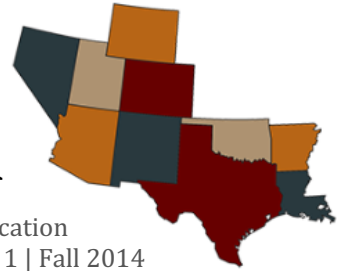


Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication
ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 30 No. 1 | Fall 2014

A Comparison of Advertising and Public Relations Students on Ethics: Attitudes and Predicted Behavior

Jami A. Fullerton, Lori McKinnon, and Alice Kendrick
Oklahoma State University, Southern Methodist University

A comparison of attitudes between advertising students and those studying public relations revealed many similarities and some notable differences in their views about professional ethics. Both groups agreed that it was very important to work for an ethical employer, though they both also echoed public sentiment that not all advertising or public relations organizations practice high ethics. Public relations students believed more strongly in the ethicality of their profession. When faced with descriptions of six ethical workplace dilemmas, both advertising and PR students exhibited basic balance or symmetry in their reactions, rejecting five questionable behaviors as unethical and predicting they would be unlikely to partake in such activity. A scenario involving the use of environmental claims for an environmentally embattled client was embraced more by public relations students than by those studying advertising. Implications for educators and communications curricula are discussed.

Suggested citation:

Fullerton, J. A., McKinnon, L., & Kendrick, A. (2014). A comparison of advertising and public relations students on ethics: Attitudes and predicted behavior. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 30(1). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

A Comparison of Advertising and Public Relations Students on Ethics:

Attitudes and Predicted Behavior

Jami A. Fullerton, Ph.D.
Professor
Oklahoma State University
700 N. Greenwood Ave.
Tulsa, Oklahoma USA 74106
ph.: 918/594-8579
fax: 918/594-8281
e-mail: jami.fullerton@okstate.edu

Lori McKinnon, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Oklahoma State University
700 N. Greenwood Ave.
Tulsa, Oklahoma USA 74106
ph.: 918/594-8579
fax: 918/594-8281
e-mail: lori.mckinnon@okstate.edu

Alice Kendrick, Ph.D.
Professor
Temerlin Advertising Institute
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas USA 75275
ph.: 214/768-2381
fax: 214/768-1155
e-mail: akendric@smu.edu

**A Comparison of Advertising and Public Relations Students on Ethics:
Attitudes and Predicted Behavior**

Abstract

A comparison of attitudes between advertising students and those studying public relations revealed many similarities and some notable differences in their views about professional ethics. Both groups agreed that it was very important to work for an ethical employer, though they both also echoed public sentiment that not all advertising or public relations organizations practice high ethics. Public relations students believed more strongly in the ethicality of their profession. When faced with descriptions of six ethical workplace dilemmas, both advertising and PR students exhibited basic balance or symmetry in their reactions, rejecting five questionable behaviors as unethical and predicting they would be unlikely to partake in such activity. A scenario involving the use of environmental claims for an environmentally embattled client was embraced more by public relations students than by those studying advertising. Implications for educators and communications curricula are discussed.

A Comparison of Advertising and Public Relations Students on Ethics: Attitudes and Predicted Behavior

Today's strategic communications students must create innovative and effective ways to communicate organizational messages across a wide variety of media. No longer is it practical to consider advertising without public relations and vice versa. Thus, there is a blurring of traditional advertising and public relations functions both in the profession and in the classroom. The realities of our postmodern world suggest that we view and practice strategic communication holistically (Hallahan, et al., 2007).

To reflect this change, many university programs are combining their advertising and public relations degrees into one major; however, students still tend to identify themselves as advertising or public relations students. Accordingly, they aspire to certain areas of the broadly defined profession and in doing so join student chapters of professional organizations, such as the American Advertising Federation (AAF) and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). This study examines separately student members of both groups from across the country and measures their attitudes and intended behaviors toward ethically questionable scenarios the likes of which they may face in their careers. The study extends previous work in this area by focusing on the differences between students who identify as future advertising executives and those who consider themselves future PR professionals.

Background

Historically, the general public tends to consider the advertising and public relations professions as somewhat unethical. Most recognize advertising and public

relations messages as persuasive communication, and many consider their practices dishonest and unethical (Jones, 2007; Saad, 2009). Despite their reputation, advertising and public relations professionals cite ethics as a core value. During the first half of the nineteenth century, both industries created professional organizations and established ethical guidelines built primarily on a foundation of journalism and business ethics (McBride, 1984; *Institute for Advertising Ethics*, 2011).

The American Advertising Federation is the nation's largest advertising association, representing more than 40,000 advertising professionals and more than 6,500 student members. The AAF's mission is to promote and protect the advertising profession. In terms of ethics, the AAF recently created the Institute for Advertising Ethics in 2010 (www.aaf.org) through a joint partnership with the Missouri School of Journalism. The institute drafted a resolution in 2011 outlining the "Principles and Practices for Advertising Ethics," which was heralded as a new advertising code of ethics by *Advertising Age* magazine ("Ad industry," 2011). Advertising professionals also adhere to other industry codes of ethics such as those from the Better Business Bureau and the American Association of Advertising Agencies.

In 1947, the Public Relations Society of America, the world's largest organization of PR professionals, was chartered with ethical practice as a foremost consideration. PRSA created its first written code of ethics 1950 and added provisions for enforcement in 1959. Over the years, PRSA added a Grievance Board (1962) and a Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (1983). In 2000, the Code of Ethics was revised to focus on key values (advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness) and provisions. Today, PRSA represents more than 21,000 public relations and

communication professionals in the United States. The organization also includes more than 10,000 Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members (www.prsa.org). This study analyzes data collected from student members of the AAF and PRSA.

Research indicates that ethics codes, such as those put forth by the AAF and PRSA, can be influential in ethical decision-making, especially when reinforced (Chonko, Tanner, & Weeks, 1996). Pratt and James (1994) contend that the adoption of professional guidelines helps practitioners to address ethical questions. Additionally, other researchers have found that students' perceptions of ethical standards may influence their behaviors in the workplace (Keith, Pettijohn, and Burnett, 2008). As today's students are tomorrow's practitioners, it is vital to understand students' attitudes and intended behaviors toward professional ethics.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Hodges (1986) argues that professional responsibility lies with what one is prepared to do given a moral dilemma. Kant provides the foundation for duty-based or deontological ethics. Pratt and James (1994) argue that Kantian ethics provides the framework for studying self-reported ethics. Not only is it important to consider the doer's actions, but also the individual's sense of moral duty. Likewise, Bowen (2004) argues that a duty-based approach yields more rational, defensible and enduring decisions. With such a deontological framework, one should attempt to remove biases and examine ethical decisions from multiple angles. Deontology applies well to the current study since moral duty is explored by examining attitudes toward ethical

dilemmas. In this study, the researchers also measure predicted actions by separately measuring intended behaviors regarding dilemmas.

Inconsistencies between a person's attitudes and actions can often lead to a psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance (Fettingner, 1957). In this study, cognitive dissonance is also considered when examining how students feel about the ethicality of their chosen profession and their commitment to working in the industry.

Students and Ethics Research

Patterson and Wilkins (2011) explain, "Thinking about ethics won't necessarily make tough choices easier, but, with practice, ethical decision-making can become more consistent" (p.3). In advertising and public relations education, examining ethical case scenarios in the classroom is common. Ethical dilemmas can be anticipated and prepared for, but resolution must come from the individual.

Ethical dilemmas provide a foundation for ethics research in strategic communications disciplines. Use of scenarios allows researchers to standardize stimuli and makes decision-making more realistic (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Chonko, Tanner, & Weeks, 1996). Researchers have found that college students generally are concerned about ethics (Peterson, Beltramini, & Kozmetsky, 1991). However, some are more concerned than others.

Studying business students' reactions to marketing dilemmas, Lane (1995) found that some students indicated that they would act unethically to gain a competitive advantage. Mayhew and Murphy (2009) also studied the impact of ethics education and reported behaviors. They found that students were more likely to act ethically when behavior was "made public" than when behavior was "anonymous." Marketing scholars

also have found that female and older students responded more ethically for most scenarios (Lane, 1995; Malinowski and Berger, 1997).

Case studies can provide a bridge between theory and practice. Thus, one of the best ways to prepare students for practice may be to engage in ethical discussions and “*what if*” scenarios. Luthar, DiBattista, and Gautschi (1997) found that students exposed to ethical issues in a course were more likely to associate ethical behavior with successful outcomes. Research indicates that ethics instruction can have a positive effect on students’ value systems (Serlin, 1987; McCuddy and Peery, 1996; Erzikova, 2010). In a survey of advertising and public relations alumni, Gale and Bunton (2005) found that ethics instruction correlated with ethical awareness and leadership. Graduates exposed to ethics courses were significantly more likely to consider professional ethics important and to value ethics highly. Moreover, these individuals were more likely to have engaged in ethics discussions with colleagues and to view personal/professional ethics as indistinguishable.

Previous ethics research with Ad and PR students

XXX, XXX, & XXX (2013) surveyed AAF student chapter members nationally to measure their attitudes and behavioral intent toward 12 ethical dilemmas in advertising. Advertising students found client overbilling to be the most unethical, but had less concern about situations involving the ad itself, such as digitally altering a photograph. For ten of the scenarios presented, students exhibited a significant difference between levels of ethicality and likelihood of engaging in the behavior. The researchers concluded that students were more likely to participate in ethically questionable activities that were perceived to be part of the business and “what everyone else was doing” such

as airbrushing a model's photo to make her look thinner. They were not so likely to engage in less ethically troubling scenarios, like online gaming at work, because such actions might be frowned upon by others.

In a separate but similar study (XXX & XXX, 2013), PRSSA members were surveyed about their ethical attitudes and behavioral intent when faced with dilemmas that might be encountered in the PR business. PR students also found client overbilling to be the most unethical among the scenarios listed and said that they were least likely to plagiarize a speech. Students were most likely to promote the questionable initiatives of an oil company with whom they were hypothetically employed. Significant differences between how PR students rated the ethical nature of a dilemma and the likelihood they would engage in the behavior was found in six of ten scenarios. The same pattern of engaging in activities that were considered an acceptable part of the business was also evident in the PR study.

Research Questions

The current study combines the data from these two previously reported surveys in order to make comparisons between advertising and public relations students. Six scenarios were used in both studies and therefore were selected for analysis. Identifying student differences and similarities will provide better understanding of students' perceptions of the individual industries and aid educators in guiding future practitioners in their professional development regarding ethics. Toward this end, the following questions were investigated:

RQ1. Do opinions about the ethical nature of the advertising and public relations industries differ significantly by students' area of study?

RQ2. When presented with ethically questionable business scenarios, do advertising and PR students rate the ethical nature of the scenario differently?

RQ3. When presented with ethically questionable business scenarios, is there a significant difference between advertising and PR students in their likelihood to personally engage in the behavior described?

Method

This study compares the data from of two separate and previously reported national surveys – one of student chapter members of the American Advertising Federation (AAF) (XXX, XXX & XXX, 2013) and one of members of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) (XXX & XXX, 2013). Both surveys were similar in content and conducted online via the Zoomerang platform. The survey of public relations students was launched on October 25, 2012, and data collection continued through December 3, 2012. An email invitation was sent to 6,612 usable addresses of PRSSA student chapter members at 327 universities. The survey of advertising students was launched on April 14, 2008, and closed June 3, 2008. Similarly, an email invitation was sent to an estimated 6,000 usable addresses of AAF student ad club members at 228 universities. In both cases, email recipients were directed to a Web site where they completed the questionnaire. Participants responded anonymously to closed- and open-ended questions about issues related to their education, career preferences and industry ethics. Those who completed the advertising questionnaire were offered the chance to win two airline ticket vouchers in exchange for their participation. Those who completed the PR survey were entered in a drawing to win one of two iPad tablets.

Instrument

The instruments for both surveys were similar, with changes made only to items that were specific to advertising or public relations. The sections about ethics contained six scenarios that were the same on the advertising and PR questionnaires. The scenarios, taken from Keith, Pettijohn and Burnett (2008), required students to respond to directional statements dealing with the ethics and social responsibility aspects of the communications business. Students were asked to rate each case on how ethical the action in the scenario was on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = Ethical; 1 = Unethical). Further, students were asked to decide how likely they would be to participate in the action or a similar action if they were put in the situation described (7 = Very likely, 1 = Very unlikely).

Data Analysis

Responses from both surveys were combined into one data set for analysis. Independent sample t-tests were used to compare responses between advertising and public relations students.

Respondent profile

For the PR survey, a total of 789 students from 226 colleges and universities who were members of PRSSA responded, which represented a response rate of 11.9% of the estimated number of student email addresses. For the advertising survey, a total of 1,045 AAF students from 176 colleges and universities responded to the survey. This represented a response rate of 17.4% of the estimated number of student emails and a rate of 77.2% in terms of the number of AAF college chapters. For operational purposes, students who were members of PRSSA are considered “public relations students” and

those who were members of AAF are labeled “advertising students.” While some students study both advertising and public relations and may be members of both organizations, it is unlikely that any of the respondents in this study was in both cohorts because of the time difference between the data collection.

PR Students. Eighty-eight percent of the PR respondents were female. The majority were White, non-Hispanic (77.9%); 6.8% were African-American; 6.3% were Hispanic; 3.8% were Asian-American; 0.6% Pacific Islander; 0.4% Native American, and 4.1% indicated “other,” including mixed race or “multicultural.” About two percent were international students. Almost two-thirds (61.8%) were graduating seniors (planned to graduate in 2012 or 2013), followed by juniors (26.2%), sophomores (11.8%), and first-year students (.3%). Students ranged in age from 18 to 53, with a mean age of 21.5 years. Their self-reported overall GPA (on a four-point scale) was 3.39, and 3.52 in their major courses.

When asked “What is your major?,” the majority indicated public relations (66.8%), followed by communications (11%), strategic communications (8.5%), journalism (4.8%), marketing (1.6%), advertising (1.6%), graphic design (.4%), IMC (.1%), business (.5%), English (0.5%) and sports communication (0.5%). Students with double majors were asked to select the major most closely related to public relations. Almost nine out of ten (87.1%) reported a desire to work in the public relations field after graduation.

Advertising Students. Seventy-seven percent of respondents were female. The majority were White, non-Hispanic (77.6%), 6.8% were Hispanic, 6.1% were Asian-American, 4.1% were African-American, 0.9% Pacific Islander, 0.3% Native American,

1.4% were international students, and 2.0% indicated “other,” including mixed race or “multicultural.” Half were graduating seniors (planned to graduate in 2008), followed by juniors (30%), sophomores (12.2%) and first-year students (6.3%). Students ranged in age from 18 to 60, with a mean age of 21.5 years. Their self-reported overall GPA (on a four-point scale) was 3.37, and 3.53 in their major courses.

When asked “What is your major?”, the majority indicated advertising (66.3%), followed by marketing (12.2%), communications (6.9%), graphic design (3.2%), IMC (2.2%), business (1.6%), public relations (1.4%), journalism (1.2%), fine arts (0.8%) and other (3.6%). Students with double majors were asked to select the major most closely related to advertising. Almost nine out of ten (88.9%) reported a desire to work in the advertising field after graduation.

The samples were compared in terms of demographic profile. Other than gender – PR students were significantly more likely to be female ($X^2 = 35.496$; $p > .0001$) -- the student samples were not significantly different on demographic variables including race, age, and self-reported GPA.

Findings

RQ1. Do opinions about the ethical nature of the advertising and public relations industries differ significantly by students’ area of study?

Students were asked to respond to various statements regarding the ethics of advertising on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating "Strongly agree" (See Table 1).

Ethical Companies. Though both groups highly valued employer ethics, public relations students were more likely than advertising students to agree that working for a

company with high ethical standards was important to them ($M_{PR} = 4.49$; $M_{AD} = 4.37$; $t = 3.963$; $p = .0001$).

Place Table 1 about here

Below are selected verbatim comments that students offered to explain their responses to the question: It is important to me that I work for a company or agency that has high ethical standards.

PR Students

(Strongly Agree) My reputation is on the line as well and I will not work for a dishonest company.

(Strongly Agree) I want to feel good about what I do, and especially in PR when I'm speaking on behalf of the company, I want to believe in what I'm saying or doing. I will not represent a company whose practices I disagree with.

(Neutral) I'll work for whichever company I get the best job offer.

(Strongly Agree) You have to believe in your company/firm, and to do so I personally would have to agree on a moral/ethical level.

Advertising Students

(Agree) Working in an unethical environment and being aware of it would take its toll on my mental state. I wouldn't be able to handle the guilt in knowing and not doing anything except profiting from it.

(Agree) It's not a top priority but I don't want to add to anything negative in the environment.

(Agree) I agree, but at the same time I would not want to work for a company that is too strict. That takes away from creativity.

(Agree) I have high ethical standards myself and I want to work for a company that is the same. I do not want to live a double standard and make exceptions for work.

Ethics in the Profession. Again, though both groups considered their respective professions to be ethical, public relations students were more likely to agree with the statement, "I consider the Advertising (or PR) industry as a whole to be highly ethical." ($M_{PR}= 3.53$; $M_{AD}= 3.12$; $t = 11.240$; $p = .0001$). Students were given the opportunity to explain their responses. In some of the comments, students specifically commented on the sources of information on which they based their responses – from the classroom, popular press, book exposes and work or internship experience. Several PR students specifically mentioned the PRSA code of ethics.

PR Students

(Neutral) I believe that this question from my standpoint can not be answered just quite yet because I have not made it into the industry. I want to be able to form my own opinion first and not from books, internet, or someone else thoughts.

(Neutral) I think the PR industry has made huge strides and is working towards defeating the unethical perception people have towards it; especially with the term "spin doctor".

(Disagree) I wish I could say it was. After reading *Deadly Spin* though, my thoughts have changed about how I thought PR really worked.

(Agree) In my experience, the people I have worked with have all been ethical people.

Advertising Students

(Neutral) I think there are a lot of rules and regulations that go into ads that keep people honest. There may be some spin and twist, but today it's generally more about giving the brand a personality people can associate with.

(Disagree) Someone has to advertise tobacco and things of that sort.

(Disagree) Don't get me wrong. I love advertising. But advertising is about selling to people, usually selling them material things they don't really need. If advertising were ideal, we would be selling them better quality of life and love.

(Neutral) Haven't really experienced enough to answer this question.

Public Opinion. When asked if they believed that most people in America would rate the public relations (or advertising) industry as highly ethical, public relations students again agreed more strongly than advertising students that their industry was considered ethical ($M_{PR} = 2.56$; $M_{AD} = 2.23$; $t = 8.118$; $p = .0001$), although both groups were in general disagreement with the statement.

Below are selected verbatim comments to the question: I believe that most people in America would rate the public relations (or advertising) industry as highly ethical.

PR Students

(Disagree) I think this is the hardest part of PR because people don't fully understand the nature of the business.

(Disagree) Journalists think PR is not highly ethical.

(Disagree) Sadly - there is a very negative stereotype about the PR industry. Most think the phrase "ethical PR" is an oxymoron. It is our job as the new generation of PR professionals to overturn this social stigma. We need to show the nation what an important career this really is.

(Disagree) When someone says Public Relations, most people's first thought is "spin." I do not view PR as unethical because I am studying it as it was intended to be used. However, many people, who do not study it, do not fully understand the intended purpose and therefore do not view it as ethical.

Advertising Students

(Disagree) The public's perception is that advertising is what makes people want what they want. In actuality, what people want is what we advertise.

(Strongly Disagree) As a little poll I did myself, all of my friends and family believe subliminal advertisement is currently being used and is an infringement on their rights as a human. If that isn't an unethical view, I don't know what is.

(Disagree) People think advertising is unethical because it creates "wants" where there were none. It is also easier to blame advertising because it is tangible and right there for

people to see.

(Disagree) Advertising doesn't have the best reputation as a whole. People don't realize how necessary it is. Political advertising doesn't help that perception any either. Political speech makes the whole industry look bad.

RQ2. When presented with ethically questionable business scenarios, do advertising and PR students rate the ethical nature of the scenario differently?

Student respondents were provided with six ethically questionable scenarios related to industry practice (See Table 2 for scenario wording) and asked: “Using your own values, how ethical do you feel this action is?” Students selected their responses on a 7-point scale anchored by Ethical (7) and Unethical (1). Table 3 provides the mean, percentage responding ethical and unethical, standard deviation and variance for each of the six scenarios. Generally speaking all of the students rated all of the scenarios as unethical.

Place Table 2 about here

Advertising and PR students, however, differed in their responses to four of the six scenarios (See Table 3). Public relations students found discarding focus group results ($M_{PR}= 2.56$; $M_{AD}= 2.77$; $t = -2.786$; $p = .005$), playing fantasy football at work ($M_{PR}= 2.82$; $M_{AD}= 3.36$; $t = -6.832$; $p = .0001$) and posing a disabled employee ($M_{PR}= 1.89$; $M_{AD}= 2.29$; $t = -4.868$; $p = .0001$) as more unethical than did their counterparts from advertising. However, for the scenario that described highlighting environmental initiatives of a company that had been criticized for polluting the environment, the biggest observable difference was noted. Public relations students rated the scenario as

much more ethical than did advertising students ($M_{PR}= 4.85$; $M_{AD}= 3.20$; $t = 17.906$; $p = .0001$). It should be noted that the wording for this scenario was changed slightly between the two surveys (See Table 2), which potentially could explain some of the difference, though the concept for both questions – that a company would highlight environmental initiatives while being criticized for environmental actions -- was basically the same.

Place Table 3 about here

RQ3. When presented with ethically questionable business scenarios, is there a significant difference between advertising and PR students in their likelihood to personally engage in the behavior described?

After rating the ethical nature of each scenario, the students were asked: “How likely do you feel you would be to do this or something similar if you were put in the situation described?” The students marked their scores on a 7-point scale anchored by Very likely (7) and Very unlikely (1). Table 3 provides the mean, percentage responding likely and unlikely, standard deviation and variance for each of the six scenarios. The average (mean) of all six scores was 2.78 for the PR students and 2.65 for the advertising students, which indicates that in general the students reported it was rather unlikely that they would engage in the behaviors described.

Public relations students were less likely than the advertising students to engage in the behavior described in two of the scenarios – playing fantasy football at the office ($M_{PR}= 2.45$; $M_{AD}= 2.88$; $t = -4.802$; $p = .0001$) and posing an employee as disabled

($M_{PR} = 1.82$; $M_{AD} = 2.15$; $t = -3.928$; $p = .0001$). However, for the scenario involving the environmental initiatives of a petroleum company, the public relations students said they would quite likely engage in the behavior while the advertising students would not ($M_{PR} = 4.89$; $M_{AD} = 3.12$; $t = 18.663$; $p = .0001$).

Discussion

A comparison of attitudes of national samples of students studying advertising and those studying public relations revealed many similarities and some notable differences. Both groups agreed that it was very important to work for an ethical employer, though they both also echoed the sentiment expressed for decades by the public that not all advertising or public relations organizations practice high ethics. Public relations students seemed to “believe more” in the ethicality of their profession, at least as evidenced by their responses to a scaled item.

When faced with six almost identical ethical dilemmas in the workplace, both advertising and PR majors exhibited more balance or symmetry in their reactions. Both basically rejected the questionable behavior as unethical, and also said they would be unlikely to partake in such activity. Though the quantitative responses reflect the intensity of the students’ judgments, they do not explain why they judged the way they did. For instance, PR students were less likely than advertising students to say they would waste work time engaging heavily in fantasy football at the office. Though most would agree that personal gaming on company time is inappropriate, it may be that the differences in the work environment between advertising and PR firms is partly responsible for student expectations. Though notoriously stereotyped as “anything goes” office environments, advertising agencies often accommodate activities related to

creativity, play and popular culture pastimes that would be considered inappropriate in a more formal workplace, such as a PR firm. It would be interesting to investigate this further by studying the perceptions and expectations of both advertising and PR students about appropriate dress, activities and office decorum in the workplace.

To the extent that there was disagreement between the PR and advertising students, it was greatest about whether to publicize environmental initiatives of a client whose company was criticized for its environmental performance. The wording of the scenarios was slightly different for the advertising and PR versions of the question, but the concept was almost identical. Perhaps the PR students believed that it was their professional obligation to assist the client company in repairing its corporate reputation, while the advertising students saw it as dishonest to use advertising to cover up questionable activities.

It is beyond the scope of this study to know how advertising and PR students cope with the type of cognitive dissonance or psychological imbalance that may occur when they possess a desire to join an ethical company in a profession that neither they nor the public at large believes is wholly ethical. Some of their verbatim responses captured this potential dilemma.

It is notable that PR students judge public relations as more ethical than advertising students rate their own profession. Could it be that this phenomenon echoes public sentiment, or is it the result of textbook, classroom or internship experiences that result in the more favorable impression? Is there something endemic to the academic or professional “cultures” of advertising and PR students that makes them view their respective professions differently? If so, what is it? Though this report does not include

a formal content analysis of student verbatim comments, it was noted that more PR students mentioned the industry code of ethics than did advertising students. If in fact advertising students do not have what the industry itself would call “top of mind awareness” of a specific set of guidelines, what can educators (and later, employers) do to facilitate such familiarity?

No doubt this study raises more questions than it answers in terms of the differences and similarities between advertising and public relations student attitudes toward professional ethics. It does provide, however, a snapshot of how strategic communications students view the industries in which they will soon work and their perceptions of the ethicality of each. The study also provides fodder for communications educators to consider when teaching about industry ethics. Perhaps most importantly, the study reminds educators to challenge, or possibly inoculate, students about the potential cognitive dissonance that they may encounter regarding personal and professional ethics. Despite their potentially strong ethical attitudes or idealism, students need to realize and reconcile that they want to work in a business that they and most of the American public believe is not so ethical.

References

- About AAF*. Retrieved on August 28, 2013 from www.aaf.org/about.
- About PRSA*. Retrieved on August 28, 2013 from www.prsa.org/about.
- "Ad industry's new ethics code takes on brand integration, social-media disclosure getting adoption from marketers, agencies is first order of business for IAE." (2011, March 17) *Advertising Age*
- Alexander, C. S., & Becker, H. J. (1978). The use of vignettes in survey research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Spring*, 93-104.
- AAF Ethics & Principles*. Retrieved on August 28, 2013 from www.aaf.org.
- Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *16*(1), 65-92.
- Chonko, L. B., Tanner, J. F., & Weeks, W. A. (1996). Ethics in salesperson decision making: A synthesis of research approaches and an extension of the scenario method. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, *XVI*(1), 35-52.
- Erzikova, E. (2010). University teachers' perceptions and evaluations of ethics instruction in the public relations curriculum. *Public Relations Review*, *36*(3), 316-318.
- Gale, K., & Bunton, K. (2005). Assessing the impact of ethics instruction on advertising and public relations graduates. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *60*(3), 272-286.
- Grunig, J. E. (2000). Collectivism, collaboration, & societal corporatism as core professional values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *12*(1), 23-84.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Veri, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *1*(1), 3-35.
- Hodges, L. (1986). Defining press responsibility: A functional approach. In D. Elliot (ed.), *Responsible Journalism*, 13-31. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hutchison, L. L. (2002). Teaching ethics across the public relations curriculum. *Public Relations Review*, *28*(3), 301-309.
- Institute for Advertising Ethics (14 April, 2011). *Principles and practices for advertising ethics*. Retrieved on August 28, 2013 from www.aaf.org.
- Jones, J. (2007, December 10). Lobbyists debut at bottom of honesty and ethics list. *Gallup Poll*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/103123/lobbyists-debut-bottom-honesty-ethics-list.aspx>.
- Keith, N. K., Pettijohn, C. E., & Burnett, M.S. (2003). An empirical evaluation of the effect of peer and managerial ethical behaviors and the ethical predispositions of prospective advertising employees. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *48*, 251-265.
- Keith, N. K., Pettijohn, C. E., & Burnett, M.S. (2008). Ethics in advertising: Differences in industry values and student perceptions. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, *12*(2), 81-96.
- Lane, J. C. (1995). Ethics of business students: Some marketing perspectives. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *14*(7), 523-535.
- Luthar, H. K., DiBattista, R.A., & Gautschi, T. (1997). Perceptions of what the ethical climate is and what it should be: The role of gender, academic Status, and ethical

- education. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16, 205-217.
- Malinowski, C., & Berger, K. (1996). Undergraduate student attitudes about hypothetical marketing dilemmas. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 15, 525-535.
- Mayhew, B. W., & Murphy, P. R. (2009). The impact of ethics education on reporting behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 86(3), 397-416.
- McBride, G. (1989). Ethical thought in public relations history: Seeking a relevant perspective. *Media Ethics*, 4(1), 5-20.
- McCuddy, M. K., & Peery, B. L. (1996). Selected individual differences and collegians' ethical beliefs. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 15, 261-272.
- Patterson, P., & Wilkins, L. (2011). *Media Ethics: Issues & Cases*, 7th ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Parkinson, M. (2001). The PRSA code of professional standards and member code of ethics: Why they are neither professional or ethical. *Public Relations Quarterly*, fall, 27-31.
- Peterson, R. A., Beltramini, R. F., & Kozmetsky, G. (1991). Concerns of college students regarding business ethics: A replication. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 10, 733-738.
- Pratt, C. B., & James, E. L. (1994). Advertising ethics: A contextual response based on classical ethical theory. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 13, 455-468.
- PRSA Member Code of Ethics. Available at www.prsa.org/aboutPRSA/ethics.
- PRSA Ethics Power Point (2008). Ethics and leadership: Ingredients of excellence. Retrieved from www.prsa.org/aboutPRSA/ethics/resources.
- Saad, L. (2009, December 9). Honesty and ethics poll finds Congress's image tarnished. *Gallup Poll*. Retrieved from www.gallup.com/poll.
- Serlin, S. H. (1987). Value system changes by students as a result of media ethics course. *Journalism Quarterly*, 64, 564-568 & 676.
- Shamir, J., Reed, B. S., & Connell, S. (1990). Individual differences in ethical values of public relations practitioners. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 67(4), 956-963.
- XXX, XXX & XXX. (2013). Advertising ethics: Student attitudes and behavioral intent. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 68(1), 33-49.
- XXX & XXXX (August 2013). *Public Relations Students' Ethics: An Examination of Attitude and Intended Behavior*. Paper presented at the annual conference of AEJMC, Washington, D.C.

Table 1
Level of Agreement with Ethics Statements

Statement		Mean	% Agree or Strongly Agree	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Standard Deviation	Variance
It is important to me that I work for a company or agency that has high ethical standards.	Advertising Students	4.37	93.2	.4	.628	.394
	PR Students	4.49**	95.6	.4	.603	.364
I consider the advertising/PR industry as a whole to be highly ethical.	Advertising Students	3.12	27.9	17.7	.732	.536
	PR Students	3.53**	55.3	9.1	.769	.591
I believe that most people in America would rate the advertising/PR industry as highly ethical.	Advertising Students	2.23	7.7	71.6	.810	.655
	PR Students	2.56**	15.2	54.5	.840	.706

• p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 2 -Ethical Scenarios

Scenario #1: In reviewing the agency’s account billing, the account supervisor notices that she has accidentally overbilled one client by \$10,000. However, payment has already been received from the client. She ignores the mistake.

Scenario #2: Focus group results are to be included in a marketing brochure for a client’s product. The first set of focus group results is disappointing. An employee discards the first set and includes in the brochure a second set of results that are more favorable to the client’s product.

Scenario #3: At the ad agency where he works, an employee participates in a fantasy football league. During work hours, he and coworkers spend a significant amount of time making picks, corresponding via email with update scores, standings, offers for trades, and sarcastic congratulations to the week’s winner.

Scenario #4: An agency employee must book a trip to visit a client in another city. Although she can obtain a less expensive fare on another airline, she chooses to book the ticket with the airline on which she collects frequent flyer miles.

Scenario #5: A recruiting brochure for a company is to feature the company’s employees and facilities. The company has no disabled employees, so the photographer asks one of the employees to sit in a wheelchair for one of the photographs.

Scenario #6 for ad survey: A large petroleum company showcases its environmental initiatives in an ad campaign, even though it has been the subject of complaints by environmental groups about its negative impact on the environment.

Scenario #6 for PR survey: Recently, the large petroleum company you work for has been the subject of complaints by environmental groups about its negative impact on the environment. In response, your company decides to showcase its environmental initiatives in a promotional campaign. This campaign will highlight the company’s social responsibility.

Table 3
Ratings of Ethical Scenarios vs. Likelihood of Engaging in Questionable Behavior

	Scenario	“How ethical do you feel this situation is?” (1 = Unethical/ 7 = Ethical)					“How likely do you feel you would do this...?” (1 = Unlikely/ 7 = Likely)				
		Mean	% Unethical	% Ethical	SD	Variance	Mean	% Unlikely	% Likely	Standard Deviation	Variance
AD	1. Client Overbilling	1.32	95.7	1.4	.830	.689	1.37	95.0	2.1	.936	.876
PR		1.31	95.0	2.3	.903	.816	1.44	92.5	3.6	1.04	1.10
AD	2. Discard Focus Group Results	2.77	71.3	12.0	1.39	1.942	2.80	67.8	15.1	1.566	2.452
PR		2.56**	72.9	9.5	1.42	2.02	2.74	66.7	14.8	1.58	2.50
AD	3. Fantasy Football	3.36	53.1	21.8	1.529	2.339	2.88	63.9	19.6	1.697	2.880
PR		2.82**	65.8	11.5	1.40	1.96	2.45**	73.3	12.8	1.59	2.52
AD	4. Book More Expensive Air Ticket for Flyer Miles	3.46	51.1	23.6	1.507	2.270	3.37	51.5	26.8	1.648	2.717
PR		3.39	50.5	21.4	1.52	2.33	3.34	49.4	24.4	1.65	2.74
AD	5. Posing Employee as Disabled	2.29	77.5	12.3	1.605	2.576	2.15	78.3	11.3	1.644	2.702
PR		1.89**	83.6	7.6	1.43	2.05	1.82**	83.7	7.1	1.40	1.97
AD	6. Highlight environmental initiatives	3.20	57.5	21.3	1.725	2.976	3.12	58.3	22.0	1.779	3.166
PR		4.85**	21.3	58.6	1.75	3.06	4.89**	21.2	60.7	1.78	3.18
AD	Average score	2.73					2.65				
PR		2.80					2.78				

*Means differ at the .05 level

** Means differ at the .01 level

%Unethical = Percentage of respondents selecting “1,” “2” or “3” on a 7-point scale

%Ethical = Percentage of respondents selecting “5,” “6” or “7” on a 7-point scale

%Unlikely = Percentage of respondents selecting “1,” “2” or “3” on a 7-point scale

%Likely = Percentage of respondents selecting “5,” “6” or “7” on a 7-point scale