

# TOWARDS AN ETHICAL PR? AN EXPLORATION INTO STUDENTS' ETHICAL PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE SAINSBURY'S WWI CAMPAIGN\*

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## ABSTRACT

Sainsbury's 2014 Christmas campaign 'Christmas is for Sharing' initiated criticism due to its creative interpretation of the 1914 World War One (WWI). The campaign was a celebration of a 20-year corporate partnership between Sainsbury's and The Royal British Legion, as well as a tribute to the centennial anniversary of the start of WWI. This paper examined the future state of ethics in the PR industry, by exploring PR and marketing student's perceptions of the Sainsbury's Christmas campaign. The research method included a questionnaire aimed at students to gather basic data, as well as a discourse analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses to analyse ascribed meanings. The results have shown that majority of students held that the industry would become somewhat more ethical, with responses citing increased industry professionalism, and the advance of ethics being included in the PR curriculum.

**Keywords:** retail, Sainsbury's, UK, public relations, ethics

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the public relations (PR) industry, its practice and function has been under persistent ethical debate and scrutiny. Thus, ethical codes of conduct and industry standards are continuously evolving. Tench and Yeomans (2014, p. 4) assert that, "public relations is the product of the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances of its time and evolves according to the needs of these broader environments." However, there is

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a continuous confusion about PR, and in large part this is the result of inability to define the field (Tench & Yeomans 2014; Theaker 2012; Bowen 2009; Harlow 1976). This confusion subsequently helps those groups and individuals who express criticism towards PR as a profession, calling it propaganda (Fawkes, 2007).

The Sainsbury's Christmas campaign of 2014<sup>1</sup>, dramatized the World War One Christmas Truce of 1914 as its main theme. The campaign was produced in result of a corporate partnership between Sainsbury's and the *Royal British Legion*. The campaign divided opinion, with some, such as the *Independent Newspaper* (Hooton, 2014) praising the campaign for its historic accuracy and production quality while others, such as *The Guardian* (Fogg, 2014) branded the campaign as a 'dangerous and disrespectful masterpiece,' agreeing that the campaign was well made, but questioning the ethics of exploiting the centenary anniversary of WWI for corporate purposes. Additionally, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) received 823 complaints about the advert that promoted the campaign, making it the 4<sup>th</sup> most complained about UK advert in 2014 (ASA, 2015).

This paper aimed to discover whether or not the Sainsbury's Christmas campaign was deemed ethical or unethical by UK based PR and Marketing students. In the remaining part of the paper, we will firstly discuss problems with definition and ethics in PR. Secondly, we will present the supermarket industry and Sainsbury's as a case study. Finally, we will discuss our results within ethical theories framework.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE PROBLEM WITH DEFINITION

Defining the PR practice has fronted controversy, largely because PR is ubiquitous and practiced by an array of individuals and organisations for diverse purposes (Tench and Yeomans, 2014). Harlow (1976), for example, analysed 475 different definitions of PR when bidding to refine a definitive version, proving the complex nature surrounding the definition debate. In result, Harlow (1976, p. 36) formulated the following definition of PR:

“Public Relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain *mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics*; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasise the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and utilises research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools” (our emphasis).

While Harlow's definition is very useful in providing a comprehensive explanation of what PR practice involves, it merely describes what PR does, rather than what it actually is (Theaker, 2012). Importantly, the final sentence of the paragraph states that PR uses “research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools” (Harlow, 1976, p. 36), which highlights the industry's consciousness of ethical practice. However, the ambiguity of PR makes it hard to define as a single entity. The *Chartered Institute of Public Relations* (CIPR,

<sup>1</sup> The advert for the campaign is available at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWF2JBb1bvM> (Accessed 20 February 2015).

2009) provided the following definition, which has been praised for being simple in its attempt to describe the field:

“Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline that looks after an organisation's reputation. Its aim is to win understanding and support, and influence opinion and behaviour. It establishes and maintains goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.” (our emphasis)

There is a significant difference between these two definitions, i.e., the first one sees PR as part of management with a distinctive function to ensure communication, while the other definition sees PR through a reputation management. The managerial definition of PR has been prevalent since 1980s when Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 6) defined PR as “the management of communication between an organisation and its publics.” Grunig revised this definition later on to define PR as “an organisation’s managed communications behaviour” (Grunig et al., 2006, p. 23), however, PR has remained within managerial fields. Nevertheless, depending on one’s specific interest, different definitions of PR apply, demonstrating that an absolute definition of PR is a matter of opinion. For example, practicing PR tactics and strategy would better be described by an organisationally centric definition, whereas alternatively, an interest in social aspects of PR would better be described by a more audience related definition (Tench and Yeomans, 2014). L’Etang and Pieczka (2006, p. 375) supportively stress that attempts to define PR are generally “constructed in an attempt to be all things to all people simultaneously,” while Butterick (2011) adds that PR’s inability to objectively define the practice is a key argument for critics who use this inability to prove that public relations is inherently flawed. In addition, some authors warn that if we would ask three practitioners and three scholars to define PR, we would get six different definitions (Edwards, 2014).

Another controversial aspect of PR is its intertwined nature with marketing. Cornelissen (2004) considers the socio-economic development of both public relations and marketing during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to describe how both practices became increasingly integrated to function what is now known as ‘corporate communications.’ Contemporary marketing theory generally refers to public relations as one of the five elements of the marketing communication mix (advertising, personal selling, direct marketing, sales promotion and public relations). Bains, Fill and Page (2011) assert that each element of the marketing communications mix is designed to integrate and complement one and other to perform effective marketing or corporate communications. Cornelissen (2004) however, discusses the traditional perspective, which viewed PR and marketing as distinctly different functions; marketing is concerned with markets, whereas public relations is concerned with publics, as also emphasized in Harlow’s definition above. Others, such as Kitchen (1993) identified a more popular, ‘middle of the road approach,’ which sees both marketing and PR as distinct functions, but recognises that they share significant similarities and mutually beneficial relationships. However, research has shown that not even PR students fully know what PR is about, and they often mix PR with marketing and advertising (Bowen, 2009).

## THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The ethics of PR and ethical theories associated with PR fall under continuous scrutiny and development (Harvey, 2002). The lack of ability to define PR has enabled criticism from critics who argue that, “PR is synonymous with propaganda, citing a constant stream of abuses of public trust by corporate communicators” (Fawkes, 2012, p. 7). Nevertheless, the critics (e. g. Moloney 2006; Rampton and Stauber, 2004; Miller and Dinan, 2008; PR Watch, 2015; Spinwatch, 2015; Corporate watch, 2015), dispute the ethical practice of PR, arguing that huge resources, unavailable to receiving individuals are expended to promote goods, political parties and corporate and cultural values. Chomsky (2002), an influential critic of the public relations industry and mass media, examined how PR and the mass media have been used as propaganda tools by governments and organisations to generate public support, citing the Iraq war and 9/11 as examples. According to Chomsky (2002, p. 20), “propaganda is to democracy as the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state,” and this is also how he sees PR<sup>2</sup>.

When it comes to propaganda and persuasion – two practices are often associated with PR - Fawkes (2007) highlights that the boundaries between the terms propaganda, persuasion and public relations are blurred. Public relations undeniably does seek to persuade publics, for example the term ‘earning understanding and support and influencing opinion,’ drawn from the CIPR definition of PR, implies that persuasion is a PR practitioners key role. Habermas (1989) on the other hand criticises persuasion as being unethical, because of the differences in interests between the persuader and the persuadee. Moreover, Tench and Yeomans (2014) discuss a YouGov poll that found that 60% of journalists did not trust PR agencies, and that similarly, journalists tend to think of PR as propaganda (Prmoment, 2011).

Bowen (2011, p. 1) eludes that, “in the public relations discipline, ethics include values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity and forthright communication.” Bowen (2011) draws upon existing research, which reveals a historic trend of public relations being associated with unethical values, such as lying and spin doctoring; with critics eluding that the practice is inherently linked with manipulation and propaganda. Critics of PR such as non-governmental organisation Corporate Watch (2003) go even further by arguing:

“There is a considerable body of evidence emerging to suggest that modern public relations practices are having a very significant deleterious impact on the democratic process. Furthermore, by giving vested interests the opportunity to deliberately obfuscate, deceive, and derail public debate on key issues the public relations industry reduces society’s capacity to respond effectively to key social, environmental and political challenges.”

On the other hand, Theaker (2012) correctly warns that ethical theories should be debated in regard to PR as ethics seems to be the main concern of those who criticise the profession.

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<sup>2</sup> L’Etang (2004) noted however, that at the turn of the twentieth century, propaganda was seen as a neutral term. Propaganda was used to recruit civilians to join the Army around the time of WWI for example (Tench and Yeomans, 2011). Furthermore, Edward Bernays, a key figure in the development of PR even titled his second book in 1928, ‘Propaganda’ (Bernays, 1928). Bernays held no issue with practicing PR as a scientific practice, influenced by the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud. Butterick (2011) importantly points out however, that significant historic propaganda events, such as Bernays’ practice had extremely dissimilar targets to those of the twenty first century PR practitioner.

In line with that, there are several approaches that should be debated within PR debate. The first one is utilitarianism, which is a form of consequentialism, where “the right action is understood entirely in terms of the consequences produced” (Driver, 2009, p. 1). The approach is based on the work of English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who both identified utility with happiness (Theaker, 2012). Bentham and Mill’s work tends to be identified as classical theory, as developments during the twentieth century added to the theory with concepts such as Act and Rule Utilitarianism, as well as Ideal Utilitarianism (Driver, 2009). Utilitarianism bases morally right decisions on the outcome that produces the most good (Driver, 2009), and is commonly associated with the term ‘the greatest good for the greatest number,’ meaning that the end justifies the means (Rachels and Rachels, 2010). With regards to the application of utilitarianism in PR, Bowen (2011, p. 10) argues, “both utilitarian philosophy and relationships with publics are seen in terms of their consequences and potential outcomes.” Furthermore, Grunig and Grunig (1996) held that due to its emphasis on consequences, a strategic management approach runs in tandem with utilitarianism (cited from Bowen, 2011). Theaker (2012) eludes however, that a common criticism of utilitarianism is that it demands the ‘maximisation of goods,’ for example economic growth if it is to achieve utility, permitting the scarification of minorities or individuals for ‘the greater good.’ Theaker (2012) draws further upon this criticism, using a PR related example, i.e., if a company was saved from administration because its reputation was enhanced by lies told to journalists by company representatives, this would be seen as a permissible act from a utilitarian viewpoint, because the employees whose jobs were saved by the lies outweigh the breaking of trust with external publics.

Non-consequentialist ethics on the other hand, argue that when determining actions morally right or wrong, decisions should be based on motivation for the action, rather than consequences; a perspective usually signified as ‘deontological’ (Theaker, 2012). Deontology is founded upon the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), with the Greek word ‘deon,’ meaning ‘duty’ (Bowen 2009; 2011; 2013). The philosophy asserts that morality is a matter of duty, and that one has a moral obligation to act in accordance with one’s duty (Law, 2007). According to Kant, “some actions are morally obligatory, regardless of their consequence” (Theaker, 2012, p. 84). Kant believed that humans were guided by reason and could “therefore ensure that moral goodness existed... This means treating people as an end, not a means to an end, that is, promoting their welfare and rights and treating them with respect without manipulating them or deceiving them, but respecting their own rational capabilities and letting them make their own decisions” (Gordon, 2011, p. 306). When it comes to PR, Bowen (2011; 2013) argues that knowledge of deontological ethics is useful for PR practitioners because it can inform more rational, defensible and enduring decisions. Although to implement deontological ethical reasoning, the PR practitioner must be as autonomous, unbiased and objective as possible, assessing all potential decisions (Bowen, 2011). Pratt, Im and Montague (1994) investigated the application of deontology amongst U.S. public relations practitioners, finding that practitioner application of deontological philosophy increased as the individuals’ careers progressed.

Kent and Taylor (2002) elude that the terms “dialogic” and “dialogue” are being increasingly coined by scholars and practitioners, to describe practical and ethical approaches to PR. Bowen (2011, p. 8) explains that a dialogic “discussion is ultimately supposed to arrive at the truth, or reveal the underlying truth to which the parties can agree.” Many philosophers consider dialogue to be inherently ethical, as it provides a setting for debate, where any

interested party can be involved, and where the value of arguments are based on merit alone, meaning that one argument will not be favoured over another (Bowen, 2011; Kent and Taylor, 2002). Bowen (2011), however, observes that concepts of symmetrical communication, relationship management and responsibility, which have been central to the development of PR practice over the last 40 years, overlap with significant theoretical concepts of dialogue. Furthermore, PR scholars such as Heath (2006) like to view dialogue as the way in which respectable organisations communicate openly with their publics. Pieczka (2011) counters however, stating that although discourse suggests that PR is essentially founded upon “dialogue,” unlike other academic disciplines, PR does not hold adequate expertise in “dialogue,” and questions public relations education for not teaching dialogic theory. The distinction between dialogue and advocacy is tenuous; dialogue seeks to reveal a truth and arguments are based on merit, whereas advocacy argues a positional basis or in other words from a bias perspective, that is unwilling to accept contesting arguments and where there is an ulterior motive (Bowen, 2011). This is not to say that the advocates’ position is true or untrue however, but because there is a bias involved, according to Bowen (2011) this deems advocacy unethical. Here we revisit the idea of PR as persuasion. When it comes to advocacy, Fawkes (2007) sees two approaches, the first being ‘Market Place Theory’ (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006). Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) see that advocacy fits with ‘market place theory,’ which argues that every organisation has the right to be heard in a free market. In other words, “marketplace theory is predicated, first on the existence of an objective ‘truth’ that will emerge from a cacophony of voices promoting various interests; second on a marketplace in which all citizens have the right- and perhaps the means – to be both heard and informed; and third, on the rational ability of people to discern ‘truth’ ” (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006, p. 4). Fawkes’ (2007) second approach to advocacy is based on the Rhetorical Theory (Heath and Vasquez, 2001; Toth and Heath, 1992) of communication and relates back to Aristotle with convincing ties to democracy. Rhetoric can be defined as “the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech or other compositional techniques” (Oxford dictionaries, n. d.). Fawkes (2007) suggests however, that although market place theory deems the advocacy model fairly uncritical, it does recognise that advocacy can lead to persuasion turning into propaganda. As previously mentioned, Bowen (2011) criticises advocacy, as it emphasises one-sided persuasion and does not take into consideration counter arguments from any publics. Pieczka (2011) writes further, that although public relations successfully functions and presents itself as an advocacy practice, it has practically ignored dialogic communication both in research and pedagogy.

Many theorists have researched the application of alternative philosophies to PR. Leeper (1996, p. 173) for example, investigated Public Relations Ethics and Communitarianism, stating “a Communitarian approach would suggest that what is best for the community is ultimately in the best interests of the organisation.” Communitarianism, dissimilar to Kantian ethics, poses a larger emphasis on responsibility over rights; arguing that for individuals to enjoy certain rights, they must first fulfill certain social responsibilities. The communitarian view therefore rejects Grunigs model of asymmetric communication (Leeper, 1996). Leeper (1996) asserts that businesses are increasingly recognising the importance of taking responsibility for not only profits, but for the consequences of its activities on groups external to the organisation, thus, arguing that the ethical theory of Communitarianism could set the ethical standard of PR and be the basis of a primary code of conduct. But, Bernays and Miller

(2005, p. 47), advocates of PR disagree, citing that PR and “manipulation of the masses” is important for democratic societies where millions of humans have to cooperate and live smoothly: “we are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized.”

Theorists, including Frances (1990) and Paluszek (1989), elude that public relations practitioners are uniquely qualified to make ethical decisions at organisational level. Fitzpatrick (1996) found however when surveying ethics officers in North American Institutions that public relations professionals are not playing key roles in the institutionalisation of ethics and that public relations remains a relatively untapped resource in ethics programmes. Furthermore, a study by Heath and Ryan (1989) found that public relations is often left out of the ethical decision-making process and that practitioners play limited roles in the development of corporate codes of conduct, with just over half of the respondents reporting that they were only moderately involved in developing corporate ethics programs (Fitzpatrick, 1996). In criticism, the Heath and Ryan (1989) research is out of date, and arguably inapplicable to the PR industry today, which has vastly evolved over the last twenty five years.

Recent studies have noted a considerable change in the practical application of PR ethics however. A study by Bowen and associates (2006) researched 1,827 International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) members, finding that 65% of respondents had access to the “dominant coalition” or the decision makers of organisations. Bowen (2011) argues that this shows PR practitioners are being heard at the highest levels of organisations, inputting at strategic planning and management level, and impacting on organisational ethical decision making. However, while American scholars debate ethics from a more neutral position examining the extent ethics is embedded in PR and business and the appropriate ways to discuss ethics in PR (Bowen 2011; 2013; Bowen & Erzikova 2013), European authors are more sceptical. For example, British PR scholar L’Etang (2003) sees PR as morally dubious and expresses criticism of PR education (see also L’Etang & Burton 2009). This criticism is in line with string criticism of the corporate conduct in the UK where there seems to be a growing hostility towards business (Grayson, 2009) due to irresponsible behaviour of certain international corporations (May & Zorn 2003; Tench et al., 2007; Pomeroy & Johnson 2009; Gulyas 2009), and the importance of CSR is growing because of which the UK Government tried to impose more regulations on companies (UK Government, 2013) even though ethical purchase seems to be on the downfall (UK Government, 2014a). On the other hand, because of harsh criticism of PR as an industry, two American scholars engaged in defending the field by publishing highly cited book “It’s Not Just PR” where they defended the profession and outlined its purpose and goals (Coombs & Holladay, 2013).

## **The Future of PR**

The implementation of ethical codes of conduct provides a detailed example of how the PR industry reacts to the importance of social responsibility in business practice. In order to set and maintain standards, public relations professional bodies, such as the CIPR, PRSA and PRCA, along with organisations themselves, implement detailed codes of ethical conduct. Bowen (2011) importantly points out however that membership to public relations

professional bodies is voluntary, and therefore non-members can still practice PR. The sanctions also seem to be loose. Leeper (1996) explains that in 1948 the Public relations Society in America (PRSA) took the lead in attempting to set a standardised ethical code of practice. On the other hand, Wilcox and associates (1986, p. 123) write that the PRCA implemented the code of ethical conduct for the three following reasons, “(1) its members would have behavioural guidelines, (2) management would have a clear understanding of standards, and (3) professionals in public relations would be distinguished from shady promoters.” Leeper (1996) argues however, that even though ethical codes exist, different practitioners interpret them differently. Heath and Vasquez (2001, p. 103) significantly point out that ethical codes of conduct are “representative of the liberal/legalistic/rules approach to ethics.”

However, what does the future of PR ethics currently look like? Leeper (1996a) writes that, organisations are increasingly accepting the systems theory concept; viewing themselves as part of an open, interdependent system, where decisions made outside of an organisation will ultimately impact the organisation, just like decisions made internally, will impact others externally. Similarly, Maignan and Ferrell (2004) argue that the growing importance of stakeholder theory and stakeholder orientation are increasing ethical awareness in marketing decision making, by taking into account the interests of relevant and associated stakeholders. Ferrell (n.d) writes that stakeholder theory assumes that stakeholders are ethically active rather than passive, and that organisations can make ethical decisions that sustain stakeholder relationships. Greenley and associates (2004), argue that if the application stakeholder theory continues to grow, then this will mean that marketing ethics will play an increasingly important role in the strategic planning process. Moreover, Leeper (1996) suggests that students of the practice need to be better educated on ethical approaches to help mould their actions as professionals, and this view has not lost validity given continuous confusion about defining PR that has not changed in years after this recommendation has taken place (Bowen 2009; Ferrel & Keig 2013; Edwards 2014). Ferrell and Keig (2013) agree, noting that there has been a consistent trend of growing amounts of ethical content being included in business curriculum. Additionally, Ferrell and Keig (2013) recommend the implementation of an ethics course, prescribing an adequate structural framework for the course itself. In support of this, recommendation 5 in the ‘PR 2020: The Future of Public Relations’ (CIPR, 2011, p. 3) report outlines that ‘Codes of conduct need to be strengthened.’ This implies that the PR practitioner will face bigger, more important ethical decisions in the future, as well as the fact that critical views of PR practice are strengthening. Interestingly, when considering CSR, and PR ethics and with relevance to the case study, Stoll (2002) argues that companies face more ethical scrutiny when using advertising tactics to market good corporate conduct, citing that there is higher risk of consumer trust being lost due to a lack of respect for the moral good. If for example, a company spends more on advertising good corporate conduct than it spends on CSR donations themselves, Stoll (2002) argues that such actions are misleading and thus unethical.

## **SAINSBURY’S AND THE SUPERMARKET INDUSTRY IN THE UK**

When it comes to the UK’s supermarket industry, there are several retail chains, however, the so-called “Big 4” is comprised of Tesco (with largest market share of 28.6%), ASDA



(second holder of the market share, holding 16.6%), Sainsbury's (third largest market share with 16.5%), and Morrisons (fourth with 10.9%) (Kantar UK, 2015). These four retailers hold 83.5% of the market share in total, and they are mostly positioned on the middle class mass market. Other than these four retail chains, two important retailers are also Waitrose and Marks & Spencer, which are premium retailers positioned on the upper scale of the market. In addition, as of 2014 two German retailers are continuously achieving growth in the UK market, i.e., discounters Lidl and Aldi (Kantar UK 2014; 2015).

Mintel report (2014) found in its 'Leading Grocers market share research,' that Sainsbury's came second behind Tesco with 48% of consumers using Sainsbury's for some of their shopping, which is a trend that has continued for several years now (Mintel 2013; 2013a). Additionally, in one of its recent reports (Mintel, 2014), research into branding using the trust/differentiation matrix found that Sainsbury's were the most trusted supermarket out of Tesco, Morrisons, Asda, Waitrose and Aldi, but came fourth on the differentiation scale. Furthermore, the Mintel report (2014) for the first time included budget supermarkets Aldi and Lidl, reflecting the increasing market share and growth in popularity both Aldi and Lidl are currently experiencing.

Grocery market research from Kantar World panel in November 2014 (McKevitt, 2015), found that for the first time since records began in 1994, the British grocery market fell into decline, with sales down 0.2% due to the falling cost of food commodities and as well as a raging price war between market competitors.

Founded in 1869, Sainsbury's - owned by J Sainsbury's PLC - is one of Britain's largest supermarkets, operating over 1,200 stores in the UK with over 150,000 employees (Sainsbury's, 2015a). Justin King, after ten years as Sainsbury's CEO stepped down in July 2014 and was replaced by Mike Coupe, former commercial director at Sainsbury's (Rankin and Butler, 2014). As a result, shareholder confidence fell as speculation grew that Justin King had left in prediction of difficult times ahead. Sainsbury has, however, always been positioned as a quality brand and not a price brand (Wood & Pierson, 2006) even though Sainsbury's has had a price match with all other members of the so-called *Big 4* until 2014 when they switched to price match ASDA only, with which they are again trying to appeal to the shoppers who prefer shopping with discounters because ASDA has always been positioned as a discounter (Butler, 2014).

## **Sainsbury's Christmas Campaign**

In recent years there has been an embellished trend in retail campaigning, i.e., which brand can produce the most popular Christmas campaign? The Christmas campaigns produced tend to be heavily broadcast and critiqued by media as well as consumers (social media and video sharing by consumers) giving brands a strong incentive to produce impactful and memorable campaigns at the busiest retail period of the year.

Sainsbury's 2014 Christmas campaign 'Christmas is for Sharing,' was a portrayal of the famous WWI Christmas Truce of 1914, on the Western Front. A product of a commercial partnership with *The Royal British Legion*, the campaign is a creative interpretation of German and British soldiers laying down their arms and peacefully meeting each other in no man's land to exchange gifts, greetings and to play a football match. The story then portrays a British Soldier giving a jacket to a German soldier who finds a chocolate bar hidden inside,

climaxing the story. This chocolate bar is significant because Sainsbury's retailed this specific chocolate bar in stores over the Christmas period, donating all profits to *The Royal British Legion*. Moreover, the 'Christmas is for Sharing' campaign was produced in commemoration of Sainsbury's 20-year corporate partnership with *The Royal British Legion*, as well as the centennial anniversary of the start of the First World War<sup>3</sup>.

The Sainsbury's campaign sparked much controversy and came 4<sup>th</sup> in the Advertising Standards Agency's (ASA) ten most complained about adverts of 2014, with 823 complaints (ASA, 2015). However, the ASA did not uphold the complaints and the advert broadcast on television was not banned (ibid). Sainsbury's was the grocer highest on the list of complaints with Waitrose following in 6<sup>th</sup> place following an untruthful portrayal of employee benefits (ibid). Nevertheless, the 'Christmas is for Sharing' campaign divided public opinion. Arguments formed against the campaign (Fogg, 2014; Critchlow, 2014) were generally concerned with the exploitation of the WWI centenary anniversary, a sensitive historic event, for commercial benefit. Fogg (2014), a Guardian newspaper journalist, described the campaign as 'a dangerous and disrespectful masterpiece', agreeing it was well made but criticising the depiction of WWI as beautiful, arguing that it disrespected the millions who died in the trenches. Critchlow (2014), a Telegraph journalist, similarly agrees that it is produced well, but criticises Sainsbury's for 'commercialising the horror of war.' On the other hand, Hooton (2014) a journalist for the Independent newspaper praised the campaign for its historic accuracy and production quality.

The *Christmas is for Sharing* campaign did however seemingly win battle of the Christmas campaigns 2014, with a Guardian opinion poll on, "Who has the best Christmas advert: John Lewis or Sainsbury's?" finding that the Sainsbury's advert was more popular, with a majority of 58% (Guardian, 2014). Furthermore, a poll conducted by Third Force News, asked if the Sainsbury's Christmas advert was distasteful, finding that 59.7% of respondents said no as opposed to 40.3% who said yes (Third Force News, 2014).

## Sainsbury's Corporate Social Responsibility

Sainsbury's operate an extensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy which is published on their website. The CSR strategy focuses on retailing and campaigning for healthy food and lifestyles, sourcing from suppliers with integrity, making positive differences in communities, reducing environmental impact and internally making Sainsbury's a positive place to work (Sainsbury's, 2015b). These elements usually constitute CSR because the majority of authors consider careful resourcing, employee management and positive impact on communities as core elements of PR (Topić & Tench, 2015). This is because CSR is no longer viewed only as a volunteer philanthropy of companies that are giving back to the society, but also as something that should form company's values, i.e., there has been an increased pressure on all companies to embed ethics in their business policies (Levashova 2014; Tench et al., 2007; Tench et al., 2014; Burchell & Cook, 2006; Golob & Bartlett 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> The Royal British Legion is a registered charity, dedicated to supporting British soldiers, past and present and their families. It provides "welfare, comradeship, and representation, as well as being the British custodian of Remembrance" (British Legion, 2015a). Along with Sainsbury's, M&S one of Sainsbury's major high street competitors also has a corporate partnership with The Royal British Legion (British Legion, 2015b).

In 2011, Sainsbury's released their 20x20 sustainability plan that outlined 20 sustainability targets to be achieved by 2020. Sainsbury's publish quarterly updates on their website to show progress. So far the 20x20 plan has been meeting its objectives, showing that Sainsbury's is committed to a sustainably responsible philosophy (Sainsbury's, 2015c). Additionally, in April 2012, Sainsbury's came 1<sup>st</sup> in the FTSE4 Good retail sector index (Sainsbury's 2015d). These policies are in line with policies enforced by the most ethical retailers recognised by critical NGO Ethical Consumer that publishes a list of ethical retailers and targets companies that do not conduct their business in a way they perceive as ethical. However, while Waitrose and Marks and Spencer have their place on the list, Sainsbury's does not (Ethical Consumer 2014; 2013; 2013a).

Sainsbury's have used Jamie Oliver as well as David Beckham as celebrity endorsers in the past. The Jamie Oliver and Sainsbury's contract expired and was not renewed in 2011, after 11 years of Oliver being the face of Sainsbury's campaigns; the majority of which were CSR orientated, with strong ties to the healthy school dinners revolution (Bowers, 2011). David Beckham was also the face of Sainsbury's *Active Kids Programme* since 2011 with a reported £3.5 million sponsorship deal, until November 2014 when Beckham was replaced by England and Liverpool footballer Daniel Strurrige (Ghosh, 2014).

Sainsbury's have a number of corporate partnerships, most notably *Comic Relief*, which Sainsbury's have helped raise over £30 million and are contracted to support until 2017. Other partners include *Fairshare* and *The Salvation Army*. Each individual Sainsbury's store also supports a local charity as picked by employees of the respective store (Sainsbury's, 2015e).

Although Sainsbury's implemented a stringent corporate social responsibility strategy, Sainsbury's came under criticism in November 2014 for cancelling their Nectar card reward points for reusing carrier bags scheme and instead offered more nectar points for fuel consumption (Smithers, 2014). Furthermore, although Sainsbury's own brand products were not directly involved (Ruddick, 2013), the 2013/14 horsemeat scandal affected like-for-like sales in the first quarter of 2014 (Stones, 2014).

In 2011, Sainsbury's ranked joint 2<sup>nd</sup>, while Comic Relief came 4<sup>th</sup> in the C&E Barometers' 'most admired partnership' rankings (C&E Advisory, 2011). In 2012, Sainsbury's dropped out of the top end of the C&E Barometer' 'most admired partnering companies' rankings (C&E Advisory, 2012). In 2013 and 2014, Sainsbury's were not even listed (C&E Advisory, 2013; C&E Advisory, 2014). However, the C&E Barometer 2014 found that the most admired corporate partnership was M&S and Oxfam; since 1999, Sainsbury's have helped raise over £95 million for Comic Relief (Sainsbury's, 2015), whereas M&S, since the start of their corporate partnership with Oxfam in 2008, have raised approximately £9.5 million. This suggests that there is an inherent lack of trust surrounding Sainsbury's in one way or another, although Mintel (2014) found that Sainsbury's were the most trusted British supermarket. In other words, it seems that depending on the interviewees, Sainsbury's reputation ranges from trusted to the inherent lack of trust, and this view is reflected in *Christmas is for Sharing* campaign, where the public divided on the ethical component of the campaign.

The above information outlines that Sainsbury's expends large amounts of resources on CSR; however there are still noted discrepancies in some aspects of its conduct. But, have Sainsbury's acted irresponsibly with the 'Christmas is for Sharing' campaign? This is the focal research question this paper will explore in the following sections.

## METHOD

The research methodology for this paper took a mixed methods approach utilising the quantitative method of surveying, as well as the qualitative method of discourse analysis. An online survey provided both statistical data and attitudinal data from respondents, to enable discussion whether or not the case study was deemed ethical and what students perceive the future state of ethics in PR to look like. Meanwhile, open-ended questions and a discourse analysis enabled collecting non-numerical data to capture meanings students ascribe to the campaign.

The case study for this research was Sainsbury's *Christmas is for sharing* campaign. Using the Sainsbury's 2014 Christmas campaign as a research case study implies consideration of both public relations and marketing, as the campaign meets objectives of both respective disciplines. The case study can be viewed from a PR perspective in terms of the Corporate Social Responsibility partnership with the *Royal British Legion*, or as a reputation enhancing strategy. On the other hand, it can also be viewed from a marketing perspective, with regards to the promotion of the 'Chocolate Bar,' and the use of television and online advertising as the primary communication channels. Nevertheless, we consider this campaign as a PR effort promoting Sainsbury's as a responsible company that helps social causes, and as an attempt to foster debate among the public and promote the company. We also consider this campaign as PR because the profit from selling the chocolate bar was donated to the Royal Legion, and there were no attempts to generally promote shopping in Sainsbury's during this campaign.

PR and marketing students have been specifically targeted as respondents, as it is likely that this group of people will work in the PR industries in the future and thus provides relevant attitudinal data that stipulated insights into the future state of ethics in PR. The fact that marketing students often go to work in PR comes from personal observation of authors at the Leeds Beckett University where, for many years, marketing students are successfully obtaining work placements in the PR industry, and from the fact marketing and PR jobs are advertised together where there seems to be a blurred distinction between two professions. On the other hand, since British scholars are more critical than the American ones, we wanted to look at ethical perceptions of PR and Marketing students in the UK to establish to what extent their views mirror existing criticism of PR as a profession.

The first dimension of the research consisted of an online survey. The survey received 42 responses over the four-week period that it was live: 22<sup>nd</sup> February to 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015. The research approached a national sample: students from around the UK have completed the questionnaire. We approached course leaders in Marketing and PR at the UK Universities to gain access to university students via email communication, in which a web link to the survey was included. Contact information for these course leaders was extracted from the 'CIPR University Course List' (CIPR, 2015) which can be accessed publically on the CIPR website. In addition, we shared the survey on our personal social media networks.

The survey included a mixture of closed and open questions. Closed, Likert scale questions asked about respondents' views and opinions. An open question followed each closed question (other than demographic information questions), which asked respondents to explain their decisions. This allowed analysing why respondents may have made their decisions. The second dimension of the research consisted of a critical discourse analysis

(CDA) on the open-ended question responses from the online survey, in order to analyse meanings students ascribe to ethics in PR, gain a deeper insight into their views and juxtapose these findings against the context of Sainsbury's position in the UK market. We followed the CDA approach established by Ruth Wodak (1999), and this approach to CDA was deemed as most appropriate to this paper, as the discourse analysis involved analysing arguments and meanings in the questionnaire responses. Wodak (2001, p. 65) outlines that CDA should not attempt to conclude what is right or wrong, but the researcher should, "make choices in the research itself, and should make these choices transparent ..."

Research on students is a popular method for making an inquiry into possible future of profession in stake because if we look at how future professionals think we might be able to re-design current policies and curriculums, and it is necessary to look at views of people who will, in the future, have a chance to directly influence organisation's policies (Eweje & Brunton, 2010). For example, many researches have been conducted on college students in general to establish whether students have strong ethical awareness, and whether age influences ethical decision making. As it appeared, age and career progress usually influences ethical decision making, and older students tend to be more ethical while females tend to be more ethical than men (Tilley et al., 2011; Eweje & Brunton 2010; Knotts et al., 2000; Weeks et al., 1999; Beltrami et al., 1994; Barnett et al., 1994; Ruegger & King 1992; Serwinek 1992; Peterson et al., 1991; Betz et al., 1989; Schwartz 1989; Longenecker et al., 1988; Jones & Gauthi 1988; Miesing & Preble 1985; Cron 1984; Gilligan 1982). However, a few researches have contested these findings showing that age does not necessarily have to be a factor that influences ethical decisions (Barnett et al., 1994; Poorsoltan et al., 1991; Burton & Casey 1980), yet these researches are in the minority and conducted during 1980s and 1990s while research confirming higher ethics among mature students is more recent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Survey Results

The questionnaire attracted 42 responses, with a sample predominantly including students aged 18 to 24 years. The sample was sufficiently good for discussing the future of PR because the majority of respondents were enrolled on a PR degree or a PR related degree. Gender diversity in this study was reflective of the global PR industry where there are more women than men working in the field (Wyatt, 2013; Aldoory and Toth, 2002).<sup>4</sup> In other words, research attracted 38.1% of males and 61.9% of females. Due to the sample being specifically students, the majority (81%) of respondents were aged between 18 and 24 years while the remaining part falls for other age groups, or 25-34 (9.5%), 35-44 (7.1%), and 55-64 (2.4%). No responses were received from respondents' aged 45 to 54, or 65 or older.

The majority of respondents (64.3%) were undergraduate, Bachelor students, which relates to the majority of respondents being aged 18 to 24. Some respondents (31%) were studying for a Master degree, while other respondents (7.1%) were undertaking professional

<sup>4</sup> Similarities also exist in the USA, where in 2002 it was found that 70% of PR professionals were female while men accounted for just 30% (Aldoory and Toth, 2002), which shows that PR is globally a predominantly female industry.

degrees. The one ‘other’ response was a student undertaking a Higher National Diploma, still qualifying as a respondent. The overwhelming majority of respondents (45.2%) were studying PR alone. The second most popular response to the question was ‘other,’ which included degrees such as PR and Media Management, PR and Communications, and Business Management/Studies. The research welcomed respondents from ‘other’ courses because it gave the research comprehensive results, from students who study degrees that involve PR but also link with other related subjects.

At the beginning of the survey, students were given YouTube video with Sainsbury’s advert as it was firstly shown on the TV to remind them of the story and the campaign. They were not given additional information on the campaign, nor were they asked to evaluate campaign as such. We asked them about the TV advert only, because TV advert presented the campaign.

When it comes to the extent students liked Sainsbury’s campaign, Figure 1 shows respondent’s perceptions. The majority of respondents (42.9%) said that they liked the campaign. Although this question asked for responses to be noted on a Likert scale, the responses are equally representative of the poll conducted by *Third Force News*, which asked if the Sainsbury’s Christmas advert was distasteful, finding that 59.7% of respondents said no as opposed to 40.3% who said yes (Third Force News, 2014). The results could also be compared with newspaper narrative discussed earlier in the paper where the media were divided over the campaign (Fogg, 2014; Hooton 2014). The results also suggest that the views of PR students do not significantly differ from those of the general public. With regards to gender differences, more female respondents (46.2%) liked the advert than males (37.5%). Yet, the same amount males and females disliked the advert out of the overall sample. When asked if respondents’ liked or disliked the Sainsbury’s Christmas advert, the overwhelming majority said that they liked the advert, with Master students far much partial to the advert than Bachelor students.

Figure 2 shows respondents opinions on whether or not the Sainsbury’s Christmas campaign was ethical or unethical. The majority (45.2%) of respondents seem to have sat on the fence, answering ‘neither ethical nor unethical.’ This shows the extent to which the advert divided public opinion, and that the students were unclear about the campaign themselves. These results can be related to results in study by Bowen (2009) where even PR students failed in properly defining PR, and mixed PR with marketing and advertising.

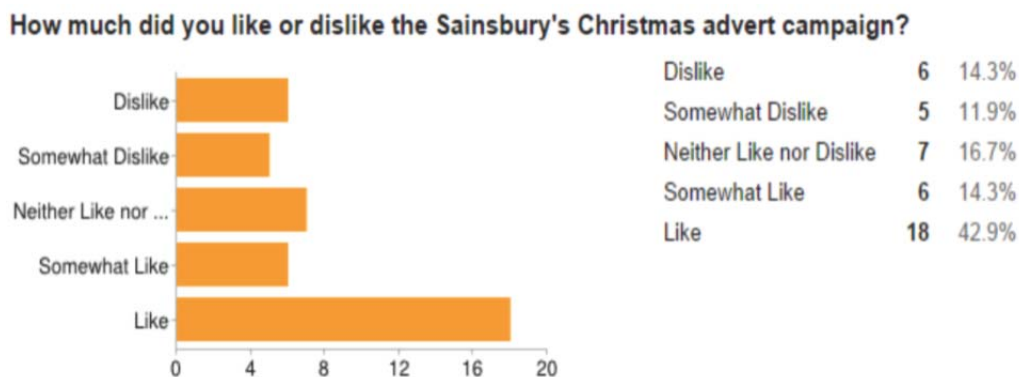


Figure 1. The Extent Students liked Sainsbury’s Christmas Campaign.

### To what extent do you think this advert is ethical or unethical?

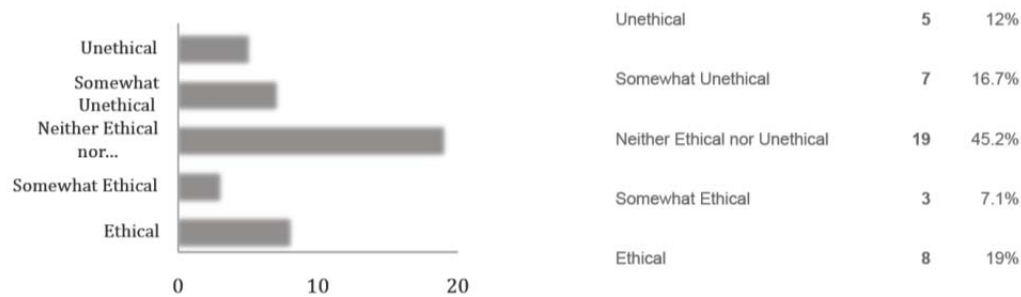


Figure 2. Student's Perceptions about Ethical Component of the Campaign.

### In your opinion, how do you envisage PR industry in the next 20 years?

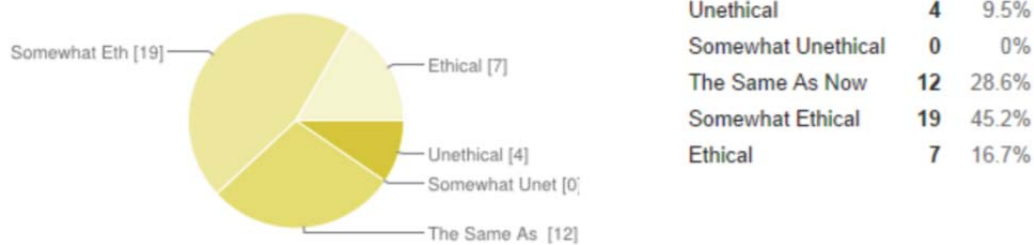


Figure 3. The Future of PR.

In the same way, even PR students were unsure whether this advert was unethical or not despite the fact they acknowledge that ethics has been included in the curriculum (as we will discuss in the next section). Yet, interestingly more respondents deemed the advert 'ethical' (19%) than 'unethical' (12%). Strangely, more respondents deemed the advert somewhat unethical (16.7%) as opposed to somewhat ethical (7.1%), which could suggest that many of the respondents acknowledged arguments for or against the advert, but did not go as far to deem it completely ethical or unethical.

Figure 3 shows respondents' opinions on how ethical the PR industry is set to become over the next 20 years. The majority of respondents (45.2%) answered that they think the PR industry is set to become 'somewhat ethical' in 20 years. This describes an improvement from the PR industries current ethical state, suggesting that PR students are aware of the critical arguments against PR practice and aware that the practice may need to become more ethical. The second largest majority (28.6%) think that the PR industry will stay the same as now. Interestingly, 16.7% of respondents' decided that the PR industry would be absolutely ethical in 20 years.

To summarise, more students liked the campaign than those who did not, supporting online opinion polls already discussed. However, more respondents deemed the advert more unethical than ethical, with the vast majority considering the advert to be neither ethical nor

unethical. Similar numbers of males and females liked the advert, showing that gender does not influence perceptions on the advert, although more females considered the advert to be more unethical than males, which goes in line with existing research according to which women are more ethically aware than men (Eweje & Brunton 2010; Knotts et al., 2000; Beltramini et al., 1994; Barnett et al., 1994; Peterson et al., 1991; Ruegger & King 1992; Schwartz 1989; Jones & Gautschi 1988; Betz et al., 1989; Miesing & Preble 1985; Gilligan 1982). Additionally, far more Master students considered the advert to be ethical than Bachelor students, suggesting that younger students are more ethically sensitive than mature students who seem to be more tolerant, which goes against existing research according to which mature students are more ethically sensitive (e.g., Eweje & Brunton 2010; Weeks et al., 1999; Ruegger & King 1992; Longenecker et al., 1988).

### **Discourse Analysis**

After analysing the survey and observing student's opinions on the Sainsbury's Christmas campaign and the ethical future of PR, a discourse analysis has been undertaken to investigate student perceptions further. The students were undecided when imposed to make a choice on the Likert scale. However, open-ended questions provided a more clear insight into their actual views since they were asked to explain their answers.

The first open-ended question asked students to state whether or not they liked the Sainsbury's advert, and as already emphasised the students opinions were polarised. However, the discourse analysis revealed that students mostly express positive views on the advert and that they actually liked it. Interestingly however, many framed their answers inside ethical aspects when evaluating whether they liked the advert or not, which does show awareness of ethical issues among students in the UK but it shows lack of consensus on what is ethical. For example:

“It has a nice story line, showing human compassion for others, even in times of conflict. However I do understand why some people might not like it because of the context of the war and Christmas.”

On the other hand, those who disliked the advert emphasised that the story was nice and the advert was well executed but the commercial aspect ruined the story and made a bad impression, because a sensitive historic event has been exploited for commercial purposes:

“... I thought it was brilliantly made- in terms of the execution and emotional connection it creates, and if it was an advert for Help for Heroes, or The Royal British legion on their own, would have been fantastic. However, the second that a Sainsbury's logo appears, it instantly leaves a sour taste, even with the fact that it was made in partnership with the British Legion. Especially with the tagline ‘Christmas is for Sharing’ which I personally read as Christmas is for buying stuff for people. I like brands tapping into history or pop culture to resonate within the audience but to take such a treasured piece of history, arguably a case study of the best points of humanity and stick a logo that is completely irrelevant on it just seems disrespectful in my opinion. In fact, the great execution of the advert probably works against it, because it creates such a strong emotional connection, I think I was more disappointed when the final logo appeared.”



“I didn’t like it as I felt it was taking a very emotive subject and using it for product sales. For me the two do not go together.”

This criticism is in line with predominant UK criticism of PR as a morally dubious industry lacking professional standards (L’Etang 2003; L’Etang & Burton 2009); however, this view shows that students are aware of ethical concerns in the communications. Interestingly, one student stated, that the problem with the advert is that Sainsbury’s as a company does not set ethical values high enough to get involved in a cause such as this one:

“Don’t agree with commercialising this topic. If Sainsbury’s ethics married up to this video then that would perhaps be acceptable, but to me this is a stand-alone value piece that sits outside of the Sainsbury’s brand, i.e., they have cashed in on an opportunity/trigger point. You could argue that this is clever.”

This view also confirms views already revealed in public polls where Sainsbury’s collaborations with NGOs are not highly rated; actually Comic Relief and Sainsbury’s both dropped out of C&E’s ‘most admired NGO’s’ and ‘most admired partnering companies’ in 2012 (C&E Advisory, 2012). This is in contrast to, for example, the corporate partnership between M&S and Oxfam, who have come first in C&E’s ‘most admired corporate-NGO partnerships and partners’ every year since 2010 (C&E Advisory, 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014). Sainsbury’s lack of trust as a partnering organisation is fairly unexplainable. Since 1999, Sainsbury’s have helped raise over £95 million for *Comic Relief* (Sainsbury’s, 2015f), whereas M&S, since the start of their corporate partnership with *Oxfam* in 2008, have raised approximately £9.5 million. Nevertheless, Sainsbury’s does have strong CSR policies and the company has not been involved in major corporate scandals on food quality (Ruddick 2013; Stones 2014), treatment of employees, etc.

The second open-ended question asked respondents to comment on the extent to which the Sainsbury’s Christmas advert is ethical or unethical. The results reflect the polarization of opinions towards the advert, as the majority of students stated that it was ‘neither ethical nor unethical,’ and in this particular question there was no significant deviation from the initial response on closed questions. Respondents’ who answered in this way were generally aware of both sides of the argument:

“I’m aware that some people find it unethical, but I don’t fully understand why. I think it’s a nice advert that presents Christmas as a time to love, share and be grateful for what we have.”

“Ethical in a sense that it raises money for the Royal British Legion charity, unethical as it is using a war in which millions of lives were lost to increase Christmas trade in a high street supermarket.”

The partnership with the *Royal British Legion* was recognised as a positive factor that helps justify the use of WWI in this instance. Yet, students equally recognised the controversial aspect of exploiting an emotional event for commercial purposes:

“Sainsbury’s handled the subject delicately and there was a charity aspect to the campaign. They had the approval of the British legion.”

“I think it is important to sometimes be remembered that also good things can happen in wars, especially in today’s times, where there seem to be wars everywhere. Also, the fact that the ad was produced together with the British Legion made it somehow more acceptable than if it was solely made by Sainsbury’s.”

Students who considered the advert to be unethical and somewhat unethical tended to be against the glamorisation of a horrendous historic event, generally premising their views on the exploitation of use of war to induce emotion for commercial benefit:

“Using love, unity and togetherness in the film to portray Sainsbury’s in a good light. Pretty unethical tapping into raw human emotion of the world war to sell food at Christmas! They could use some of that human emotion to right many wrongs in the world and perhaps stop skipping corporation tax but no!”

“This was a brutal conflict in which millions of young men and women lost their lives for very dubious causes. Sullyng their memory by attempting to glamorise what was one of the most hideous conflicts of the 20th century is appalling. Utterly appalling.”

In other words, it seems that Sainsbury’s facing general corporate criticism of not being socially responsible enough by not paying taxes, which is an issue some companies faced recently. Nevertheless, students seem to express disagreement with presenting company in a good light by using emotional communication because they find this practice unethical even though CIPR’s definition of PR actually says that PR is about enhancing reputation and building good relations with publics. Nevertheless, one response noted that the marriage between the Sainsbury’s brand and *The Royal British Legion* did not match. This could again be attributed to the negative associations of Sainsbury’s corporate partnerships as discussed in the C&E Barometer (2014). In other words:

“I don’t think it marries up with their brand. It’s a sensitive issue for many people and families and I didn’t think Sainsbury’s are the right commodity to push this message out form.”

The final open-ended question asked students to explain their predictions on the state of ethics in the PR industry in 20 years’ time. The majority of students’ predicted that the PR industry would become somewhat more ethical over the next 20 years; while the second largest majority stated that they thought it would stay the same as now. Students who predicted that the PR industry is set to become more ethical over the next 20 years tended to form their arguments on the digital evolution and how this has induced consumer demand for increased organisational transparency, while also creating social networks where it is hard to hide from criticism. This is relatable to the ‘systems theory’ concept as discussed in the literature review, which describes the growing trend in organisations viewing themselves as part of an open, interdependent system, where decisions made outside of an organisation will impact the organisation, just like decisions made internally, will impact others externally. For example:

“I think the industry will become more honest as society demands it and there will be more conversations, storytelling and relationship building rather than "undercover selling.”

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“I think that PR is taking steps to become more ethical and with the industry becoming more professional we will see improvements in this area. But with an industry in growth there are always going to be those pushing boundaries while innovating so I don't think we could ever be called entirely ethical.”

Furthermore, some responses alluded to ethics in education teaching students to be open and honest. For the example:

“I believe that my class, and students who go through my programme, are taught how to be ethical and the importance of ethics in PR. We're taught to tell the truth, tell it first and tell it all. It's important to be open and honest, even in hard times.”

The second largest majority of students predicted that they thought the PR industry is set to stay the same as now in 20 years. Interestingly, one of the responses stated that PR people will not follow codes of conduct, which relates back to the literature review, where it was discussed that membership of professional bodies are not a requirement and thus codes of conduct do not have to be followed. This relates to another response, which argued that ethical conduct depends on individuals rather than the industry as a whole:

“I believe the PR industry will always be viewed in a negative way in some respects due to people believing stereotypes. Not all people will follow correct codes of conduct.”

“I think PR industry will stay the same, I think ethics depend on the actions of individuals rather than an industry.”

Significantly, only four respondents predicted that the PR industry was set to become unethical in 20 years' time, while no respondents stated that it would become somewhat more unethical. However, one response stood out by arguing that PR is converging with other business activities and thus will not be able to change its current ethical direction. This point, to some extent relates to the convergence of PR and marketing as discussed in the first section of this paper, which is interesting because the more PR integrates with other business functions, the more it has to conform to the divergent ethical codes of these functions, making it harder to implement an absolute PR industry ethics code. This can be seen in this case study, where CSR, a PR function has converged with advertising; the advert aggressively publicises the CSR partnership through emotive, controversial themes and excellent production quality, which has led to an abundance of criticism. This could be seen as good for sales (the advertising function) but bad for reputation (the PR function), or as students put it:

“It's all about money and greed now. People will do anything to save a reputation or to get some publicity.”

“I'd like to think it won't become unethical, but I think there are more and more unethical people joining the industry, or people who perhaps don't have a proper understanding of what PR truly is and the true values behind it. I think there's an increasing number of opportunities for PR practitioners to act unethically and hope that no-one will notice.”

“I think that it will be much more complicated and change into a way different path than it already is. Because of convergence in the business, PR is becoming a mix of all

things. By that, PR is shifting dramatically and personally, I do not see that PR will be much ethical in the future.”

In summary, the discourse analysis exposed Sainsbury’s inherent problem of unsuccessful/untrusted corporate partnerships in the eyes of consumers. Additionally, the discourse analysis found that opinions towards the case study were entirely polarized with respondents recognising both sides of the argument. Some respondents enjoyed that advert, praising it for being a respectful tribute to Soldiers of WWI, while others claimed it exploited an emotive topic for product sales. With regards to the future state of ethics in PR, it was found that many respondents believed that the PR industry will become more ethical due to the increasing demand for organisational transparency which is supplemented by digital and social media. Additionally, increased professionalism in the industry and the increasing implementation of ethics into PR curriculum were recognised. At the same time, students who predicted the ethical state of the PR industry to stay the same as now recognised the fact that ‘controversy sells’ as well as the convergence between of PR in business, as factors that would prevent the industry becoming more ethical.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, with relevance to the literature review and ethical schools of thought Sainsbury’s actually acted within the grounds of deontology, communitarianism and arguably utilitarianism. A utilitarian viewpoint would describe Sainsbury’s actions as trying to do the greatest good for the greatest number; it would see that using a controversial topic for the campaign with the potential to offend as a permissible act, because the campaign is produced to benefit the greater good, designed to raise money for the many ex-servicemen that *The Royal British legion* support, thus the ends justify the means. The consequence of the campaign, seen in terms of the ex-Servicemen that the campaign helps, would offset the offence that the campaign may cause, as objectively helping the vulnerable would be seen as more important than subjectively offending an audience. From a deontological perspective, Sainsbury’s can be seen as acting upon their duty to society, by implementing CSR strategies. The campaign would be deemed ethically permissible by Kantian schools of thought, as moral decisions are not based on consequences, because the motivation for the production of the campaign is morally right. Sainsbury’s essentially acted within the remit of a communitarian philosophy, on the premise that what is “best for the community is ultimately in the best interests of the organisation” (Leeper, 1996, p. 173). Sainsbury’s corporate partnership with *The Royal British Legion* could be seen as doing best for the community, which is in the best interests for Sainsbury’s, as in return Sainsbury’s expect this corporate partnership to enhance their reputation as a good corporate citizen.

However, students were largely polarised in their views over the campaign even though majority did like the campaign. However, even those students who liked the campaign stated they understand why some thought it was not ethical. Those who disliked the campaign opposed it purely based on ethical component, i.e., they thought it is unethical to exploit corporate partnership for what they perceived was a commercial purpose. The polarization of opinions towards the campaign may suggest that UK based PR students are not adequately educated on PR ethics, as ethical theories generally view the campaign as permissible, but are

critical in line with general criticism of business in the UK as well as existing criticism of PR among British scholars. In other words, there is a growing hostility towards business, and the public generally has a negative view of corporations. At the same time however, the polarization of opinions and recognition of ethical discrepancies surrounding the Sainsbury's Christmas campaign suggests that PR students are morally aware of the ethical connotations of PR, which should be considered as positive news with regards to the future state of PR ethics. On the other hand, a worrying trend shows that student have little understanding of PR as a profession, and what PR professional actually does. In other words, while it was not majority who felt that way, it is still worrying that some PR students frame reputation enhancement, which is inherent to PR, into greed and chasing the corporate profit and place the usual PR practice of enhancing reputation within unethical practices. What is particularly interesting is that younger students were more ethically concerned than the mature ones, which goes against existing research that shows that mature students are more ethical. On the other hand, this could be the result of education where younger students are less educated on PR and their views might change as their education progresses.

While these findings cannot offer a full picture and definitive conclusions given a limited number of respondents, they do point towards problems in PR education in the UK that were already recorded in previous research conducted in the US (Bowen, 2009). Future research, therefore, needs to look at the PR education in general and into ethical modules in particular to establish what are PR students taught, how to overcome persistent lack of understanding what PR is, and what constitutes an ethical practice in PR.

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