptions about a group's behaviour, schemas influence perception via influencing people's attributions of causes and intentions. When journalists begin to question public relations, they may believe there is prejudice or other ulterior motives at work. These perspectives produce filters that can make it more difficult for them to see alternative viewpoints and simpler for them to think negatively (Macnamara, 2014; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). People often use their existing beliefs to justify their actions, especially when they are in a hurry or unsure. Instead of changing their views, they strengthen them (Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985).

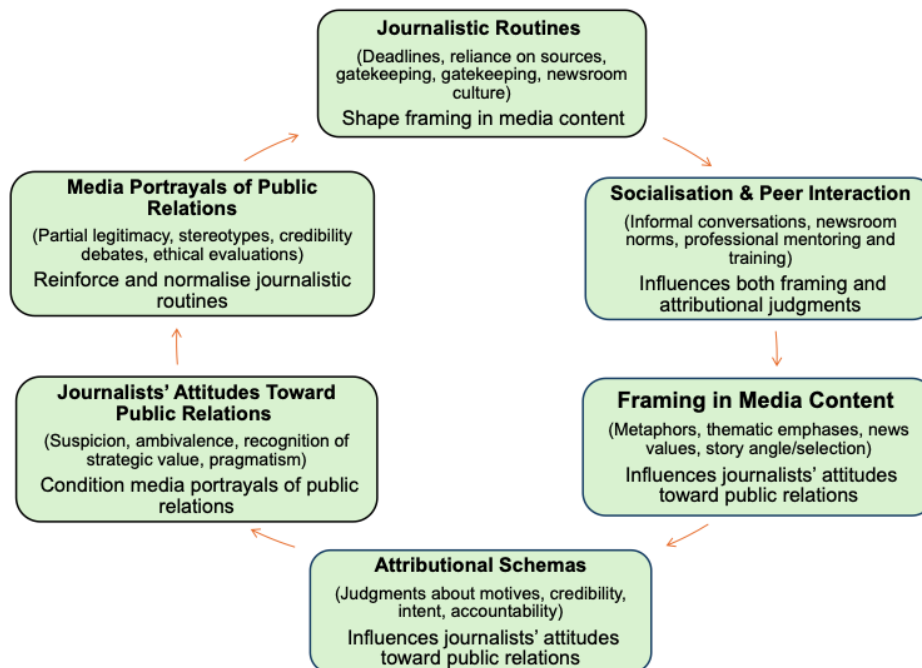
This approach demonstrates how schemas influence journalists' perceptions of practitioners' behaviour, creating a vicious circle of mistrust. As an example of what Scheufele (1999, p. 115) called a "feedback loop" between individual (audience) frames and media frames, these depictions also reinforce journalists' own attitudes and presumptions about the field.

As one interviewee observed, "*PR is in the news most of the time, for damage control or something that went wrong*" (J10). Negative expectations are frequently reinforced by unfavourable news, producing a vicious cycle that influences how subsequent events are interpreted. Repeated exposure to negative frames reinforces pre-existing schemas and raises the possibility that new information will be interpreted negatively (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, 2020; Soroka, 2014; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). This process shows how the issues framed and the blame assigned contribute to a consistent way of understanding situations. The depiction of public relations in times of crisis or conflict illustrates how journalists' biases can affect what is deemed significant news (Eldridge & Franklin, 2016; Vos & Hanusch, 2024).

To illustrate the above-discussed dynamic, Figure 6.1 presents a six-stage cycle that illustrates how journalistic practices connect to social interactions, perceptions, attitudes, framing methods, and media representation. Together, these stages demonstrate the connection between cognitive processes and the established institutional procedures.

From Journalistic Routines to Media Framing: Journalistic routines shape public relations information processing and presentation. To structure their stories, journalists choose material based on particular news values, work under strict deadlines, and rely on reliable or sometimes accessible sources. As Gans (2004) and Shoemaker and Reese (2013) argued, such routines function as institutionalised cognitive shortcuts that influence what becomes news and how it is presented. These practices create hidden ideas about cause and morality (Entman, 1993, 2007), which can cause journalists to view public relations efforts as attempts by organisations to manipulate, plan, or control.

Figure 6.1. The cyclic interplay of journalistic routines, peer socialisation, framing, interpretive schemas, attitudes, and media portrayals shows how these elements shape coverage of public relations and reinforce newsroom norms through a continuous feedback loop



Peer Socialisation (The Informal Reinforcement of Norms): Peer socialisation refers to the informal and formal processes through which journalists learn, reinforce, and negotiate professional norms, values, and expectations by interacting with colleagues (Anderson, 2018; Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado et al., 2017; Ryfe, 2013). Mentoring, collaborative editing, desk conversations, and discussions on journalistic ethics are everyday activities at a newspaper. The current study did not directly examine all aspects of peer socialisation. However, previous research indicates that these interactions play a significant role in shaping journalists' decisions about which stories to cover by helping journalists understand professional boundaries and the reliability of their sources before reporting (Anderson, 2018; Hanitzsch, 2007; Ryfe, 2013). In other words, everyday workplace interactions reinforce shared norms and beliefs about the profession and its boundaries with other communicative actors, including public relations. Including peer socialisation in the model shows that cultural practices in newsrooms, not just official routines, shape how journalists think, which, in turn, affects how the media portrays public relations.

From Peer Socialisation to Framing Practices: The way journalists build their stories is influenced by their interactions with peers as well as other organisational and individual factors such as editorial procedures, organisational conventions, and individual journalist traits (Li et al., 2023; Oni, 2021). A community's sense of what is significant, fascinating, or even dubious is further shaped by cultural cues and shared memories. Journalists often utilise tried-and-tested strategies, such as framing public relations challenges in terms of controlling perception or minimising harm, because of their shared viewpoint. These techniques become tools for assessing public relations events and shape how they narrate these stories to their audience.

Interpretive Schemas (The Cognitive Layer of Attribution): Framing practices and social interactions inform journalists' interpretive schemas, the mental models used to make sense of practitioners' motives and credibility. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985, 2012) helps explain behaviour by showing why certain actions in public relations occur. It examines whether these actions are due to organisational pressure or deliberate misrepresentation. This theory makes it easier to understand complex behaviours by identifying their causes. Entman (2007) described these schemas as essential for maintaining the consistency of framing over time. Once they become established, these schemas influence how new information is understood, strengthening familiar stories about causes and effects.

From Interpretive Schemas to Journalists' Attitudes: Interpretive schemas shape journalists' perceptions of public relations. According to Scheufele (1999), framing strengthens existing beliefs. As a result, journalists often believe their own interpretations are valid. Journalists develop attitudes, from doubt and uncertainty to respect for the strategic role of public relations, based on these long-held habits of interpretation. As noted by Bivins (2009) and Spence et al. (2009), public relations is frequently perceived negatively. These opinions

paint public relations as an outsider with dubious intentions and show enduring moral disparities and boundary preservation.

From Attitudes to Media Portrayals: Journalists' attitudes influence the tone, structure, selection, and sourcing of news stories. Journalists who are sceptical of public relations may focus on organisations' motives or point out potential manipulation. In contrast, those who recognise the strategic role of public relations may see practitioners as essential mediators. These portrayals are influenced by cognitive and emotional factors and institutional norms, creating a mediated image of public relations that fluctuates between ambivalence and critique.

From Media Portrayals Back to Journalistic Routines and Socialisation: Media portrayals feed back into the professional environment. Newsrooms' perception of public relations is altered when it is seen as dubious or unduly strategic. Selective sourcing is widespread as a result of this effect on editorial decisions. Reese's (2001) idea of framing explains how interactions link the structural and cognitive aspects of media production. Widely accepted depictions reinforce the routines and social interactions that initiated the cycle, thereby sustaining scepticism towards public relations and preserving journalism's credibility.

All things considered, this six-stage recursive structure explains why public relations media portrayals have mainly remained consistent over time. Larger discursive structures, such as how journalists frame and present information, collaborate with individual-level cognitive processes, such as how they assign causes and employ interpretive frameworks. Peer interactions and professional routines create a feedback loop that maintains journalistic standards and fosters ongoing scepticism of public relations.

6.6 Summary

This chapter has synthesised the findings from both the media portrayals (Chapter 4) and journalists' perceptions (Chapter 5) to examine how framing and attribution processes

converge to shape the public image of public relations in New Zealand. By integrating the two analytical lenses, this chapter shows that media portrayals of public relations are not just simple descriptions of what happens in the field. Instead, they reflect deeper issues related to individual thinking, institutional, power-based dynamics, and the discursive traditions within journalism. Journalists and practitioners have different roles and views of each other. Journalists often see themselves as more knowledgeable and ethical, which gives them the power to judge and sometimes overlook public relations efforts. At the same time, practitioners need to explain and defend their influence constantly (Davis, 2003; Gandy, 1982, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). As a result, framing and attribution are entwined not just with routines and thinking processes but also with asymmetrical professional judgments (evaluating practitioners based on presumptions about their motivations rather than the quality of their communication) and hierarchies that influence professional relationships.

At the cognitive level, journalists interpret public relations through attributional logics, influencing their perceptions of practitioners' motives, intent, credibility, and moral legitimacy. As the interview data revealed, journalists often ascribe self-serving or strategic intent to public relations activities, interpreting them through schemas of manipulation or control rather than sharing information. These judgments, in turn, inform the frames of meaning that journalists employ in their reporting. By examining the interplay between attribution and framing, this analysis shows that journalists actively influence how public relations is perceived as an arena of ethical and professional debate, instead of just reflecting what happens in the world.

The analysis found that the way framing and attribution connect is influenced by the power difference between journalism and public relations (at least in traditional news media). Bourdieu's field theory shows that media outlets and journalists play a key role in shaping what people think is important or credible. They do this by deciding which stories to cover

and how to present them. This choice affects the legitimacy of different viewpoints about public relations in public discussions. This situation is more complex today with social media and online platforms. Now, practitioners can reach their audiences directly, without going through traditional gatekeepers. They can also take part in creating stories and messages. While differences in power help in understanding traditional newsroom practices, one should also consider how public relations plays a larger, more interactive role in digital media today. Journalists often view public relations as a reactive field. It is sometimes used as a persuasive tool rather than as a means of active participation. This representational imbalance is heightened by attributional bias, where journalists blame practitioners for ethical mistakes while asserting their role as independent truth-tellers.

The language employed in journalism mainly shapes public relations impressions in the absence of a compelling professional counter-narrative. Public relations is rarely discussed in media coverage as a profession with established ethics and community responsibilities. Instead, it is often portrayed as morally dubious or in crisis settings. This shows a recurring framing-attribution cycle: how journalists perceive public relations influences how they describe it, and those portrayals, once widely accepted, reinforce the perceptions that shaped them. Notably, the analysis identified moments where journalists reflected on their work and redefined their relationship with public relations. Some journalists recognised that public relations is becoming more professional and is important for public communication, especially when sharing complex information. Those more balanced attributions (though still limited) show a growing recognition that journalism and public relations can and do rely on each other. Macnamara (2016) and Johnston (2018) argued that reflecting on this relationship can rebuild trust and communication between the two fields.

This chapter demonstrates the connection between the way the media portrays public relations and journalists' perceptions. The patterns in Figure 6.1 show that negative or mixed views of public relations are not random. Instead, the patterns are found in journalism as a

result of a complex system that includes standard practices, attitudes, ways of thinking among journalists, and shared organisational constraints. These characteristics do not seem to be specific to any one newspaper or platform, but rather are present in a variety of news outlets. Journalists frequently view public relations unfavourably because of tight deadlines, reliance on official sources, business interests, and the professional culture that encourages scepticism toward external communicators. Journalists often view public relations with scepticism, which, over time, shapes their beliefs about the field and strengthens their existing perceptions. This ongoing process shows how framing and attribution work together to maintain professional boundaries and power structures.

This chapter looks at how personal decision-making about intent and credibility connects to the collective media stories that form. This chapter uses case studies to illustrate how attributing purpose and framing stories creates main narratives that highlight some voices while sidelining others, influencing public discussions. The findings indicate that public relations operates in a complex environment in which professionals from both fields depend on and compete for influence. In this setting, they constantly negotiate about power, credibility and ethics.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.0 Overview and Revisiting the Research Objectives

This concluding chapter discusses how the study's key findings fit into broader discussions of the relationship between media and public relations. The chapter also considers the implications of these findings for public relations theory and practice, as well as for debates about professionalism and ethical standards in the public relations profession, making explicit how journalistic perceptions shape, challenge, or reinforce these areas. It revisits the research aims, draws together insights from both thematic strands, namely, journalistic perceptions and media portrayals, and proposes directions for future research and practice.

The primary objective of this study was to examine how New Zealand news media portray public relations. It also investigated how these representations relate to journalists' perceptions of the field. This study utilised framing theory and attribution theory to examine how the media portrays public relations and how journalists perceive its role, value, authority, and legitimacy. It explored how cognitive, relational, institutional, and cultural factors shape these perceptions. In addressing this aim, three interrelated research questions guided the analysis:

- RQ1. How is public relations portrayed in New Zealand news media coverage?
- RQ2. How do New Zealand news media journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners?
- RQ3. What are the sources of New Zealand news media journalists' perceptions of public relations and its practitioners?

To address these questions, the study used a qualitative approach that combined news stories analysis with semi-structured interviews of journalists. This two-tiered method linked news portrayals to journalists' perceptions, revealing how they create meaning in their

reporting and how this influences their professional identity, particularly concerning public relations.

The previous chapters highlighted key themes: negative and sensational views of public relations (such as seeing it as a 'disaster', 'hype', or 'distraction'), the ongoing impact of the press agency model, and the common practice of journalists blaming public relations for organisational crises rather than examining larger systemic issues. Findings from the interviews revealed that journalists have ambivalent attitudes toward public relations: they recognise it as an essential source of information yet harbour scepticism about its intentions, perceiving it as a calculated method of persuasion and manipulation. Chapter 6 discussed how journalists' perceptions of public relations are influenced by, and in turn influence, news stories. It illustrated a cycle in which journalists' cognitive frameworks can shape the narratives they produce.

This chapter consolidates these insights and builds on them in three areas. First, it explains how the findings can affect journalists' perceptions and portrayals of public relations. Second, it considers the practical impacts on journalists, practitioners, and organisations such as PRINZ. Finally, it identifies future research directions that could further examine the cultural and structural factors influencing these interprofessional perceptions and portrayals.

7.1 Theoretical Implications: Rethinking Framing, Attribution, and Identity in Media-Public Relations Relationships

This study indicates how framing and attribution processes intersect to shape public understanding of communication fields such as public relations. By bringing these two frameworks together within a single interpretive design, the research offers a novel explanation for the persistence of negative portrayals of public relations in the media and journalists' sceptical attitudes. This approach shows how journalists create meaning through framing and explains why attribution reasoning makes specific viewpoints more accepted. Additionally, this study incorporates social identity theory to show how journalists'

professional duties can be shaped by their group identities. Belonging to a specific group both alienates practitioners and reinforces their identity as journalists, influencing how they construct stories and assign blame.

7.1.1 Framing as an Interpretive System

Researchers, such as Goffman (1974), Scheufele (1999), Entman (1993, 2007), and Almakaty (2025), claim that framing theory looks at how the media emphasises specific aspects of reality, which can affect how people perceive problems, their causes, moral judgements, and behaviours. It is about how the stories and images people see can affect their perspectives and responses to the world around them. This study shows that journalists' framing of public relations concerns, such as 'disaster', 'distraction', or 'spin', serves to define moral and professional boundaries rather than to provide objective descriptions. In contrast to practitioners, whom journalists perceive and present as manipulators, these frameworks enable journalists to demonstrate their ethical independence as truth-seekers. According to social identity theory, this framing reflects a divide between groups, as journalists see themselves as part of a specific group and view practitioners as outsiders (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Brewer, 1999; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004). This perspective helps journalists defend their role and status in the field of communication by criticising outsiders. As a result, there is a power imbalance in how communication is filtered and authorised for public consumption.

This result suggests that framing is not just a way to communicate, but also a way to express identity (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Van Gorp, 2007). When journalists use opposing or challenging frames, they build a professional identity based on independence and accountability (Carlson, 2017; Deuze, 2005). By demonstrating how journalists use their social identity to assert control over public relations, framing fortifies group ties (Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). This image plays an important cultural role by questioning public relations practices and bolstering the credibility of journalists. According to Gitlin

(2003), the way narratives are presented in the media can uphold professional authority and status disparities. Journalists frequently blame and criticise practitioners to improve their group's cohesion and sense of superiority; these processes of social identity validate such blaming behaviours and strengthen peer alignment, common professional values, and the maintenance of boundaries within the journalism community.

7.1.2 Attribution as a Cognitive Mechanism

Attribution theory, developed by Heider in 1958, extended by Kelley in 1973, and further developed by Weiner in 1985 and 2012, is used to explain how journalists decide how to frame news stories. It helps explain how they determine motives, assign blame, and evaluate events. When journalists report on organisational crises, they instinctively try to identify causes and determine who is responsible. The study examines how crises, such as the Team New Zealand issue and the United Airlines tragedy, are covered by the media. It demonstrates how media frequently hold the public relations team accountable for mistakes, even when the real culpability is elsewhere (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

This pattern illustrates what Coombs and Holladay (2007) described in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a process in which people perceive someone as responsible and the degree to which they attribute the cause to internal factors, such as intention or competence, results in stronger negative opinions. Using phrases like "PR disaster" and "the PR person strikes the match" (Crabb, 2017, April 16), journalists frequently attribute problems to practitioners. Public relations is often associated with deceit and manipulation (Miller & Dinan, 2008; Moloney, 2006; Spicer, 1993). The inclination of journalists to prefer their own group can be understood through social identity theory. They often think their professional standards are better and blame those outside their group. This attitude can lead to less self-reflection and a defensive mindset (Brewer, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004).

Attribution theory provides the psychological rationale for framing practices. It explains why public relations initiatives are frequently criticised by journalists, even when the real causes of reputational crises are found in other organisational decision-making domains. These patterns show what Weiner (2012) called “motivated attributions” (p. 55), which means that people interpret causes and assign blame based on their existing beliefs and expectations about their roles. Social identity also plays a role in this: people tend to be less critical of their own biases when they are part of an in-group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001).

7.1.3 The Framing-Attribution Nexus

The relationship between attribution and framing is seen in Figure 6.1. In addition to influencing how the public perceives events and who is held accountable, attributions help explain their causes. The persistence of the press agency stereotype and the prevalence of unfavourable portrayals in various media can be explained by this relationship. Even though public relations has improved over the years by focusing on dialogue, transparency, mutual understanding, and stakeholder engagement (Grunig & Grunig, 2013; Heath, 2001; Leitch & Motion, 2010; Macnamara, 2014), the way journalists tell stories still draws on old propaganda ideas. Attribution processes perpetuate this bias by assigning moral and causal responsibility for communication failures to the profession itself.

Broader societal discussions, such as debates on corporate influence, media ethics, propaganda, and public trust, also shape journalists’ perceptions (Ragone, 2023; Tam & Kim, 2025). This interaction between societal debates and journalistic social identity demonstrates how journalists’ social identity and professional prejudices interact with attribution and framing, magnifying unfavourable opinions and reinforcing power disparities between journalism and public relations (Brewer, 1999; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004).

7.1.4 Social Identity Dynamics in Journalism-Public Relations Interactions

Social identity theory provides a critical lens for understanding in-group/out-group dynamics between journalists and practitioners (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004; Turner et al., 1987). Journalists see themselves as part of a group that seeks the truth and serves the public. In contrast, practitioners are often viewed as outsiders who engage in manipulation or spin (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Brewer, 1999). This dynamic influences both framing and attribution: (a) journalists' in-group identity leads them to highlight ethical and moral differences, which boosts their professional reputation (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007); (b) additionally, they often show negative views of public relations, even when there is no evidence to support these negative opinions (Carlson, 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2019); and (c) social identity processes make it harder for journalists to reflect on their work critically. Admitting mistakes could damage their sense of belonging to their group and lower their self-esteem as professionals (Brewer, 1999; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 2001). In essence, social identity mechanisms explain why negative perceptions and assumptions persist and why journalists tend to be defensive instead of thoughtful. Additionally, these mechanisms help to maintain professional boundaries by consistently highlighting differences between groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004).

7.1.5 Reframing Public Relations in Communication Theory

By combining these two theoretical lenses, this study also contributes to ongoing efforts to reframe public relations as a socially constructive and dialogic practice, as outlined in this section. The evidence in Chapters 4 to 6 indicates that public relations is often depicted as a reactive or manipulative function, while its advisory and ethical dimensions remain underrepresented. Such portrayals suggest what Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) referred to as "narrative hegemony" (p. 15), the dominant ways of interpreting things that favour some professional identities over others. Combining social identity theory and attribution theory

helps in understanding the mental processes that maintain these hierarchies. When journalists blame crises on poor public relations management, they shift the blame away from the organisation. This action reinforces the moral ranking between journalists and practitioners. Recognising this attributional bias can create opportunities for a more constructive dialogue between journalists and practitioners. Journalists and practitioners can work together by recognising that negative images often result from patterns of blaming rather than individual acts. They can agree on important goals, such as transparency and serving the public interest. This understanding could promote cooperation in deciphering complex material, minimise misconceptions, and jointly develop communication strategies that respect ethical standards. In this sense, public relations can be viewed as a helpful ally that promotes the appropriate exchange of information in a democratic society rather than as a competitor to journalism (Grunig & Grunig, 2013; Heath, 2001).

7.1.6 Toward a Multi-Theoretical Framework for Communication Studies

Finally, by blending structural and cognitive approaches, the framing-attribution synthesis in this study provides a more precise explanation of the complex processes through which journalists frame public relations, assign responsibility and intent, and reproduce professional boundaries that shape the public legitimacy of the field, responding to the growing demand among researchers for the use of interdisciplinary frameworks in communication research, as noted by D'Angelo (2002), Entman (1993, 2007), and Reese (2001, 2007). It connects how the media represent public relations issues to the psychological and institutional dynamics at play. By placing journalistic perception and media representation under a common analytical framework, this study provides a contextual model of meaning-making that may be used across a variety of mediated communication settings. The model can be applied, for instance, to political journalism to explain how the public's view of politicians' actions or policy choices is influenced by journalists' attributional reasoning and framing decisions. It can shed light on how the media interprets organisational reactions and places responsibility in crisis communication, which

can influence the public perceptions of the organisation's reliability and accountability. In the context of public diplomacy, the framework can shed light on how journalists' professional norms, prejudices, and identification processes influence how foreign governments or international initiatives are portrayed in the media. In corporate reputation management, this model can show how journalists' viewpoints influence how the media portrays businesses. These portrayals can affect the level of trust stakeholders have in a brand and how legitimate it appears to be. Using social identity theory helps explain how differences in power between groups can shape professional authority in public settings. These differences can support or challenge that authority. This understanding adds value to both public relations and media theory (Brewer, 1999; Hanitzsch, 2007; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, 2004).

7.2 Practical and Professional Implications: Towards a Reflective Media-Public Relations Interface

The study's conclusions have important ramifications for how journalists perceive public relations and its practitioners and how these perceptions influence how the field is portrayed in the media. Rather than direct recommendations empirically supported by the data alone, the implications for practice are intended to be interpretive and theory-informed suggestions derived from the broader patterns observed in the study.

7.2.1 Reframing Journalism's Perceptual Lens

The study emphasises the importance of paying closer attention to the language and framing journalists use when discussing public relations. Phrases such as 'PR stunt' or 'spin doctor' simplify complex organisational issues and implicitly position journalists as impartial observers, reinforcing the perception that their own reporting is objective. By portraying public relations as the manipulative or strategic actor, journalists create a contrast that suggests their own work is ethical, independent, and fact-driven, even though media production often involves negotiation and collaboration with various communicators (Zelizer,

2004). Understanding the relationship between teamwork and communication shows how modern communication works without exaggerating the extent to which teamwork contributes to objectivity. Recognising this helps promote a deeper understanding of both disciplines.

This study demonstrates that journalists can benefit from emotional reflection, as emphasised by Wahl-Jorgensen (2020): by recognising the ethical and emotional factors in their reporting, journalists can confront their biases and question the belief that public relations campaigns are inherently deceitful. This deeper understanding can enhance honest journalism without compromising autonomy, leading to a more nuanced view of strategic communication in democratic discourse.

Professional journalism education could integrate modules on strategic communication literacy, exposing emerging journalists to the principles of ethical public relations and the organisational contexts in which communicators operate. Such education would align with Macnamara's (2016) call for curricula that prepare journalists to engage critically, but not cynically, with other communicative actors in the public sphere.

7.2.2 Reclaiming Professional Legitimacy in Public Relations

The study emphasises the importance for practitioners to embrace openness, maintain strong ethical standards, and utilise evidence-based advocacy to build trust, especially in the face of media scepticism. It is interesting to note that, according to attribution theory, journalists often associate public relations with dishonesty or only showing up during a crisis. These perceptions create practical challenges for practitioners: they may struggle to have routine communications taken seriously, to have their messages scrutinised more closely, or to have their expertise discounted. A straightforward and open approach to sharing timely information can improve public relations. Additionally, by presenting clear evidence and engaging regularly, practitioners can counter negative perceptions, thereby helping ensure that the media accurately conveys public relations messages.

One strategy emerging from this study is for the practitioners to actively communicate the advisory, relational, and analytical functions of public relations rather than only its promotional outputs (Dottori et al., 2018; Kim & Reber, 2008; Udir et al., 2025). By emphasising how they engage with stakeholders, contribute to corporate responsibility, connect with communities, and communicate policy, practitioners can slowly shift journalists' views of their work from mere public relations spin to a thoughtful strategy.

The findings of this study suggest that professional associations can play a pivotal role in bridging the divide between journalists and practitioners. For instance, PRINZ has organised panel discussions and seminars that brought journalists and practitioners together to explore best practices in media relations and ethical communication (PRINZ, n.d.). Such initiatives demonstrate associations' capacity to create structured opportunities for dialogue, supporting the recommendation that enhanced collaboration can improve mutual understanding and professional trust. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that there is limited systematic evidence regarding the long-term impact of these events. Results such as long-term shifts in professional perceptions, increased trust, or less negative media portrayals of public relations are still largely unmeasured.

Therefore, rather than being conclusive proof of long-term collaboration or change in media-public relations interactions, these examples are provided as illustrative of possible tactics. Facilitating collaboration on important issues will help journalists and practitioners address disinformation and transparency challenges during crises. This type of collaboration will not only improve their news production procedures but also contribute to a more informed public discourse. When combined, these initiatives would be consistent with Macnamara's (2018) communication ecology approach. Instead of seeing media and public relations as rivals fighting for control of stories, this method sees them as working together within a standard information system.

7.2.3 Bridging Perceptual Asymmetry Through Dialogue

The attributional asymmetry identified in this study, where journalists disproportionately attribute intent and blame to public relations, reflects a relational communication gap. This perceptual asymmetry occurs when one group of professionals views another group in a biased way. Journalists often see practitioners as manipulative or self-serving. Practitioners frequently perceive journalists as sensationalists or overly constrained by their media organisations (Cvjetković et al., 2023; McAllister, 2012). According to Jo (2003) and Serrano-Puche et al. (2023), the communication industry becomes less confident and confused as a result of the significant impact that divergent opinions have on news articles and how different positions are seen. To close the gap, both journalists and practitioners need to work together and communicate clearly. They can use training programmes with case studies to evaluate news events, understand how stories are framed, and consider ethical choices. For instance, analysing media coverage of corporate crises or political scandals reveals how blame can be assigned in different ways. It can also highlight ways to reduce misunderstandings through transparent information-sharing and shared responsibility.

Campaigns emphasising the advantages of strategic communication for society, such as its functions in community involvement, crisis management, health promotion, and sustainability advocacy, could be organised by professional bodies such as PRINZ. Even if these projects have substantial potential impact, it is crucial to acknowledge practical limitations, including organisational capacity, funding, and the availability of qualified staff to plan and execute long-term campaigns. However, simple actions, such as focused seminars, panel discussions, or storytelling projects, can help change how people think about public relations. These initiatives can shift attitudes from seeing public relations as manipulation to viewing it as a way to build trust and mediate discussions (Obasi, 2024; Russ-Mohl, 2015).

7.2.4 Institutional and Policy-Level Considerations

At a broader institutional level, the findings call for rethinking media governance and industry policy frameworks that influence how communication professions interact. Media organisations, for instance, could benefit from having clear guidelines about what qualifies as legitimate public relations versus hidden promotional content. Being open about these distinctions can foster ethical practices and maintain trust.

Likewise, public sector communication guidelines could emphasise the dual accountability of communicators, to both organisational goals and the public interest, making explicit that ethical public relations aligns with democratic transparency. Heath's (2010) theory of a fully functional society is consistent with these policy viewpoints. This notion, which offers a valuable perspective on public relations, implies that public relations facilitates the discussion of diverse viewpoints. In the public domain, this method promotes understanding and helps identify points of agreement.

7.2.5 Academic-Professional Synergy

Finally, the study advocates for ongoing communication between academia and the two professional fields. Studies that incorporate framing and attribution theory offer conceptual resources for both sectors to assess their interpretive practices (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Weiner, 1985, 2012). Academic institutions can be relatively neutral spaces where journalists, practitioners, and lawmakers meet to talk about public trust and communication ethics (Reese, 2007; Zelizer, 2004). Although political influences do exist in universities and research institutions, their focus on scholarship, evidence-based discourse, and methodological rigour permits more balanced discourse than could be achievable in commercial newsrooms or organisational settings (Deuze, 2005; Tuchman, 1978). These settings help lessen prejudice and miscommunication among professional groups by encouraging critical thinking, learning across professions, and analysing other points of view (Giddens, 1984; Pfeffer, 1993).

Embedding such collaboration into professional and higher education curricula can help future communicators develop a nuanced understanding of interprofessional ethics, framing, and attribution. According to Ihlen and Fredriksson (2018), it helps develop the ability to comprehend communication from both ethical and strategic viewpoints. Building trust is becoming more difficult in the complex communication environment of today. Professional gatekeeping has been undermined by the demise of traditional media, which has fewer resources for fact-checking and investigative reporting. Public views of bias and inaccuracy are exacerbated by the emergence of digital and social media, which frequently lack uniform verification standards, as well as financial strain on traditional media institutions. When taken together, these elements increase audience scepticism and lower public confidence in media and communication professionals. Understanding different viewpoints is necessary to address these issues.

To summarise, the findings suggest that encouraging greater reflection on how attributional assumptions and professional norms may shape journalistic interpretations of public relations is valuable. The findings also indicate that reflective engagement with professional assumptions and interpretive routines may support more balanced evaluation of strategic communication practices. By doing this, journalists can provide a fairer and more balanced perspective. At the same time, practitioners must continue to build transparent and socially responsible communication practices that embody the ethical ideals often lacking in their media image. To bridge these gaps in understanding, professions need to have open and ongoing conversations. It is essential to share knowledge, work together in decision-making, and make changes to their institutions. This way, they can see communication as a teamwork effort rather than a conflict.

While open and ongoing dialogue between the professions can be beneficial, it is only one of many tools and not the sole solution. These conversations might reveal disagreements and differences in priorities between the groups. Additionally, not all journalists or practitioners

may want to participate. Historically, as also in the current study, interviews suggest that journalists often primarily seek support from practitioners to achieve their own reporting goals, and this dynamic has persisted. Therefore, efforts to improve understanding and cooperation need to be grounded in realistic expectations, recognising structural and incentive-based barriers that shape interactions. Communication should be approached as a complex, negotiated process, in which collaboration may occur in some areas but does not fully resolve underlying conflicts or professional asymmetries.

7.3 Methodological Reflections, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

This section outlines how the study's design and findings enhance public relations research methods and theories, addresses limitations, and suggests areas for future research. It builds on the integrative insights developed in this chapter on how journalists' perceptions can influence and be influenced by the media's portrayal of public relations in New Zealand's small, democratic media system. It combines ideas from framing and attribution theories to explain this relationship.

7.3.1 Methodological Reflections and Contributions

Methodically, this study combines two different methods to analyse information: examining news texts and interpreting interview transcripts. Examining how the media frames stories alongside journalists' reasoning helps understand the connection between how public relations is portrayed in the media and how it is perceived during news production. This dual approach offers deeper insights into the relationship between public relations and journalism. This approach moves beyond one-directional models of media influence, showing that portrayals of public relations emerge from a cyclical interplay between institutional routines, cognitive schemata, discursive practices, and relational dynamics.

In theoretical terms, this study advances communication scholarship by demonstrating that combining attribution and framing theories helps explain how journalists form their

perceptions of public relations. It also describes how these perceptions can shape how news stories portray public relations. The analysis shows that journalists and practitioners play different but interdependent roles in the communication landscape. However, this characterisation reflects only the journalists' perspective, as the data were drawn from journalistic accounts. From this viewpoint, journalists position themselves as maintaining independence and objectivity, while casting public relations as a strategic outsider. These views can have a disproportionate impact on how public relations is defined, how its actions are described, and how its legitimacy is assessed within the media system, because journalists also have primary control over news portrayal. Recent research has begun to recognise the potential of such hybrid explanatory models (Ragone, 2023; Tam & Kim, 2025), yet few studies have empirically operationalised this integration. The framework used in this study to understand how the presentation of information influences the attribution of responsibility can be applied to other areas of communication, especially in crisis response and reputation management.

This study examines how the media and public relations interact in New Zealand, providing a new viewpoint on these connections in nations with more concentrated or comparable media markets. It reveals how participants perceived the media-public relations landscape in New Zealand as being influenced by its small size, scarce resources, and overlapping professional networks. While this study does not offer a direct comparative analysis with other countries, the interview data indicate that journalists themselves perceive the small population and close professional circles as contributing to patterns of both reliance and scepticism in their interactions with public relations. These impressions imply that frequent cross-role interactions and interpersonal acquaintance are unique aspects of the local communication environment for journalists. Such contexts magnify the relational paradox at the heart of journalism-public relations interaction. It is a mix of working together out of necessity, but there is also a lingering sense of distrust stemming from deep-rooted beliefs within each profession.

7.3.2 Study's Contribution to Knowledge

This study advances public relations and media studies scholarship in three key ways:

Theoretical Integration: This study enhances existing media-framing models by connecting them to journalists' attributional reasoning about practitioners' actions and motives.

Research indicates that how journalists view practitioners' motives can affect their choice of stories and how they assign blame, based on whether they see the motives as strategic, defensive, or self-serving (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1994; Weiner, 2006). News coverage is influenced by the personal interpretations and professional standards that journalists use to craft their stories. This connection between individual thinking and general journalism practices has been emphasised by earlier research (Reese, 2007; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). These repeated ways of depicting events help to define the roles and differences between public relations and journalism over time (Carlson, 2017; Davis, 2003; Zelizer, 1993, 2004).

Contextual Expansion: This study places media-public relations relationships in the context of a small democratic system, where journalists are more dependent on public relations materials due to a lack of newsroom resources, and the small market's close professional networks encourage familiarity and regular interaction without necessarily lessening the underlying scepticism rooted in journalistic norms and identity. The findings are inherently situated within the professional, institutional, and cultural context of the New Zealand media environment, and are interpreted as reflecting New Zealand media conditions. The contextual significance, therefore, lies in analysing perceptions and portrayals emerging from New Zealand's unique media and cultural landscape.

These insights, however, can enhance theories that are typically based on studies conducted in large markets, such as research on media-public relations power dynamics in the United States (Davis, 2003; Gandy, 1992), source-media dependency in the United Kingdom (Franklin, 2017; Lewis et al., 2008), and newsroom-public relations interactions in

Australia and Europe (Macnamara, 2014; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013), by suggesting how these relationships operate differently within small, resource-constrained media systems. This study does not say that media systems in small democracies have special ways to establish their legitimacy. The results suggest that some features of small media systems can affect how well-known media theories fit in this context. These features do not change the basic processes identified in larger market studies, but they do impact how strong, visible, and practical these processes are.

Methodological Innovation: The dual-source design, combining textual and perceptual data, provides a replicable framework for future cross-national comparisons. It allows researchers to follow the flow of interpretive logics between individuals (journalists) and institutions (news organisations and media systems), demonstrating how media content both influences and is influenced by journalists' perceptions of public relations (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Reese, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). This approach shows how news frames connect with journalists' reasoning. It illustrates how repeated representations help strengthen professional hierarchies and influence how public relations is viewed in the communication field. It draws attention to the connection between institutions' practices and how individuals see themselves, ultimately helping create lasting stories in this profession (Carlson, 2017; Davis, 2003; Zelizer, 1993, 2004). It also emphasises how power relations between journalism and public relations are both upheld and challenged.

7.3.3 Study Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, it also has a few limitations that shape its empirical scope and suggest areas for future research.

First, the study analysed 103 news stories from three significant national publications, namely, *The NZ Herald*, *Stuff*, and *Otago Daily Times*, published between 2011 and 2023 for media content. Because they present a variety of perspectives, news organisations are vital

in influencing public opinion. While there are advantages to print and online news media, one can learn how different storytelling techniques affect news presentation by investigating alternative media, such as radio, television, and social media, and how these media influence public perception and the overall story. This study did not look at how different media platforms affect message credibility or the visibility of public relations. However, previous research shows that using multiple formats, such as combining images, sound, and text, can help people remember messages better and see them as more credible (Binet & Field, 2013). Future research could compare how different platforms and their combinations affect the visibility and perception of public relations in today's media landscape (Gurevitch et al., 2009; Malthouse et al., 2016).

Second, the study included 21 interviews with journalists. This part of the research added depth and valuable insights, which align with standard practices in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Nevertheless, future studies could incorporate practitioners' perspectives to capture the bidirectional dynamics of the relationship. Incorporating this would aid in elucidating disparities in perception and identifying instances of collaboration or conflict (Bhadra, 2024; Macnamara, 2016).

Third, the study is subject to the usual limits of online qualitative data collection because the majority of interviews were conducted via Zoom due to fieldwork constraints. Previous research (e.g., Anthony et al., 2025; Gray et al., 2020; Guest et al., 2020) has shown that videoconference interviews can result in less comprehensive information than in-person interviews, make it harder to recognise nonverbal cues, and cause technical issues. While the video format enabled access to geographically dispersed participants and reduced costs, these trade-offs should be considered when interpreting the findings. Using in-person interviews in future projects would improve understanding of the context of the data collected (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). This is especially important while examining emotions or space dynamics in journalism.

Fourth, the lexical scope of the media analysis focused deliberately on the terms 'PR' and 'public relations' to maintain continuity with previous studies and capture established stereotypes (Macnamara, 2016; Miller & Dinan, 2008; Moloney, 2006). This approach has highlighted some clear patterns of negative and mixed messaging.

Interestingly, using terms like 'communications' or 'corporate affairs' could shed light on how language changes relate to professional rebranding and the way identities are shaped within organisations, a reminder of how the chosen words can reflect more profound changes in the way an organisation sees itself and interacts with the world (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2014; Shen & Jiang, 2013).

7.3.4 Directions for Future Research

The above-identified limitations have been identified as opportunities to expand on this study's insights. Four key avenues for further exploration emerge:

Cross-Professional Studies: Interviews with both journalists and practitioners who participate in shared communication events, such as political campaigns or crisis responses, may be included in future research. A greater understanding of how professionals think and negotiate in conversation can be gained by looking at how different groups distribute intent, accountability, and credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Macnamara, 2016; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011).

Cross-Media and Cross-National Comparisons: Incorporating broadcast, social media, and online-native (born-digital) platforms that produce journalism exclusively for the internet into future research could help in understanding how different media environments shape how public relations is perceived and trusted. Additionally, future research could compare how the relationships between media and public relations work in big versus small democracies. For instance, differences in size, newsroom resources, professional networks, and political communication cultures may affect the degree of trust journalists have in practitioners (Hallin

& Mancini, 2004; Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022). Researchers can maintain certain important elements, such as press freedom and accountability, by studying democracies (Norris, 2011). Due to this consistency, it is easier to understand how variations in structure and culture, such as size and resources, influence the interaction between public relations and the media. Research in large democracies, such as the US and UK, has shown strong relationships between public relations and the media (Davis, 2003; Gandy, 1992). Comparing this with smaller media systems can help in understanding how these relationships differ.

Longitudinal and Experimental Designs: Experimental attribution models (Coombs & Holladay, 2007) or longitudinal content analysis (Matthes, 2009) can be used in future studies to explore the evolution of framing and perception. Audience-based experiments could, for instance, examine how different levels of transparency or source disclosure affect attributions of trustworthiness and credibility in public relations content, as disclosure of cues has been demonstrated to influence perceived credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2017; Messing & Westwood, 2014).

Interdisciplinary and Policy-Oriented Approaches: Integrating insights from policy studies, cognitive psychology, and media sociology can enhance models of trust in public communication. Research into media policy looks at how various elements, like rules about transparency, the standards for professional credentials, ethical principles, and the practices of journalists, influence how public relations is viewed in democratic societies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Napoli, 2023). Cognitive theories suggest that presentation and interpretation of information influence its trustworthiness perceived by audiences and experts (Entman, 1993; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Weiner, 1985). Media-sociological studies (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Gandy, 1982; Waisbord, 2013) show how people's views on professional legitimacy are affected by established practices, efforts to define boundaries, and current inequalities in media systems.

By integrating attribution and framing theories with qualitative data to examine journalists' perceptions of public relations, this study presents a compelling approach. Although the focus was on the specific context of the media system in New Zealand, the lessons learnt are applicable in other contexts. To gain a deeper knowledge of how journalists and practitioners co-construct meaning, legitimacy, transparency norms, and credibility within the changing ecology of public communication, future studies might build on this conceptual framework.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

12 December 2022

Project Title

Media Portrayal of Public Relations in New Zealand.

Introduction of the Researcher

My name is Daljit Singh Bedi and I am a PhD researcher at AUT University. I had more than 15 years of experience as a public relations practitioner in India before I immigrated to New Zealand in 2019. I recently completed my Master's in Communication Studies from AUT University with my thesis focused on the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists involved in media relations.

An Invitation

As part of the current research, I will be conducting interviews with senior journalists in New Zealand to learn more about how they regard the public relations industry. As you are an accomplished journalist, I would like to cordially invite you to take part in a 40-minute interview with me regarding your opinion of the public relations industry and public relations practitioners.

The questions will focus on your perceptions of public relations, your relationship with public relations practitioners, and your expectations from them. Your perspectives, experiences, and thoughts on this matter would be very helpful to the media research, with the findings anticipated to focus on areas that can help both public relations practitioners and journalists like you improve interactions with each other in the overall process of providing timely, accurate, and unbiased news.

Please take the time to carefully read this Information Sheet's contents before deciding whether to participate in this study.

What is the purpose of this research?

A constructive relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners is essential to practising public relations since it promotes information flows that become the news of the day. Perceptions of public relations can have an impact on the profession's perceived credibility and value to society. As a result, it is important to understand how journalists define public relations and use the term in news reporting. Examining how public relations is portrayed in the news media can give a better understanding of how the term public relations and its profession are perceived.

The current study intends to understand the variables that affect the interactions between journalists and public relations practitioners and may in turn influence how the public relations industry is portrayed in the media. The research will explore news reports on public relations and interview journalists on their perceptions of public relations.

Besides the thesis to be submitted to AUT University, the findings of this research may also be used for academic publications and presentations related to this research work.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

The research has been designed to interview 20 journalists having more than five years of experience as journalists working for the leading news outlets in New Zealand. I found your contact details through a Google search. I understand that you have relevant experience and that your being an accomplished journalist will make you an ideal candidate for the research interview.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Once you have decided on your participation in this research, you need to sign the Consent Form.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will be offered the choice between having any data identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

This research uses interviews as one of the methods of data collection. One 40-minute interview will be conducted over Zoom or in person (as per your convenience) and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview will take place at your place of work, or any other location you prefer. The transcript will then be examined to ensure that all of the important information has been captured. The transcript will not contain any information about you that would allow you to be identified. You will be given the option to review the transcript of your interview. Access to the transcript will be restricted to me and my supervisors only. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and writing of findings. Please note that your responses, identity information, and any other names mentioned during the interview would be kept confidential. Only major lines of thought that emerge from the interviews will be used to describe important findings. The research findings will be used for the completion of the thesis and any other academic publication and presentation related to this research work. A summary of the results of the data will be made available to you via e-mail.

What are the benefits?

Benefits to the PR Profession and Wider Community. The outcomes of the study are expected to help understand how journalists view public relations. This information can be used to make recommendations to help public relations practitioners improve their interactions with journalists in delivering timely, accurate, and unbiased news.

Benefits to the Researcher. The benefits of this research to public relations practitioners will also benefit the researcher, who is a public relations professional. Besides, the study being done as part of a PhD degree would assist the researcher in meeting this key requirement.

Benefits to the Participants. The findings of the research are expected to improve communication between journalists and public relations practitioners involved in media relations.

How will my privacy be protected?

Any information collected from you as a result of the interview will be kept confidential, and access to this information will be restricted to me and my supervisors only. Your name and details of your answers will not be disclosed. With your permission, the interviews will be recorded and typed as a transcript. The transcript will then be examined to ensure that all of the important information has been captured. The transcript will not contain any information about you that would allow you to be identified. Again, access to the transcript will be restricted to me

and my supervisor. Your employers will not see your specific responses. Some of your comments may be included as a finding of the study, but these will be kept anonymous.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

You will need to allocate a maximum time of about an hour, including 40 min for the interview and about the time for typescript approval if you feel it necessary.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

An interview will be arranged a month in advance of it occurring.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You will be able to see a transcript of your interview and a summary of the research findings.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the research supervisor,

Dr Angelique Nairn, angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz, 021 120 2519

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz, p21 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Daljit Singh Bedi, bedids@yahoo.com, 021 0840 3350

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Angelique Nairn, angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz 021 120 2519

Appendix B: Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title: **Media Portrayal of Public Relations in New Zealand.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Angelique Nairn, Associate Head of School - Research
School of Communication Studies, Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies**

Researcher: **Daljit Singh Bedi, PhD Student**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 12 December 2022.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, the removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature :

Participant's name :

Date :

PhD Study Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 12 August 2022 AUTEK Reference number 22/183

Note: The participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix C: AUTECH Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

18 August 2022

Averill Gordon
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Averill

Re Ethics Application: **22/183 The Portrayal of Public Relations in Print and Online Media in New Zealand in the context of PRINZ Definition of Public Relations – An Exploratory Study.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 18 August 2025.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. If the interviews are to take place at the person's home a Researcher Safety Protocol is required.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTECH before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: bedids@yahoo.com; Angelique Nairn

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

1. *Demographic Questions*

- a. How many years of total experience do you have in journalism?
- b. What is your role in the current news outlet?
- c. What exposure do you have in public relations as a part of your education/training in journalism or your interaction with public relations practitioners?

2. *Journalists' Attitudes about Public Relations*

- a. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of public relations?
- b. Can you provide details on any recent stories involving your active interaction with a public relations practitioner?
- c. How will you conclude your overall experience in interaction with public relations practitioners while developing your story?
- d. How often do you use the information provided by public relations practitioners to develop your stories?
- e. Do you believe that over time, the extent of the public relations content that journalists have used has changed in any way?
- f. How relevant do you think the information provided by public relations practitioners is to your story?

3. *Possible Reasons Influencing the Journalists' Attitudes about Public Relations*

- a. What are your thoughts on the value of the public relations industry, say credibility, the knowledge it helps to create, and the value it adds to journalism?
- b. How do you think the public relations industry compares to journalism in terms of professionalism?
- c. What is your opinion on how public relations practitioners influence content or control the actual source of information?
- d. What are your thoughts on public relations practitioners' grasp of journalists' expectations about news values of the information, the need for quick access to information sources, and time constraints associated with reporting?
- e. How do you think the boundaries between public relations and journalism have blurred?
- f. What impact do you believe the blurring of boundaries between public relations and journalism has had on your relationship with public relations practitioners or your overall perception of the public relations industry?

4. *Relationship between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners*

- a. How often do you communicate with public relations practitioners from different organisations?
- b. How would you define your relationship with them?
- c. How do you assess the credibility of public relations practitioners you frequently interact with? Is it based on their occupational status, professional competence, journalism training background, or level of interaction with you?
- d. Which public relations practice do you find to be the most appealing?
- e. Which public relations practices do you find to be the least appealing?

5. *Journalists' Expectations from Public Relations*

- a. What do you think makes for good public relations?
- b. What do you think the public relations industry should do differently?

- c. What attributes make public relations practitioners the most desirable to work with?
- d. Do you see any change in the practice of public relations over the years – say from what it was about ten years back?
- e. Why do you believe more journalists are transitioning to the public relations industry?

6. *Journalists' Awareness of PRINZ*

- a. What do you know about the role of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) – the professional association for communication professionals in NZ?
- b. What suggestions do you have for PRINZ to help bring the desired changes in the public relations industry? (For those having knowledge of PRINZ)

Appendix E: Changes in the Coding Framework on Media Portrayal of Public Relations

Several changes were made during the review of coding framework version 3, including merging and dropping some sub-categories and adding new ones, resulting in the newly modified coding framework version 4. These changes affected the following categories:

Purpose of Public Relations

Although the academic data suggested the inclusion of 'persuasion' as one of the purposes of public relations as evidenced by the prior research, it was argued that an element of persuasion co-exists with the other purposes outlined in previous research: advocacy, image-reputation management, relationship management, and cause-related. Furthermore, no reference could be unambiguously coded under this sub-category. It was therefore decided that 'persuasion' as one of the likely sub-categories suggesting the purpose of public relations can be dropped for further analysis.

Meaning Ascribed to Public Relations

It was decided to drop three sub-categories, namely, merely, schmooze, and war in the category, 'meaning ascribed to public relations', mainly on the grounds of ambiguity and the absence of any reference that could be coded under any of these sub-categories. These sub-categories were earlier included in the framework deductively based on prior research.

Characterisation of Public Relations

This category, involving analysis of the connotation of the chosen search terms, 'public relations' and 'PR' in the context of the news stories, was earlier included in the preliminary coding framework based on prior research (Jo, 2003). The sub-categories under this category indicated whether the terms were used in a positive, negative, or neutral context. According to Jo (2003), an accurate meaning of public relations and a successful outcome for an organisation are displayed by a positive connotation, which also suggests the positive role of public relations. Since poor reputation management is associated with a negative connotation, public relations in these situations is portrayed negatively. A neutral meaning indicates a general adjectival use of public relations. During the trial coding stage, it was observed that the same texts were coded in these categories as were coded in various sub-categories under the category, 'meaning ascribed to public relations.' Also, since

both ultimately shed light on the connotation of public relations terms used in the context of the news stories, the one on 'characterisation of public relations' was dropped from the final coding frame used for the current study to avoid duplication of results.

Source of the News Story

Since no reference was coded in the 'citizen group' and 'public document' sub-categories, these two sub-categories were dropped from the final analysis. Also, the sub-categories of 'experts' and 'politician-celebrity' were merged for clarity.

Addition of New Sub-Categories

During coding, two additional sub-categories were added to the Other Category: 'semantics used around the public relations terms' and 'alternate terms used to portray public relations or its practitioners.' The text coded under these new sub-categories was expected to indicate an underlying bias of the journalist or news outlet.

New Classification of Main Categories

All the categories were classified under three main headings for clarity in the presentation of results, namely demographic categories, manifest categories, and thematic categories.

Appendix F: Media Portrayal of Public Relations: Coding Framework

Name	Description	Files*	References**
A. Demographic Categories	Includes all categories/sub-categories, each of which defines an attribute of the news story that can be used while presenting the findings and fine-tuning the conclusions.	0	0
1. The News Outlet	The news outlet that has carried the news story.	103	103
NZ Herald	The print and online editions of NZ Herald along with its Sunday editions.	41	41
Otago Daily Times	The print and online editions of Otago Daily Times along with its Sunday editions.	18	18
Stuff	The news website, Stuff along with its collection of local and regional media including daily urban newspapers, The Press and Dominion Post.	44	44
2. Year of Publication	Year of publication of the news story.	103	104
2011		9	9
2012		17	17
2013		13	13
2014		15	15
2015		8	8
2016		6	6
2017		8	8
2018		9	9
2019		8	8
2020		5	5
2021		3	3
2022		1	1
2023		1	1
3. Relevance Score of News Story	The relevance score of a news story means how closely each news story matches the database search, which in the current study ranges from 10 to 24. The news stories with relevance scores lower than 10 are insignificant in terms of determining the portrayal of public relations.	103	103
a. High Relevance Score	News stories have a relevance score of 18 and above.	36	36

Name	Description	Files*	References**
b. Medium Relevance Score	News stories have a relevance score of 14-17.	57	57
c. Low Relevance Score	News stories have a relevance score of 10-13 (Except in the case of news stories published in 2022, for giving representation).	10	10
4. <i>Focus of News Story on Public Relations Issue</i>	The extent of focus on the public relations issue in the news story, that is, whether the public relations issue is central or peripheral to the news story.	103	103
Central	Where the public relations issue is central to the news story.	61	61
Peripheral	Where the public relations issue is peripheral to the news story.	42	42
5. <i>Frequency of the Use of Terms, Public Relations and PR</i>	Gives the number of times the two terms, 'Public Relations' and 'PR' are used in the news story.	103	103
a. High Frequency	The terms, 'public relations' and 'PR' are used more than five times in the news story.	40	40
b. Medium Frequency	The terms, 'public relations' and 'PR' are used three to five times in the news story.	39	39
c. Low Frequency	The terms, 'public relations' and 'PR' are used less than three times in the news story.	24	24
6. <i>Word Count of News Story</i>	Length of the news story in terms of its word count.	103	103
a. High Word Count	The news story has a word count of more than 500 words.	52	52
b. Medium Word Count	The news story has a word count of between 300 and 500 words.	39	39
c. Low Word Count	The news story has a word count of fewer than 300 words.	12	12
7. <i>Type of News Story</i>	Whether the news story covering an issue involving public relations is a news/feature, an editorial, or an opinion/comment, OR it is an article substantially about public relations.	103	103
A News or a Feature	The story is published as a news story or a feature story, covering an issue in which public relations practice is talked about. Note: A news story reports the facts about an event. A feature story explains the significance of an event. It offers analysis.	49	49
An Article	The news story is published as an article that talks substantially about a public relations practice/issue.	6	6
An Editorial	The news story is published as an editorial, covering an issue in which public relations practice is talked about.	6	6
An Opinion or a Comment	The news story is published as an opinion (more common in Stuff) or a comment (more common in New Zealand Herald), covering an issue in which public relations practice is talked about.	42	42
8. <i>Source of News Story</i>	Type of the organisation involved in public relations issue reported in the news story - business, a citizen group, government, non-profit, or celebrity.	103	103
Business	Where a corporate organisation is the source of the information that serves as a basis for reporting on the public relations issue	41	41

Name	Description	Files*	References**
	in the news story.		
Government	Where a government agency is the source of the information that serves as a basis for reporting on the public relations issue in the news story.	40	40
Non-profit	Where a non-profit organisation is the source of the information that serves as a basis for reporting on the public relations issue in the news story.	5	5
Politician-Celebrity	Where a politician or a celebrity is the source of the information that serves as a basis for reporting on the public relations issue in the news story.	17	17
B. Manifest Categories	Manifest categories arrive from manifest qualitative content analysis. The context in manifest qualitative content analysis is derived from the words' obvious and literal meanings, which are considered at face value.	0	0
1. <i>Terminology used in relation to the term, 'Public Relations' or 'PR'</i>	This manifest category reveals the terminology used in relation to the terms, 'PR' and 'public relations.' The way or the frequency with which a word is used in a news story in conjunction with the terms 'PR' and/or 'public relations' may indicate an underlying bias on the part of the journalist or news outlet. Excludes such phrases as a PR campaign, PR strategy, PR bods, PR agency/firm/company /business/industry, PR people/consultant/expert/team/staff, PR job/exercise, PR principles...	51	78
Blunder		3	3
Challenge		3	4
Coup		3	3
Crisis		2	2
Debacle		2	3
Disaster		13	15
Flack or Flannel		3	3
Miscellaneous Semantics	These words are used only once in the entire data set.	17	21
Ploy		3	4
Spin Machine		4	4
Stunt or Game		6	6
Tricks, Tactics, or Manoeuvres		3	4
War or Battle		4	5
2. <i>Alternate term used to symbolise public</i>	Alternate term(s) or phrase(s) used to symbolise the public relations profession and/or its practitioners.	20	22

Name	Description	Files*	References**
<i>relations or its practitioners</i>			
Dark Art or Dark Side	Use of the phrase 'dark art' or 'dark side' to symbolise the public relations profession.	4	4
Spin or Spin Doctors	Use of the phrase 'spin' or 'spin doctors' to symbolise the public relations profession or its practitioners.	16	18
C. Thematic Categories	Thematic categories arrive from latent qualitative content analysis. It is typically conducted through a further in-depth investigation where the researcher must co-create meaning with the text. Includes all the sub-categories, each of which could develop into a theme.	0	0
1. Portrayed Purpose of Public Relations	The purpose of the public relations practice as portrayed in each news story.	103	109
Advocacy	An organisation's reactive effort aimed at persuading an audience to think or act in ways that will benefit the organisation – normally triggered by a crisis with a focus on persuading audiences not to think or act in certain ways. For example: ACC is rotten to the core, and I have numerous examples that could seriously embarrass you, over and above this... You are going to need big PR help on this one.	31	32
Cause related	An organisation's pro-active effort, generally taken as a crusade, is aimed at persuading its audience to think or act in ways that benefit the general welfare of a citizenry rather than the organisation. For example,	3	4
Image-Reputation	An organisation focuses on its image or reputation by way of publicity, spin control, or manipulation of symbols. For example: ...Hager exposes the cynical way the Defence Force has purposely misled the public by...public relations flannel... the "candyfloss" image the military has built...	46	48
Public Information	An organisation's effort that serves primarily as an educator and information clearinghouse. For example: Council communication includes public notices, consultation and engagement publicity, producing documents such as the long-term plan and annual reports, multi-media communication, rates communications, recruitment and educational communications.	17	18
Relationship Management	An organisation's effort focuses on identifying mutual interests with its publics with an aim to act in a responsible manner, in the belief that public support is vital to the organisation in achieving its objectives. For example: ...sanctioned the use of debt collectors to chase teachers who were overpaid? The (NovoPay) system, which has been riddled with glitches since its launch last year, mistakenly overpaid, underpaid or failed to pay thousands of teachers...it is just one PR disaster after another...	6	7
2. Meaning attached to the term, 'Public Relations' or 'PR'	The connotative meaning that the news story attaches to the term, 'Public Relations' or 'PR', in the public relations activity being highlighted in the news story, either influenced by the personal beliefs, or feelings of the actors, or based on facts.	103	106
Challenge	The news story connects public relations to a genuine continuing long-term public relations difficulty as opposed to a one-time disaster or distraction. For example: No PR agency can guarantee you media coverage, but a good outfit will be able to talk with you to understand your business goals, figure out how media profile can help you achieve them, identify what good stories you are sitting on, and help you craft them.	33	34

Name	Description	Files*	References**
Disaster	The news story connects public relations to an unwise decision in that the mistake is made public and viewed as an insurmountable blunder that opens the organisation to public ridicule. For example: Adidas' public relations disaster spiralled further out of control last night, with the global sports giant cancelling a glitzy party tonight to celebrate the All Blacks... The move followed the appearance on TV of two senior executives to front the growing controversy over the price of the new All Black jerseys.	28	29
Distraction	The news story connects public relations to the use of euphemisms by an organisation to soften or fix a perceived negative consequence of its previous action of detrimental nature. For example: Defence Force has purposely misled public by omission of pertinent facts...the "candyfloss" image the military has built around the deployment of New Zealand soldiers in the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan. That image is of our soldiers acting more like peacekeepers armed with nothing more dangerous than a shovel.	23	24
Hype	The news story connects public relations as an exercise of an organisation for generating excitement quickly and artificially amongst its publics. For example: That's what industry awards are, a public relations exercise. They create a positive news story, and the performance of the contestant is less important than how they look.	5	5
Profession	No distinct meaning is ascribed to public relations and the story is presented about public relations as another profession. For example: Allan doubted that public relations was growing as a sector because people were being cautious about spending, but there was plenty of work.	14	14
3. <i>Role of PRINZ</i>	The news story mentions PRINZ and brings out its role in promoting the public relations profession - whether positive, negative, or neutral OR the news story does not mention PRINZ at all.	103	104
a. Positive	Where PRINZ is mentioned in the news story as having played a positive role in promoting the public relations profession.	3	4
b. Neutral	Where PRINZ is just mentioned in the news story without attributing to its role in promoting the public relations profession. For example: Public relations body PRINZ said that while there was plenty of work it was from existing clients and overall, the sector was not growing.	8	8
c. Negative	Where PRINZ is mentioned in the news story as not having played its role in promoting the public relations profession.	0	0
d. No mention	Where PRINZ is not mentioned in the news story.	92	92

*The term 'file' refers to the research material, which in this case is a news story.

**The term 'reference' is a count of the selections across a file coded to any node. The same selection is coded to two different nodes, it is counted as two references.

Appendix G: Changes in the Coding Framework on Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations

Several changes were made during the review of coding framework version 2, including merging and dropping some sub-categories and adding new ones, resulting in the newly modified coding framework version 3. These changes affected the following categories:

Journalist's Interaction with Public Relations Practitioners

Interaction with Public Relations Practitioners

a. Frequency of Interaction

The various levels of interaction were defined to avoid any ambiguity in the coding of relevant texts:

Low interaction: Once a week or less.

Average Interaction: 2-4 times a week.

High Interaction: Daily

b. Mode of Communication

The title of this node was modified to avoid ambiguity by making it more specific to define the preferred mode of communication by public relations practitioners as perceived by journalists. The revised title is 'Practitioners Preferred Means of Communication'.

Relevance of Information

One child node under this category, 'Manipulated, requires Verification,' was dropped as the content coded under this node was duplicated elsewhere in the coding frame, B.2 'Objectivity of Public Relations Content'. Also, it did not fit under this category semantically. Another child node, 'Relevant,' was added to this category.

Perception of Public Relations

It was noted that the same sequence of text was coded in this and the 'Overall Experience of Interaction' categories. To avoid the resulting duplication, the category on the 'Perception of Public Relations' was shifted along with its child nodes as another separate category with a label, 'G. Perception of Public Relations.'

Perceived Purpose of Public Relations

The child nodes under this category, earlier placed at serial number 6 (the category with serial number 5 was dropped as explained above), were modified to sync them with those considered for this category in Stage 1 of the research. The child nodes created under this category include Advocacy, Cause Related, Image-Reputation Management, Public Information, and Relationship Management.

Factors Influencing Journalists' Perception of Public Relations

Value of the Public Relations Industry

The sequence of the child nodes was changed to facilitate the coding process.

Changes in Public Relations

The child node 7d was shifted to another category, '8. Impact of Change in Public Relations,' as it was more valid there since the text coded in this child node reflected more on the impact. Also, it was a duplicate child node under this category.

Journalists' Expectations from Public Relations

Traits of Good Public Relations

Two child nodes, 'Respect Reporting Deadlines' and 'Respect Journalism Values,' were merged to create a new child node, 'Respecting Journalism Values including Reporting Deadlines,' to avoid ambiguity, as most texts were coded in both these child nodes.

Turnover of Journalists to Public Relations Profession

This category was added to reflect the perspectives of journalists on the trend. The underlying reasons perceived by journalists were added as child nodes under this category: pay & emoluments, job opportunities, work-life balance, operational freedom, and a combination of the above four.

Perception of Public Relations

This category was created, shifting its contents from category A, labelled 'Journalists' Interaction with Public Relations Practitioners'.

The other changes incorporated in the coding framework include:

- The NVivo feature, 'aggregate coding for child nodes,' was activated for all the second and third-level nodes taken as parent nodes to help ensure that all the files have been coded under the respective categories.
- The definitions of all categories/sub-categories and their child nodes were fine-tuned for clarity to allow for coding without any ambiguity. Examples extracted from the nodes were also provided in all categories taken as parent nodes.

Appendix H: Journalists' Perceptions of Public Relations: Coding Framework

Name	Description	Files*	References**
I. Demographic Categories	Defines the participant demographics that this study can use while presenting the findings and fine-tuning the conclusions. These aspects include the news organisation journalists work for, their current job, their total body of work as a journalist, and any past schooling, training, or experience in public relations.	0	0
1. The News Outlet	Name of the news organisation that employs journalists.	21	21
a. NZ Herald	Journalists who work for NZME and contribute to the print and online editions of the NZ Herald and its sister publications.	9	9
b. Otago Daily Times	Journalists who work for the Allied Press in New Zealand and contribute to the print and online editions of Otago Daily Times and its sister publications.	4	4
c. Stuff	Journalists who work for the news website, Stuff or its local and regional media, including daily urban newspapers, The Press and Dominion Post.	8	8
2. Journalism Experience	Journalists' total body of work in journalism.	21	21
a. Between five and ten years	Journalists have five to ten years of experience.	5	5
b. Between 11 and 15 years	Journalists have 11 to 15 years of experience.	2	2
c. Between 16 and 20 years	Journalists have 16 to 20 years of experience.	4	4
d. More than 20 years	Journalists have more than 20 years of experience.	10	10
3. Current Role in the News Outlet	The job currently held by journalists.	21	21
a. Reporter	Journalists specialise in gathering and reporting news.	12	12
b. Editor	Journalists specialise in assigning stories to other journalists, reviewing and editing content, and prioritising news coverage.	7	7
c. Writer	Journalists specialise in creating stories for the news outlet, using facts from other journalists, public records, data, etc.	2	2
4. Background in Public Relations	Any education, training, or experience held by journalists in public relations.	21	21
a. Past Background	Journalists have a past background in public relations.	6	6
b. No Past Background	Journalists have no past background in public relations.	15	15
5. Interviewees' Awareness of PRINZ	Interviewees' awareness of the role of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ). For example, I think it's an industry body for public relations people. So, I suppose that they offer training and conferences and support things.	20	21
a. Interviewees are Aware	Journalists are aware of PRINZ.	18	19

Name	Description	Files*	References**
b. Interviewees are Not Aware	Journalists are not aware of PRINZ.	2	2
II. Manifest Categories	Manifest categories arrive from manifest qualitative content analysis. The context in manifest qualitative content analysis is derived from the words' obvious and literal meanings, which are considered at face value.	0	0
1. Journalists' Interaction with Public Relations Practitioners	The frequency of journalists' interaction with public relations practitioners while developing their stories. For example, It depends on the stage of the story now and the kind of research phase of a story, potentially two or three times a week.	21	23
a. Low Interaction	Journalists interact with public relations practitioners once a week or less while developing their stories.	4	4
b. Average Interaction	Journalists interact with public relations practitioners two to four times a week while developing their stories.	8	9
c. High Interaction	Journalists interact with public relations practitioners daily while developing their stories.	10	10
2. Journalists' Use of Public Relations Content	The extent of public relations content used by journalists in their reporting. For example, It depends on the story. Sometimes, they see me use a lot of it; sometimes, I completely ignore what they send me and talk to the person.	0	0
a. Rare Use of Public Relations Content	Journalists do not use or rarely use public relations content while developing their news stories.	8	8
b. Moderate Use of Public Relations Content with Changes	Journalists use a part of the public relations content more often after confirming its truthfulness or complementing it with added information they got from other sources to balance their stories.	6	7
c. High Use of Public Relations Content	Journalists use the entire public relations content while developing their news stories.	7	9
3. Changing Trend in the Use of Public Relations Content	Journalists' perspectives on any change in public relations content usage over time. For example, I regularly see press releases essentially being printed wholesale these days. There's not even any attempt and perhaps they reordered the information.	19	21
a. More Public Relations Content Usage	Journalists report an increase in public relations content usage over time.	17	19
b. Less Public Relations Content Usage	Journalists report a decrease in public relations content usage over time.	0	0
c. No Change in Public Relations Content Usage	Journalists report no change in public relations content usage over time.	2	2
III. Thematic Categories	Includes all the categories/sub-categories, each of which has the potential to become a theme.	0	0

Name	Description	Files*	References**
A. Journalists' Perceptions of the Public Relations Profession	Journalists' perception of public relations as a profession and the factors that may influence their perception.	0	0
1. Perceived Value of Public Relations	Journalists' perspectives on the value of the public relations industry in facilitating media communication. For example, It can be valuable if you are dealing with someone you have a good relationship with who is helpful and is not obstructive and you respect each other's roles. But it can be that they can create roadblocks.	21	23
a. Important and Adds Value to Media Communication	The public relations industry is valuable for media communication.	5	5
b. Important but hinders Media Communication	The public relations industry is valuable but often hinders media communication.	13	14
c. Not Important and Hinders Media Comm.	The public relations industry is not valuable as it hinders media communication.	3	4
2. Perceived Purpose of Public Relations	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as advocacy, cause-related, image-reputation management, public information, or relationship management. For example, To help communicate the message of the organisation or the company they represent. So, it's about communicating messages and managing risk with key stakeholders, the public, the media, and internal communication within the organisation.	20	25
a. Advocacy	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as advocacy, including advocacy for marketing or lobbying.	3	3
b. Cause-Related	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as cause-related.	0	0
c. Image-Reputation Management	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as facilitating image-reputation management.	14	15
d. Public Information	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as providing public information.	6	7
e. Relationship Management	Journalists perceive the purpose of public relations as facilitating relationship management.	0	0
3. Changes in Public Relations	Changes in the public relations industry resulted from the rise in the number of public relations practitioners and agencies, the resources at their disposal, their adoption of efficient and interactive methods of disseminating information directly to strategic stakeholders, and greater transparency. For example, There seem to be a lot more PR people that's probably the biggest difference. I mean a lot of companies you call now have a team of like 10 or 20 PR people.	21	24
a. Increased Number of Public Relations Practitioners and Agencies	Rise in the number of public relations practitioners and agencies/departments.	7	8

Name	Description	Files*	References**
b. Increased Resources	Rise in the resources available to public relations practitioners.	0	0
c. Direct Access to Publics	Adoption of efficient and interactive methods of disseminating information directly to strategic stakeholders.	6	6
d. Combination of 7(a), 7(b), and 7(c)	The combination of rise in public relations practitioners and agencies, the resources available, or the adoption of efficient and interactive methods of disseminating information directly to strategic stakeholders.	6	8
e. Greater Transparency	Greater transparency seen in the public relations agencies/departments.	1	1
f. Changed Behaviours of Public Relations Practitioners	Changed behaviours amongst public relations practitioners.	1	1
4. Impact of Changes in Public Relations	Changes in public relations lead to the increased use of public relations content by journalists or the blurring of boundaries between journalism and publications, and the resulting impact on how journalists perceive public relations. For example, These numbers are so many and sometimes I feel like I get caught between different people because they think that somebody is handling it but it's someone else that's handling it and then they think that such and such has come back to you but they haven't.	21	35
a. Impact on Increased Use of Public Relations Content	Changes in public relations lead to increased use of public relations content by journalists.	2	2
b. Impact on Blurring of Boundaries between Public Relations and Journalism	Changes in public relations lead to blurred boundaries between journalism and public relations.	6	6
c. Impact on Access to Information	Public relations practices are increasingly aimed at finding ways to restrict journalists' access to specific information of interest compared to past practices.	8	8
d. Impact on a Combination of 4(a) and 4(b), and 4(c)	Changes in public relations lead to a combination of (a) increased use of public relations content by journalists, (b) blurred boundaries between journalism and public relations, and (c) access to information.	3	5
e. No Impact	Changes in the public relations industry have no impact on their dealings with public relations practitioners.	2	2
f. Impact on Journalists' Perception of Public Relations	Changes in the public relations industry have influenced the perception of journalists about public relations.	8	12
5. Comparison between Journalism and Public Relations	How do journalists compare the two professions of journalism and public relations? For example, I just find that their mandate is where the problem lies. But the public relations industry as a whole and the journalism industry are trying to achieve two different things.	21	22
a. Different Mandates	The primary responsibility of journalists and public relations practitioners is to disseminate information to audiences. The difference lies in the purpose of drafting the message. Public relations is done to improve one's image, whereas journalists present news for the	10	11

Name	Description	Files*	References**
	audience's benefit.		
b. Professionalism	Journalists' perspectives on the news value orientations and occupational status judgments, particularly the credibility of the messages put out by the public relations profession.	1	1
c. Resources, including Employment Opportunities	Journalists' perspectives on the vast difference in the resources available including employment opportunities for both professions.	4	4
d. Pay and Other Service Conditions	Journalists' perspectives on the disparity in income and other benefits earned by journalists and public relations practitioners, including the work-life balance.	6	6
6. Transition of Journalists to Public Relations Profession	Reasons behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations. For example, Money, I'd say that's the main reason. I mean journalism is high-stress, long hours, shift work, and work hours on weekends - seven days a week sometimes. So, I think there is a perception that working in PR will be easier and a big pay! Also, I guess there are fewer media jobs available.	21	22
a. Pay and Emoluments	Journalists assign pay and emoluments offered in public relations as the reason behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations.	4	4
b. Job Opportunities	Journalists assign ample job opportunities in public relations as the reason behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations.	0	0
c. Work-Life Balance	Journalists assign work-life balance opportunities offered in public relations as the reason behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations.	0	0
d. Operational Freedom	Journalists assign operation freedom available in public relations as the reason behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations.	0	0
e. Combination of (a), (b), (c), and (d)	Journalists assign a combination of two or more of the variables including pay and emoluments, job opportunities, work-life balance, and operational freedom as the reasons behind the trend of journalists transitioning to public relations.	17	18
7. Overall Perception of Public Relations	Journalists' overall perception of public relations. For example, To be honest, the first thing that comes to my mind is that they make my job harder.	21	28
a. Positive Perception	Journalists have a positive perception of public relations.	2	2
b. Negative Perception	Journalists have a negative perception of public relations.	10	14
c. Mixed Perception	Journalists have a mixed perception of public relations.	9	12
B. Journalists' Perception of Public Relations Practitioners	Journalists' perception of public relations practitioners and the factors that may influence their perception.	0	0
1. Means of Interaction	The means of interaction preferred by public relations practitioners and journalists, such as press releases via email, phone calls, or one-on-one interviews.	0	0
a. Practitioners' Preferred Means of Communication	The means of communication preferred by public relations practitioners for interaction with journalists, such as press releases via email, phone calls, or one-on-one interviews.	21	23

Name	Description	Files*	References**
	For example, It's just a matter of them sending an initial e-mail and then connecting me up with the person I need to speak to for the story.		
i. Press Release	Public relations practitioners interact with journalists by sending press releases through email.	17	17
ii. Phone Call	Public relations practitioners interact with journalists over the phone.	0	0
iii. One-on-One Interview	Public relations practitioners interact with journalists by arranging a one-on-one interview with the information source.	0	0
iv. Mixed Means of Communication	Public relations practitioners interact with journalists using mixed means of communication, including press releases by email and follow-up by phone or one-on-one interviews with actual sources of information.	4	6
b. Journalists' Preferred Means of Communication	The means of communication preferred by journalists for interaction with public relations practitioners, such as press releases, phone calls, or one-on-one interviews. For example, I ask for their assistance to get to certain people in their organisation.	21	25
i. Press Release	Journalists prefer that public relations practitioners interact with them by emailing press releases.	1	1
ii. Phone Call	Journalists prefer that public relations practitioners follow up with them over the phone.	2	2
iii. One-on-One Interview	Journalists prefer that public relations practitioners follow up with them by arranging a one-on-one interview with the information source.	13	13
iv. Mixed Means of Communication	Journalists prefer that public relations practitioners interact with them using mixed means of communication, including press releases by email and follow-up by phone or one-on-one interviews with actual sources of information.	5	9
2. Relevance of Public Relations Content	Relevance of the public relations content to developing news stories by journalists. For example, Not usually because usually the key piece of information that I'm trying to find out won't be provided under the Official Information Act.	21	21
a. Relevant	The public relations content is relevant to the interests of journalists.	1	1
b. Relevant, requires More Input	The public relations content provided is relevant to the interests of journalists but is incomplete and requires added input from public relations practitioners.	4	4
c. Sometimes Relevant	The public relations content is sometimes relevant and sometimes not relevant to the interests of journalists.	13	13
d. Not Relevant	The public relations content is not relevant to the interests of journalists.	3	3
3. Objectivity of Public Relations Content	Journalists' perspectives on the objectivity of the public relations content in terms of it being factual and timely. For example, The public relations industry's job is to you know push stories that are favourably to an organisation or institution and to defend their institutional organisation against questions from journalists that it sees as being problematic, and so the flow of information hinders.	21	25

Name	Description	Files*	References**
a. Objective Content	The public relations content is objective in terms of being factual and timely.	0	0
b. Subjective Content	The public relations content is provided in time but is manipulated to suit the client.	21	25
4. Journalists' Access to Information Sources	Journalists' perspectives on their direct access to information sources as provided by public relations practitioners. For example, One of the most frustrating aspects of journalism today is that I don't have direct access to the people who hold the information.	20	25
a. Direct Access to Information Sources	Public relations practitioners help journalists to develop their news stories by providing direct access to information sources.	1	2
b. Controlled Access to Information Sources	Public relations practitioners help journalists to develop their news stories by providing controlled access to information sources.	16	18
c. No Access to Information Sources	Public relations practitioners do not provide journalists with direct access to information sources.	4	5
5. Understanding of Journalists Reporting Requirements	Journalists' perspectives on the public relations practitioners' grasp of journalists' expectations of news values, the need for quick access to information sources, and the time constraints associated with reporting. For example, Some of them have a good grasp but others have no idea what we're after or how quickly we need information - it's just varied across the industry.	21	23
a. Understand and Meet Journalists' Reporting Requirements	Public relations practitioners understand and meet journalists' expectations.	0	0
b. Understand but do not Meet Journalists' Reporting Requirements	Public relations practitioners understand but do not meet journalists' expectations.	2	2
c. Neither Understand nor Meet Journalists' Reporting Requirements	Public relations practitioners neither understand nor meet journalists' expectations.	3	3
d. Some Practitioners Understand, Others Do Not Meet Journalists' Reporting Requirements	Some public relations practitioners understand journalists' expectations and others do not.	16	18
6. Journalists' Most Liked Public Relations Practice	A public relations practice liked the most by journalists. For example, Somebody who will answer my questions quickly and help give me the information that I need and get me in front of the person that I need to talk to and who will do it in that specific medium that I work with which is video rather than something in print.	21	22
a. Giving Exclusive Access to Information	Public relations practitioners give journalists a head start or exclusive access to news.	5	5

Name	Description	Files*	References**
b. Treating Information Requests Positively	Public relations practitioners appreciate the journalists' need for information and do their best to offer the same timely.	16	17
7. Journalists' Most Disliked Public Relations Practice	A public relations practice disliked the most by journalists. For example, The key piece of information that I'm trying to find out won't be provided under the Official Information Act.	21	23
a. Follow-up Calls by Practitioners	Unwarranted follow-up calls by public relations practitioners to check up on the publication status of their news story.	3	3
b. Pitching Irrelevant Matter	Public relations practitioners do not research the areas of interest to journalists before pitching press releases.	3	3
c. Bypassing Media	Public relations practitioners bypass journalists in reaching out to their target audience.	3	3
d. Failing to Provide Information under the Provisions of OI Act within the prescribed time frames	Public relations practitioners do not give information as per the Official Information Act.	5	5
e. Simultaneous Pitching to Multiple Reporting Points	Public relations practitioners pitch their news stories to multiple journalists in the same or different news outlets.	1	1
f. Controlling Access to Information Sources	Public relations practitioners give controlled access to information sources, whether it is indirect access by way of questionnaires or selective access.	7	8
8. Credibility of Public Relations Practitioners	Journalists often judge the credibility of public relations practitioners they often interact with or develop trust based on the latter's professional competence, training or past interaction. For example, Probably, how they interact with me. Yeah, I think the way that they respond to a request that I might make - is going to be the first indicator of how the rest of it is going to go.	21	21
a. Professional Competence	Journalists judge the credibility of public relations practitioners they often interact with or develop trust based on the professional competence of public relations practitioners.	7	7
b. Journalism Training Background	Journalists judge the credibility of public relations practitioners they often interact with or develop trust based on the training public relations practitioners had in journalism.	0	0
c. Past Interactions	Journalists judge the credibility of public relations practitioners they often interact with or develop trust based on their past interactions with public relations practitioners.	12	12
d. Combination of 8(a), 8(b), and 8(c)	Journalists judge the credibility of public relations practitioners they often interact with or develop trust based on a combination of two or more of three variables, including their professional competence, journalism training background, and past interactions with public relations practitioners.	2	2
9. Journalists' Overall Interaction Experience	The degree to which journalists have satisfied interaction experience with public relations practitioners. For example, The experience varies depending on your relationship with them and depending on the individual. There can sometimes be a difference	21	29

Name	Description	Files*	References**
	between public relations people with expertise in their subject matter that they're quite good to deal with versus people who maybe work for an agency that has several clients who don't understand the subject matter.		
a. Satisfactory Interaction Experience	Journalists have a satisfactory interaction experience with public relations practitioners.	4	5
b. Unsatisfactory Interaction Experience	Journalists have an unsatisfactory interaction experience with public relations practitioners.	6	8
c. Mixed Interaction Experience	Journalists have mixed satisfaction experiences with public relations practitioners.	11	16
C. Journalists' Relationships with Public Relations Practitioners	Journalists rely on public relations practitioners to give information, and public relations practitioners rely on journalists to report information. Because of their mutual dependency, both have control over the rules governing the exchange of information. As a result, they can expect their relationships to be harmonious or adversarial.	0	0
1. Importance accorded to Relationships with Public Relations Practitioners	The importance given by journalists to maintain a strong and functional relationship with public relations practitioners, and if so, who do they consider more responsible for maintaining the relationship? For example, Certainly, it helps if you can develop a good relationship with a PR practitioner who might have a better understanding of one of those that I'm trying to achieve.	21	24
a. Maintaining Relationships is Important, Practitioners are more Responsible.	Journalists value maintaining a strong and functional relationship with public relations practitioners and consider the latter more responsible for maintaining it.	2	2
b. Maintaining Relationships is Important, both Responsible	Journalists value maintaining a strong and functional relationship with public relations practitioners and consider both parties responsible for maintaining it.	17	20
c. Maintaining Relationships is Not Important	Journalists do not value maintaining a strong and functional relationship with public relations practitioners.	2	2
2. Categorisation of Relationship with Public Relations Practitioners	Both cooperation and conflict characterise the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners, and thus their relationship could be positive, negative, or mixed, depending upon elements of cooperation and conflict. For example, I kind of have a bit of a love-hate relationship with PR people as sometimes they're very helpful, sometimes they're very annoying, and sometimes they're obstructive.	21	21
a. Positive Relationships	Journalists consider their relationships with public relations practitioners as positive.	7	7
b. Negative Relationships	Journalists consider their relationships with public relations practitioners as negative.	3	3
c. Mixed Relationships	Journalists consider their relationships with public relations practitioners as positive with some and negative with others.	11	11

Name	Description	Files*	References**
3. Reasons Attributed to Positive Relationships	The reasons attributed by journalists for a positive relationship with public relations practitioners. For example, I have my needs properly understood by publicists and PR people, we're kind of pulling in the same direction.	18	20
a. Providing Information Timely	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as positive if they provide journalists with relevant, timely information, respecting the reporting deadlines.	4	4
b. Providing Direct Access to Information Sources	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as positive if they provide journalists with direct access to information sources.	2	3
c. Mutual Trust & Understanding	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as positive if they trust journalists, understand journalists' roles, and are willing to talk about the matter under consideration off the record.	7	8
d. Understanding Journalists' Requirements	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as positive if they, by exposure to the field of journalism or experience, fully understand journalist requirements, including the news value of the information provided by them, the need for quick access to information sources, and the time constraints associated with reporting.	5	5
4. Reasons Attributed to Negative Relationships	The reasons attributed by journalists for a negative relationship with public relations practitioners.	12	13
a. Being Obstructive	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as adverse if they do not provide journalists with relevant, timely information and be obstructive.	8	9
b. Not Understanding Journalists' Requirements	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as adverse when practitioners do not fully understand journalist requirements, including the news value of the information, the need for quick access to information sources, and the reporting deadlines.	3	3
c. Combination of 4(a) and 4(b)	Journalists consider their relationship with public relations practitioners as adverse if they do not provide journalists with relevant, timely information and be obstructive and when practitioners do not fully understand journalist requirements.	1	1
D. Journalists' Expectations from Public Relations	Journalists' perspectives on what makes up efficient public relations, changes they want to see in the industry, and the qualities they seek in public relations practitioners for building rapport.	0	0
1. Traits of Good Public Relations	Journalists' perspectives on what makes for good public relations. For example, Good public relations is just when it is helpful, timely, doesn't stop information flow and connects you to the people you want to talk to.	21	22
a. Enabling Direct Access to Information & its Sources	Direct access to information sources.	5	6
b. Understanding Roles	Understanding the roles of both public relations practitioners and journalists in communicating the message.	16	16
2. Preferred Changes in the Practice of Public Relations	Journalists' perspectives on changes needed in the public relations industry to make it more valuable to media communication. For example, Relinquish some of its control! I think the public	21	25

Name	Description	Files*	References**
	was better served and journalists certainly would be more able to do their jobs in the days when we could speak directly to the holders of the information.		
a. Adaption to Changing Dynamic of Newsrooms	Make appropriate changes in public relations training and practices to cater to the changing dynamics of modern newsrooms.	3	3
b. Encouraging Practitioners to Enable Direct Access to Information Sources	Implement appropriate guidelines for enabling direct access to journalists' desired information sources.	7	7
c. Encouraging Practitioners to Pitch Targeted Messages	Encourage public relations practitioners to research the information needs of their target audience before releasing their pitches.	6	7
d. Encouraging Practitioners to Front-Foot Organisational Issues	Encourage public relations practitioners to front-foot the issues instead of avoiding them or fudging data to defend the actual issues.	3	4
e. No Suggestions		2	2
3. Preferred Traits of Public Relations Practitioners	Characteristics that journalists appreciate in public relations practitioners for maintaining positive relationships. For example, A public relations practitioner who understands the way journalism in different mediums works and what is needed in terms of deadlines and delivery.	21	22
a. Integrity and Honesty	Journalists believe integrity and honesty are the fundamental characteristics of public relations practitioners to nurture a positive relationship.	8	8
b. Transparency	Journalists believe transparency is the fundamental characteristic of public relations practitioners to nurture a positive relationship.	2	2
c. Helpful Attitude	Journalists believe a helpful attitude is the fundamental characteristic of public relations practitioners to nurture a positive relationship.	6	6
d. Professional Competence	Journalists believe professional competence is the fundamental characteristic of public relations practitioners to nurture a positive relationship.	5	6
4. Journalists Suggestions for PRINZ	Journalists' perspectives on changes to be facilitated by PRINZ in the public relations industry. For example, They could do a lot more to help PR people understand how newsrooms work and how it shifted over time as to how much the news cycle has quickened and it is so much faster. They need to think of multimedia now and not just print.	19	20

*The term 'file' refers to the research material, which in this case is a news story.

**The term 'reference' is a count of the selections across a file coded to any node. The same selection is coded to two different nodes, it is counted as two references.

Annexure I: Item-by-Item Justification for Attribution Types Assigned in Figure 5.23

Each of the attribution dimensions (I, E, C, U, S, and Si) used in Figure 5.23 is justified here. Based on perceived intent, control, stability, and contextual elements, this table explains how journalists evaluate each perspective (positive or negative) of public relations practitioners.

Behaviour/Perception	Attribution Types	Justification/Explanation
A. Positive perspectives		
1. Favourable responses to requests	E, C, Si	Enabled by organisational conditions (E); practitioners choose to respond promptly (C); varies depending on story context and timing (Si).
2. Granting exclusivity	E, C, Si	Usually driven by organisational or client strategy (E); practitioners can advocate for exclusives (C); depends on timing or significance of announcement (Si).
3. Competence and past trust	I, C, S	Interpreted as a personal professional quality (I); practised through controllable behaviours such as accuracy and reliability (C); demonstrated consistently over time (S).
4. One-on-one interviews	E, C, Si	Access governed by organisational policies or executive availability (E); practitioners negotiate or facilitate interviews (C); opportunities vary by event or news cycle (Si).
5. Journalism background	I, S	Viewed as an inherent, personal attribute (I); stable across all interactions (S).
B. Negative perspectives		
1. Press release reliance	E, U, S	Driven by organisational messaging structures (E); practitioners often cannot deviate from mandated content (U); seen as an enduring pattern or systemic norm (S).
2. Biased or irrelevant content	I, C, S	Journalists attribute bias or poor relevance to practitioners' personal choices (I); believe practitioners can control how content is framed or targeted (C); experienced as a repeated pattern (S).
3. Spin and manipulation	I, C, S	Seen as deliberate strategic intent (I); interpreted as purposeful behaviour (C); viewed as a consistent feature of PR practice (S).
4. Controlled access	I, C, S	Perceived as intentional information restriction (I); assumed practitioners decide who gets access (C); treated as a recurring tendency (S).
5. Gatekeeping/delays	E, U, Si	Often caused by organisational approval layers or managerial bottlenecks (E); practitioners typically cannot accelerate these processes (U); delays are context-dependent (Si).

6. Irrelevant pitches	I, C, Si	Attributed to poor judgment or inadequate research by practitioners (I); assumed to be within practitioners' control (C); relevance depends on editorial priorities and timing (Si).
7. Follow-up calls	I, C, Si	Viewed as pushy or intrusive personal behaviour (I); practitioners choose whether to follow up (C); frequency often tied to campaign pressures or deadlines (Si).

Table legend: Attribution dimension key		
Abbreviation	Meaning	Description
I	Internal	Attributed to practitioners' motives or character
E	External	Attributed to organisational or systemic factors
C	Controllable	Actions practitioners can directly influence
U	Uncontrollable	Constraints or forces beyond practitioners' control
S	Stable	Practitioners' habitual behaviours
Si	Situational	Practitioners' context-specific behaviours