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Protecting Corporate Image in the Age of "Fake News": How Public Relations Professionals Handle Misinformation in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of "fake news" on corporate reputations and describe the best approaches for public relations professionals to effectively deal with instances of false information.Morover, it aims to identify successful strategies for PR professionals to adeptly navigate and minimize the adverse effects of fake news on corporate communication.The study was conducted through a qualitative approach using structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions. Purposeful sampling was used to select twenty public relations and communications professionals. The results suggest that the concept of "fake news" is divisive and political, concentrating more on its branding implications than the core issue of misinformation. The results also show that The optimal strategy for dealing with disinformation entails countering it with the truth, recognizing the limitations of controlling the entire narrative. Finally,the significance of this study lies in its ability to pave the way for best practices in the field of PR, equipping future professionals with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate the treacherous landscape of disinformation effectively.It emphasizes the urgent requirement for preventative measures to deal with misinformation.

Keywords: Public Relations, Fake News, Disinformation, Corpora Reputation Management, Social Media

Introduction

The spread of fake news is a significant challenge in the digital era, aided in large part by the prevalence of social media platforms and the ease with which information can be shared. This proliferation not only erodes public trust in reliable sources of information, causing confusion and impeding informed decision-making, but it also has the potential to manipulate public sentiment, incite social unrest, and influence organizations' reputation.Fake news is not a new phenomenon. Lies, spin, and disinformation have been around since humans have been around. They range from Octavian's "fake news" war against Mark Anthony 2000 years ago during the Roman Republic's civil war, to The New York Sun publishing a series of articles in 1835 claiming that there were "fantastic animals" on the moon, to Donald Trump's tweets during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Bovet & Makse, 2019).For centuries, humans have created stories that are untrue, extreme, and sensational. The goal is frequently to change people's minds and opinions, make money, incite passions and prejudices, and, in some cases, incite violence. The concept of fake news is not new; in fact, the term "disinformation" is derived from the Russian word "dezinformacija," which dates back to the Cold War's early years. It refers to "creating falsehoods about one's enemies in order to confuse them about one's own intentions." (Poole, 2019). According to Lazer et al. (2018), fake news is "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (Lazer et al., 2018, pp.1094-1096). "Fake news" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "false, often sensational, information disseminated in the guise of news reporting." In recent years, the term has become increasingly popular because of the rise of social media and the ability for people to spread false information quickly and widely with little oversight or regulation. The term gained popularity in the United States following the 2016 presidential election and has since become widely used.

Fake news has grown in both impact and scope through the power of social media platforms and content creation technologies. This makes it difficult to detect and has allowed it to reach a wide audience in a very short span of time, exposing organizations to increased reputational harm. This is a major issue for corporate reputation management today, and it highlights the importance of public relations and communication professionals in dealing with this growing problem. To deal with this issue effectively, public relations professionals must embrace new methods and technologies for accurately monitoring and responding to malicious content. Public relations professionals should invest in their own reputation management and crisis communications strategies.This study aims to "gain significant understanding and discern the attitudes, experiences, behavioral patterns, and professional acumen of public relations practitioners in the context of minimizing the negative impact of disinformation on the reputation and integrity of their respective enterprises or clientele."

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed a lack of research on the effects of fake news on corporate reputations and how public relations professionals deal with misinformation in the digital age, emphasizing the significance of this study and its potential contribution to filling this gap in the media and public relations fields. Researchers investigated various aspects of fake news, such as its societal implications, the dynamics of misinformation propagation, and media trustworthiness. Their efforts include a thorough investigation of misinformation dissemination, research into the psychological factors that contribute to belief in fake news, and the development of counter-strategies. Numerous scholars expressed apprehension regarding the dissemination of false information via social media channels (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Anderson & Rainie, 2017; Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb, 2016; Grinberg et al., 2019; Jahng et al., 2020; Khan & Broh, 2022; Lazer et al., 2018; Mian et al., 2020; Mould, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Tandoc, 2019;Uberti, 2017). Their efforts have aimed to fully comprehend the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. These research projects used a variety of methodologies and disciplines, such as network analysis, textual analysis, online media ecosystem analysis, and digital techniques. Scholars attempted to investigate how and why the public reacts to fake news, as well as how it affects society. As a result, they have taken various approaches to studying fake news. Some of them have performed detailed examinations of how fake news can spread quickly on social media. For example, Grinberg et al., (2019) studied how news items related to the 2016 U.S. presidential election went viral on Twitter. Based on their experiments, they identified a variety of ways in which fake news can spread, including the use of bots, junk news sources, and interactions with opinion leaders

Tandoc (2019) classified previous studies on fake news into three categories. These categories include: 1) the definition of fake news and the extent of its prevalence, 2) the evaluation of fact-checking as a tool for counteracting the influence of fake news, and 3) the investigation of factors that contribute to people's belief in and propagation of fake news. Other researchers used various research methods, such as 1) Content Analysis, in which they examined the content of online news sources and social media posts, taking into account factors such as the context and emotional tone of a given article, its headlines, and its sources. 2) Network Analysis: Analyze the networks of actors (people, organizations, bots, etc.) that interact around stories, how those sources are connected, and how information spreads both through those connections and through traditional journalistic outlets. 3) User Study: Investigate how users interact with and interpret fake news, including how they share it, comment on it, and how their worldviews shape their perception of the news. 4) Data Mining: Use natural language processing/machine learning to detect and classify fake news accurately and quickly. 50 Media Literacy Studies: Focuses on teaching people about media literacy and how to identify fake news.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) investigated the economics of "fake news" in their study "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," presenting new data on the consumption of fake news prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In their study, they drew on web browsing

data, results from an online survey they conducted, and archives of fact-checking websites. One of their key findings was that the average American adult saw at least one or two fake news stories in the months leading up to the election, and half of those who remembered seeing them ended up believing them, particularly if they had a segregated social media network that included people with similar views and from a similar socio-political background (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Furthermore, Knapp (1944) revealed in his study "The Psychology of Rumor" that war or unstable times foster rumors for two primary reasons: The first is due to secrecy during times of war. In such times of instability and secrecy, facts become more precious and scarcer, and rumors fill in these gaps of knowledge for the public. The second is that war intensifies the public's emotions. As a result, rumors, rather than logic and rationalized terms, are created to express these feelings and are often spread quickly during these times. A more recent study, "The spread of true and false news online" (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), confirmed Knapp's theory by revealing that "fake news" is more likely to spread than "true news." The study discovered that people are more likely to share false news because it is "more novel than true news," and that, contrary to popular belief, humans, not robots, were more likely to spread fake information online (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Thorson (2016) suggested in her 2016 study "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation" that even when negative political misinformation is effectively and immediately discredited after it has circulated among the public, the negative information is what continues to shape public attitudes and beliefs.She refers to this as "belief echoes," which occur when misinformation is corrected immediately after it circulates in the public, and she expresses concerns about current fact-checking organizations and their efforts to correct false claims (Thorson, 2016). Similarly, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) confirmed Thorson's 2016 findings in their study "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misconceptions." They conducted four experiments where participants were given mock news articles to read. These articles included either a misleading claim and a correction or a misleading claim from a politician. They wanted to investigate the extent to which "corrective information" embedded in realistic news reports helps to reduce the participants current misinterpretations or beliefs in politics. Their findings revealed that in four experiments conducted between 2004 and 2005, participants with a specific ideology failed to change or update their beliefs when presented with corrective information that was contrary to or inconsistent with existing notions. In fact, they documented instances of what they referred to as a "backfire effect" where these corrections resulted in increasing misinterpretations among the most strongly committed participants (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

A Pew Research Center study conducted right after the 2016 U.S. presidential election found that 23% of Americans stated that they had shared politically fabricated stories themselves. Sometimes they shared stories by accident, and other times they did it on purpose. Furthermore, 42% believe social networking sites contributed significantly to the spread of "fake news," and

64% believe fake news caused a great deal of confusion, with many concerned about the effects of spreading fake news on social media (Barthel, Holcomb, & Mitchell, 2016). According to the same study, when it comes to preventing the spread of 'fake news,' 45% of American adults believe that politicians, the government, and elected officials are responsible for preventing inaccurate and fabricated stories from spreading and gaining attention (Barthel, Holcomb, & Mitchell, 2016).

As can be seen from the preceding, there is consistent progress and growing interest among researchers from various disciplines in studying the phenomenon of fake news, particularly in understanding its sources and consequences. To analyze the spread and impact of fake news, researchers used a variety of research methods, such as digital methods, network analysis, online media ecosystem analysis, and textual analysis. These studies have shed light on the spread of fake news on social media, highlighting aspects such as bot use and interactions with opinion leaders. Furthermore, previous research has been divided into three categories: the definition and prevalence of fake news, the effectiveness of fact-checking, and the factors influencing belief in and transmission of fake news, providing a useful framework for understanding this complex topic. However, it is critical to recognize that false news is a multifaceted problem that requires additional research to investigate the psychological and social processes that contribute to its dissemination.

Previous research on fake news offers useful insights into its presence, distribution, and consequences. However, much remains to be discovered about this complex issue, and future research should focus on the psychological, social, and technological variables that contribute to the durability and effect of fake news.

Two Different Approaches To "Fake News"

Fake news has been studied and theorized for decades. One body of research states that misinformation is often preferred to true information.For example, Knapp (1944), stated that 'rumor thrives only in periods of social duress' (Knapp, 1944). In his study "The psychology of Rumor" Knapp (1944), revealed that war or unstable times nurture rumors for two primary reasons: The first is due to secrecy during times of war. In such times of instability and secrecy, facts become more precious and scarcer, and rumors fill in these gaps of knowledge for the public. The second is that war intensifies the public's emotions. Therefore, rumors are created to express these feelings and are often spread swiftly during these times as opposed to logic and rationalized terms.

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2016 study "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation" that even when negative political misinformation is effectively and immediately discredited after it has circulated among the public, the negative information is what continues to shape public attitudes and beliefs. She refers to this as "belief echoes," which occur when misinformation is corrected immediately after it circulates in the public, and she expresses concerns about current fact-checking organizations and their efforts to correct false claims (Thorson, 2016).

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In a similar vein, in their study "Political Fact-Checking on Twitter: When Do Corrections Have an Effect?" Margolin, Hannak, and Weber (2018) sought to investigate the effect of factchecking in relation to various social contexts in order to determine whether there are certain social contexts in which the truth may be preferred over misinformation. They tested this on Twitter corrections made between January 2012 and April 2014, and then from November 2015 to February 2016. Their findings revealed that when people have a connection or relationship with those correcting them, such as friends or relatives or people who simply follow them on Twitter,

they are much more likely to accept the correction than when they are confronted with corrections from strangers or those with whom they have no connection (Margolin, Hannak, & Weber, 2018).

Previous research on fake news provided useful information. For example, Knapp's 1944 study, while historically noteworthy, raises questions about its applicability in the digital age, where knowledge delivery has changed dramatically, stressing the importance of modern understanding. While the 2018 study by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral is significant for its experimental findings on quick online fake news transmission, it only addresses one aspect of the multifaceted disinformation problem, which requires a more comprehensive assessment. On the other hand, Thorson's 2016 study emphasizes misinformation's longevity even after debunking, emphasizing the difficulty of combating misleading information. In addition, the 2010 research of Nyhan and Reifler emphasizes the resistance to belief change, particularly in politically heated circumstances, underscoring the need for nuanced persuasive tactics. Moreover, Margolin's 2020 viewpoint brings useful context-dependence insights while posing practical concerns. The 2015 study by Bode and Vraga backs this up. Finally, the above studies highlight the multidimensional character of fake news and the difficulty associated with effectively combating it. They emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach that takes into account the platform, context, audience, and social dynamics. While they provide useful information, it is critical to identify the shifting nature of the false news ecosystem and constantly modify measures to combat disinformation in a continuously changing digital context.

Disinformation Enters The Corporate Sector:why Would A Company Be Targeted?

There is no doubt that both misinformation and disinformation have significant social and political consequences that we continue to see on a daily basis. However, it's important to highlight that disinformation also poses a real problem to companies today, especially those with "celebrity" CEOs that are active on social media platforms and have a large following on their social media platforms. They are easily targeted and more susceptible to hacks on social media. Companies that are outspoken about contentious issues, whether environmental, political, or social, are more vulnerable to disinformation attacks. In addition to businesses launching an IPO, merging, or acquiring another company, or rebranding (Petrov & Fehon, 2019). This places extra pressure and highlights the prominence public relations and communications professionals play when dealing with such crises and when managing and protecting the reputation of their company.

Disinformation attacks or "fake news" campaigns are frequently used to influence a company's stock price. According to Gu,Kropotov, and Yarochkin (2017, p. 54), this is more noticeable for more established or well-known businesses. These companies are targeted by disinformation campaigns in order to harm their reputation, which could have a negative impact on their stock price, earnings, and investor decisions. Furthermore, Bennett and Livingston (2018) discovered

that when "fake news" is associated with an organization, it usually involves accusations about the organization's involvement in sociopolitical issues in their study "The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions."

Additionally, the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer (2018 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals record-breaking drop in trust in the U.S., 2018) revealed that trust in the U.S. had suffered the greatest drop in the survey's history among the general population. Specifically, it indicated that trust among the general public fell nine points to 43 and trust among the informed public dropped 23 points to 45. This was reported as the lowest of the 28 different markets surveyed. The U.S. was below both Russia and South Africa. It revealed that the decrease in trust in the U.S. is largely driven by a lack of faith in government which fell 14 points to 33 percent among the general population and 30 points to 33 among the informed public. The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer also highlighted that trust in business, and media institutions, along with NGOs, experienced a decline of 10 to 20 points in terms of people's trust in them and a reason for this decline was the increased public scrutiny of organizations in the current unstable socio-political environment.

When asked, Edelman President and CEO Richard Edelman stated, "The United States is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of trust." This is the first time that a massive drop in trust has not been linked to a pressing economic issue or catastrophe like the Fukushima nuclear disaster. In fact, it's the ultimate irony that it's happening at a time of prosperity, with the stock market and employment rates in the U.S. at record highs. The root cause of this fall is the lack of objective facts and rational discourse" (2018 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals record-breaking drop in trust in the U.S., 2018). Furthermore, Strau and Jonkman (2017) suggested in their study "The benefit of issue management: anticipating crises in the digital age" that public relations practitioners must understand 'fake news' well in order to deal with it effectively as part of issues management in public relations. As a response to the "2019 Disinformation in Society Report: How Americans perceive Deliberately Misleading News or Information" (Institute of Public Relations, 2019) which revealed how Americans view the rise of misinformation and disinformation as a major problem in society today along with other issues like gun violence and terrorism, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Chair Debra Peterson emphasized that "disinformation and misinformation is "NotOurPR." Peterson noted that one of the roles of a public relations professional today must be to help the public understand how to detect truth as well as how to speak out against disinformation (Public Relations Society of America, 2019). Misinformation and disinformation have serious societal, political, and corporate consequences, as demonstrated by these previous cases. According to the findings, misinformation is especially problematic for businesses, particularly those with high-profile CEOs who are active on social media or are vocal on contentious issues, because they are more vulnerable to hacking and disinformation attacks. Such attacks may be intended to influence stock prices, harm reputations, or influence investment decisions. They also cited the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, which revealed a record dip in trust in the United States, with declines in government, corporate, and media institutions, mostly due to increasing

public scrutiny in an unpredictable socio-political environment. According to Edelman's CEO, the decline in trust is distinct and unrelated to economic downturns, but rather to a lack of objective information.

Reseach Methodology And Findings

This research methodology relied on in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of group of twenty experienced public relations and communications professionals. These interviews yielded a wealth of qualitative data, providing unique insights into these people's perspectives and experiences as they dealt with the complicated issues raised by the phenomenon of "fake news." The research hypothesized that:

Hypothesis: Public relations professionals can effectively respond to "fake news "aimed at harming the reputation of a corporation by implementing protocols to enable them to quickly identify "fake news" and efficiently respond to it.

To examine this hypothesis, this study focused on answering the following research questions:

RQ1. How do public relations professionals define and identify "fake news" in the context of their work to protect a corporation's reputation?

RQ2. What are the experiences and challenges encountered by public relations and communications professionals in addressing disinformation?" **.**

RQ3. What are the most effective strategies public relations professionals can use to easily identify and effectively respond to "fake news" aimed at harming the reputation of corporation

RQ4. What factors contribute to the effectiveness of the protocols and strategies used by public relations professionals in responding to "fake news" incidents that threaten a corporation's reputation?

To answer these questions, the best and most effective method was to use a qualitative research method approach to explore, gain key insights, and understand public relations professionals' attitudes, experiences, behaviors, and expertise when dealing with "fake news." Plano and Creswell (2015) confirm that qualitative research endeavors to explore a particular phenomenon through the examination of an individual's experiences and perspectives(Creswell & Poth, 2017). As a result, the primary research method used in this study was in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of twenty public relations and communications professionals in the United States. Professionals with a background and experience in media relations, crisis communication, and reputation management, either at an organizational or agency level, or both, were considered. In depth interviews helped understand and explore how much of a threat "fake news" is to organizations' reputations today and whether public relations professionals are trained and prepared

to effectively identify and respond to this phenomenon. In-depth interviews were also appropriate for experts who have unique knowledge and experience with the topic under investigation.This assisted in identifying and better understanding the issues that public relations professionals face when dealing with "fake news" intended to harm companies' reputations, as well as providing recommendations for future professionals.

Procedures And Sample Description

The primary research methodology employed involved conducting in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of twenty public relations professionals. In opting for in-depth interviews, the research aimed to facilitate subjective discussions, enabling exploration of individual perspectives and experiences. These interviews were conducted via video meetings, allowing for a face-to-face interaction. Initial outreach to potential participants involved contacting 30 individuals, out of which 25 expressed interest. However, logistical constraints led to the participation of only 20 experts in the in-depth interviews. The participant pool comprised seasoned public relations professionals and younger practitioners with expertise in crisis communication, reputation management, and media relations.

Diverse professional backgrounds were represented, including experts from politics, financial communications, technology, business consulting services, energy, distribution, legal, medical devices, NGOs, government entities, banks, media production companies, and other fields. The recruitment process utilized platforms such as LinkedIn, official emails, and the researcher's professional and academic network. Participants boasted professional experience ranging from 10 to 35 years on average. To ensure consistency, the researcher conducted video meetings with each participant, posing a standardized set of questions. Some questions were tailored to individual interviewees based on their specific areas of expertise and unique experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Additionally, most experts displayed a willingness to address follow-up questions via email, contributing to the depth and richness of the gathered insights.

The participants, on average, had an age of 40, spanning from 30 to 70. The youngest participant was 35 years old, and the oldest was 70 years old. In terms of gender distribution, there were 14 men and 6 women, with males making up 70% (n = 14) and females comprising 30% (n = 6) of the sample.The educational background of the participants exhibited significant diversity. Five individuals held bachelor's degrees or equivalent, constituting 25% of the sample (n = 5). Conversely, fifteen participants held master's degrees, representing 75% of the sample (n = 15).

Coding And Analyzing The Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured interview technique was used in this study. According to Alston and Bowles (2003), semi-structured interviews are particularly suited for exploratory and descriptive research endeavors in which the researcher has limited prior insight into the participants' perspectives. The process of preparing qualitative interviews begins with determining the purpose of the interviews; the purpose is to investigate the impact of "fake news" on the reputations of companies in department and the most effective approaches for public relations professionals to address cases of misinformation. With this purpose in mind, an interview guide with open-ended questions was created. The interviews were carried out via video meetings, allowing for face-to-face interaction. Participants were only given a code to identify them. The following coding system was explained to the participants: subject matter expert (SME) 1, subject matter expert (SME) 2, subject matter expert (SME)3, etc. This coding system helps in referencing the experts in the study while protecting their identities.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to gain key insights and understand public relations professionals' attitudes, experiences, behaviors, and expertise when dealing with disinformation impacting the reputation of their companies or clients. In addition to understanding the main issues they encounter when dealing with disinformation aimed at harming the reputation of corporations or clients they work for. The objectives of this research include: (1) understanding how much of a threat "fake news" is to corporate reputations today. (2) Explore the strategies and tactics implemented by public relations professionals to address "fake news" aimed at harming the reputation of corporations. (3) Examine the existing perceptions of public relations professionals regarding the term "fake news" and its threat to companies and clients they work for.

Findings

This section delves into the research findings related to the research questions, literature review, and research objectives that provided guidance for the study. The present study aims to investigate and comprehend the term "fake news," which has gained widespread notoriety and sparked significant polarization in contemporary public discourse. The study's primary objective is to provide an accurate and scientific definition of this term, which has become increasingly blurred and ambiguous over time, causing confusion for many. Thus, through a thorough analysis of secondary research, the researcher explores the various components and categorizations of "fake news." The researcher also explored the terms disinformation and misinformation, which are the more accurate terms to use when referring to information disorders or what is largely

understood as "fake news." While there was an overlap between all three terms in the secondary research conducted, the focus of this research was to explore the impact of disinformation: false information created with the intention of causing harm, on corporate reputations and the experiences, challenges, and best practices for public relations professionals faced with this phenomenon. Misinformation was also brought up in both the secondary and primary research findings. The researcher identified two key topics from the conversations with all twenty interviewees. Firstly, the participants's understanding of the threat of "fake news" to companies today and how that has changed in recent years, specifically in today's post-digital age Second, the participants' experiences and challenges dealing with misinformation and disinformation aimed at harming the reputation of their company or client.

RQ1: Definition and identification of "fake news" by public relations professionals in safeguarding corporate reputation and its proliferation in today's post-digital age.

The findings revealed that all participants agreed that the concept of fake news is not a new concept, as propaganda, lies, rumors, and conspiracies have existed for centuries. They all agreed that the term "fake news" should be avoided because it is a "catch-all" or "branding" issue that is both polarizing and feeds into political narratives. They defined 'disinformation' as falsehoods created with the intent of causing harm.

For example, SME 1 stated that disinformation is false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage, and guide people, organizations, or portions of society down an incorrect path. SME 2 added that among the dangers of disinformation is that it is infectious, spreads far more easily than the truth, and is hard to distinguish from real factual news. SME 3 stated that disinformation is information disseminated to the public through any media channel with the intent to mislead or cause harm for someone else's personal gain. SME 4 stated that his definition of disinformation has not changed over the last ten to twenty years because disinformation, lies, and propaganda have always existed. He added to this by saying," governments have historically used disinformation, but what changed was that people realized they could go online, remain anonymous, and start spreading falsehoods easily and in large quantities"(SME 4).

SME 5 highlighted that the concept of "fake news" is not a new idea but is one that has become more of a contemporary issue. According to SME 6, disinformation, propaganda, and inaccurate information intended to cause harm have always existed, but the proliferation of "fake news" and falsehoods today is more visible due to social media and the ability of things to become accessible to everyone. SME 7 added that the spread of misinformation or erroneous information is becoming more of an issue as a result of the internet's and social media's ubiquity.

SME 8 stated that disinformation is information created intentionally to mislead the public and cause harm. SME 9 shared that disinformation is completely wrong and inaccurate news and

that today people blur the lines between what is opinion, what is fact, what is disinformation, and what is fake news. SME 10 and SME 11 added that as someone who works in the industry, she understands the difference between the two terms and how to distinguish between the two, but this is not the case for the general viewer, which is a real issue because many people do not know the difference between what is real news based on facts and opinion. She also highlighted that when people tend to disagree with a certain viewpoint, they simply refer to it as "fake news." SME 12 stated that he does not use the phrase "fake news," and that it should not be used when dealing with those who hold opposing views to the company or entity you represent.

Most participants agreed that Donald Trump's use of the term "fake news" popularized and introduced it into public discourse during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. However, SME 13 stated that the terms "fake news" or "disinformation elections" were used 10-20 years ago. For example, they were not used and were not widely discussed. Propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and rumors have always existed, for example, during wartime, and there are numerous historical examples of how they were used. However, it was Donald Trump who created the term "fake news" and popularized it. He was the one who coined it. SME 14 agreed that fake news was "defined" and popularized because of the impact of Donald Trump. He popularized the term "fake news," and there is a "understanding" that fake news is any news with which a person disagrees, and that it is misleading and false because it comes from the opposing side.

The preceding results show that public relations and communications experts have a complex understanding of the phenomenon of "fake news" or disinformation in today's post-digital world. They all agree that the concept of fake news is not new, citing the existence of propaganda, lies, rumors, and conspiracies throughout history. Participants agree that the term "fake news" has a negative connotation, serving as a polarizing catchphrase that feeds into political narratives. Instead, they use the term "disinformation" to denote purposefully incorrect information intended to do harm. Participants point out that disinformation spreads quickly, frequently outpaces truth, and can be difficult to distinguish from legitimate news. Moreover, they point out the importance of social media and online anonymity in aggravating the spread of misinformation. Furthermore, several scholars credit Donald Trump's use of the term "fake news" during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, noting its eventual absorption into public discourse. This insight emphasizes the changing nature of misinformation and the influence of political actors on public perception. Overall, the study sheds light on the intricacies and developing dynamics of false news, underscoring the importance of diverse methods for dealing with this widespread issue.

RQ2: The experiences and challenges public relations and communications professionals face when dealing with disinformation

As a result of the participants' experiences and the difficulties they face when dealing with disinformation. SME 1 explained that his business, the energy industry, has many moving parts,

which makes dealing with disinformation and misinformation more difficult. SME 2 stated that it was still difficult to adequately convey and explain your point of view 10–20 years ago, when everyone was reading from the same news sources and social media did not exist. SME 2 confimed that

"because of today's post-digital world, people can choose their own information and consume the type of news and information that aligns with their ideology and political views. Therefore, many people don't see the full spectrum of things and develop a narrow point of view. Additionally, because of how easily accessible information has become today due to social channels, the spread of disinformation has become much easier, and many people have short attention spans" (SME 2).

SME 3 added that in public policy debate and in the legislative process, which he is actively involved in, 20 years ago, when he started out in the business, people would spend time getting to know one another in the statehouse setting. SME 4 added that there were extremes on both sides, whether extreme Republican or extreme Democrat, but these were generally ignored, and when it came to moving a piece of legislation, it was more of "moving the ball in the middle of the field, and it was a moderate centrist kind of game." However, today, that is no longer the case. (SME 2) shared that because of people's short attention spans and the limited information the public consumes, people start painting things in black and white. SME 5 emphasized that understanding the information they are consuming takes time and an open mind, both of which are lacking in today's discourse. As a result of all these elements, disinformation thrives and is easily spread and replicated. He added that another challenge he faces is that his company is an international publicly traded company with a long history and a strong brand. This makes it more vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation, as well as subject to constant scrutiny.

SME 6 shared that in his experience, whether it's dealing with a government entity or a major corporation in a certain industry, the intent of those creating and spreading falsehoods is simply to disrupt and not to add to the conversation. SME 7 revealed that a company will fall into the trap when it looks at the disinformation from the perspective of "Is this impacting me directly?" Because many corporations or organizations may not be confronted with direct falsehoods at the time, despite seeing the cumulative effect, they tend to ignore it until it directly impacts them. He emphasized that the cumulative effect of disinformation is a real danger. SME 8 explained that most of the time, if a company has built trust, a reservoir of goodwill, and is transparent, it can address this type of threat and these issues over time. However, many people have begun to lose faith in institutions, making it more difficult for the company to effectively counter disinformation and maintain stakeholder trust.

The issue is larger than just companies being impacted by disinformation; it is the cumulative effect of disinformation spreading that is the issue. SME 9 mentioned that one of the challenges today when dealing with disinformation is that many companies are not dealing with disinforma-

tion. SME 10 pointed out that another problem with disinformation is that it extends beyond just impacting companies. Whether the problem is in the overall education system or in introducing news literacy to deal with this growing phenomenon, companies must be investing in educating their employees and the people they serve. Companies must also ensure that their communication is clear and not manipulative in order to play their part.

SME 11 emphasized that "we are in a very scary place right now." He explained how the concept of tribalism and the fact that people have become ingrained in their own beliefs and the ideas that the "tribe" with which they associate themselves with, they completely disregard or oppose any information that is contradictory to their personal beliefs and political stance. SME 12 emphasized that if you look at media consumption today, obscurity has gotten worse. He emphasized that the majority of people in America today get their information from social media platforms, which largely fuel disinformation. Additionally, consumers can no longer differentiate between what is fact from opinion and the source of the news they're consuming. SME 13 added that from a public relations perspective, whether you're working on the agency side or in house, one of the main challenges when dealing with disinformation is ensuring that management doesn't overreact in their response, as "not everything that's said about you on Twitter is a crisis." At the same time, ignoring things and waiting until they become a major issue is not a viable option. He pointed out that companies must be fully aware of what is happening around them, tracking and monitoring the conversation and understanding what matters and what doesn't. The real challenge, he said, is getting everyone to focus and remain calm in the face of such a crisis. SME 14 shared that he did a lot of work for companies around COVID-19 vaccine policy. He stated that the amount of not just inaccurate but deliberately misleading information regarding both the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 spread, despite the process regulators went through to test, approve, and distribute the vaccine, was staggering. He pointed out that people were simply reading an article or post, not liking it, and so figured out how to put the inflection on different words to turn it to their advantage through the deliberate misleading of the truth. SME 15 emphasized that when facts don't fit people's worldviews, their social standing, or the people they associate with or live around, they deny and reject the facts presented to them.

According to SME 16, that was one of the fundamental reasons why there were many rumors, conspiracy theories, and inaccuracies escalating around the COVID-19 vaccine. This was also exacerbated with the help of social networking sites. From a public relations stance, SME 17 mentioned that one of the challenges when dealing with disinformation is figuring out the best channel, method, and source to turn to to get the right information to the people you care about the most. The challenge and key is to approach your key stakeholders directly and focus on ensuring that the disinformation directed at you does not negatively impact your relationship with them. Whether this is by focusing on what media or channels will reach them or through other methods, the challenge is to remain focused, not overreact, and understand who matters to you the most.

SME 18 stated that there are certain elements a public relations professional must be aware of, one of the critical components is, he must be monitoring the social channels in multiple countries, and multiple languages, in real-time. And that's very difficult because the services out there that do this are imperfect. Therefore, organizations must be constantly on the watch guard for what's been said. Whether what has been said about the organization is true or untrue, organizations must be constantly alert. SME 19 added that she previously dealt with many crises that started online, whether they started in chat rooms or social media sites, or even blogs. He emphasized that the issue of misinformation and disinformation isn't black and white, it's much more complex and there are many different layers and elements to it. While yes, there are digital tools that help with monitoring disinformation, they are imperfect. Therefore, a public relations professional must be aware of the complexities relating to this issue and must be having regular conversations with their senior team members on how to best address and effectively deal with such issues.

SME 20 shared that a huge part of his previous job involved monitoring the media, where he oversaw over 60 different publications and dealt with many crises specifically involving disinformation and misinformation. He emphasized that one of the most difficult challenges he faced was dealing with journalists. He emphasized that one of the issues he came across early in his career was that there was no booklet or guide provided to him on how to deal with the media today, especially when dealing with disinformation. He added that news literacy isn't taught enough at institutions today, which is an issue given the rise and challenges disinformation presents. SME 1 stated that she had worked with various media companies with a large global presence, and that when a company has such a large scale and global presence, and when it is constantly putting out news, it is extremely vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation. Furthermore, she frequently dealt with inaccurate stories about the company she worked for, and getting the company's side of the story out to the public was a major issue. SME 8 and SME 1, who both worked directly with disinformation and falsehoods online, stated that the most useful resources they used were those that allowed them to easily fact-check, monitor, track, and analyze social media. They both agreed that, while third-party software is useful, it should only be used as an additional tool for public relations professionals. They admitted that, while these tools are useful, they are also flawed. They both expressed that public relations professionals must also have the judgment, critical thinking, and logic to connect the dots, dissect the situation, and devise a well-thought-out and effective response.

It is clear that the post-digital era has complicated misinformation management, with social media allowing individuals to construct their own information feeds, reinforcing ideological bubbles. The phenomenon of information selectivity contributes to the spread of misinformation by capitalizing on people's short attention spans and the ease of sharing made possible by the internet. Disinformation's cumulative effect is a major source of concern, as it undermines public trust in institutions. Furthermore, tribalism in ideas and media consumption exacerbates the problem by ignoring contrary facts. The difficulties include the necessity for continuous monitoring of

social channels, comprehending the complexities of disinformation, and a lack of comprehensive tools and resources for dealing with the issue. Effective solutions necessitate the use of third-party technologies as well as professional critical thinking skills. Overall, the described experiences highlight the complex and ever-changing nature of disinformation challenges in today's communication landscape, emphasizing the importance of a proactive and nuanced approach in public relations and communications.

RQ3: The most effective strategies to adopt and recommended skills for future professionals when dealing with disinformation.

In response to the most effective strategies to adopt when dealing with disinformation, SME 1 stated that his own philosophy has always been to confront the issue and tell the truth and explain candidly why what the other side is saying is untrue. He added that as a professional if you allow the disinformation or misinformation to linger without addressing it, chances are you will be in a much worse position. He referenced examples where he advised many clients who simply did not want to go public and respond to the false information and incorrect accusations targeting them and how that didn't help rectify the problem. SME 2 added that the bigger the name of the client and the more public they are, the more targeted they'll likely be, especially today. He pointed out that sometimes depending on the situation a public response is not always the way to go. Organizations should avoid exaggerating the situation and getting ahead of themselves. This is an issue he observed over the years that resulted in companies making a simple issue worse. He emphasized that this is where the role of an effective public relations advisor with sound judgment comes in.

SME 3 also highlighted that one essential skill public relations professionals must have today is to be objective. They must at least be able to see and understand the other side, even if they don't necessarily agree with their point of view. They must at least consider the point of view of the other side and look at the whole situation objectively. He referenced that today, because of the polarization, people don't consider the other side and aren't willing to hear the opposing point of view. While this may largely be the case in politics for example, for a public relations professional this is a bad approach to have. A public relations professional must be able to understand and even go after the other argument if it's hurting the company or client they represent. Therefore, a fundamental skill for public relations professionals is objectivity and approaching a situation objectively. This allows the professional to be diplomatic and give logical and reasonable advice that is in the best interest of the organization and its public. He added that a public relations professional is also required to be a good researcher and conduct thorough research about the issue they are dealing with, and the different players involved. He highlighted that from his observations, many don't take the time to conduct comprehensive research today which flaws their judgment in many situations.

SME 4 highlighted that when dealing with disinformation, a public relations professional must first have the skill sets to understand the brand they represent. She recommended that one of the best things a public relations professional should do early on in their career is to know the organization they're working for very well. SME 5 added that understanding the business very well and how the business operates helps in understanding what is troubling and what is not, what will affect business operations and what will not. This allows the public relations professional to craft an effective response when faced with disinformation or misinformation aiming to cause harm.

In terms of specific skill sets, she shared that public relations professionals must be able to efficiently use monitoring tools that can surface what has been said on social media for example. From an organization's side, there must be a culture where employees are comfortable enough to immediately bring up an issue they view is concerning.

SME 6 emphasized the importance of companies not only looking at what's currently happening but also anticipating things. She shared that public relations professionals must be able to anticipate things before they happen and plan for the unexpected. Additionally, they must be critical thinkers and able to skillfully diagnose a situation and understand what the potential risks are. They must also clearly understand what is considered harmful to the company and have the wisdom and judgment to evaluate the merits of that. She added that this not only enables the professional to effectively identify and deal with disinformation, but also add value to a conversation and be taken seriously by management. SME 7 shared that the best response to disinformation involves firstly understanding that this is both an art and science. He pointed out that companies must have a system to first identify early warning signs, monitor it, and categorize it accordingly and place it in "the right bucket." He added that it's important to understand that not every falsehood is a crisis that's going to necessarily have a huge reputational harm to the company and its key stakeholders. Once the company understands this, it must have systems in place to effectively respond. SME 8 added that in his experience every company has a different "pain threshold" and it's important for the company to weigh up what response will be appropriate and what will give more oxygen to the issue and worsen rather than rectify it. He highlighted that organizations spend a lot of time talking about debunking, but there needs to be more time put into pre bunking. An organization must understand the importance of building trust or a goodwill reservoir with its public as this is key to "inoculate them against falsehoods."

He mentioned that public relations professionals must not only have the technical skills to monitor, evaluate and respond to disinformation, but also understand the psychology of it and the behavioral science aspect to fighting disinformation today. SME 9 added that professionals must also look at empathy and understand the reasons why people would share false information, whether it's because they are just inattentive, or they're misinformed, or they are not news literate, or have a bad media diet.

SME 10 also emphasized that today, public relations professionals must understand the current ecosystem they are in very well and that "approaching the issue of disinformation with the traditional public relations toolbox is a disservice." Public relations professionals must broaden their toolbox to understand behavioral sciences, understand decision making, how and why people make decisions, and what their motivations are. He added that simply pushing more content into the environment is not going to solve the disinformation problem and that's an issue with many professionals today, they approach the issue in terms of: "what can I push out to solve the problem?" And many times, the problem doesn't need more content, it needs less, it needs an understanding rather than a fight.

SME 11 shared that when dealing with identifying disinformation you must consider the source, consider the channel, and consider the language. He added that the way to counter disinformation is with real information. It is with the truth. This requires the public relations professional to effectively propagate the truth to eventually overwhelm the disinformation so that the disinformation can't be found without also finding the truth, and that is not easy. He emphasized that when faced with disinformation, it is fundamental for a company to understand whether the disinformation targeting it will affect its key stakeholders or not. By understanding this and strategizing what response is too much, too little, or just enough, a company can find the correct balance when responding and ensure that it's not overreacting or making the situation worse. SME 12 added that the key is to focus on the people you care about as a company and not focus on the masses on the periphery. This is the key and the mindset that should be adopted.

He emphasized that as a public relations professional you are not going to change the minds of the people deliberately spreading falsehoods, so you must instead target those who are rational and have an open mind, who can be swayed by facts. In a way, you are "inoculating them with the truth" to prevent the disinformation from potentially influencing them. SME 13 highlighted that to deal with disinformation today public relations professionals must be critical thinkers, question everything, trust but verify, and consume a balanced and broad media diet. He added that they must be taught the critical skills for how to discern fact from fiction and pointed out the importance of them also having the technical skills to track, monitor, and respond to disinformation.

SME 14 emphasized that it is fundamental for organizations today to have someone or a team depending on the size, whose sole job is to monitor social channels to help track public sentiment and report back if anything is considered alarming. The issue he mentioned is that many companies don't allocate a suitable budget for that and with the growth of disinformation today that should start to change. SME 15 also added that when dealing with countering disinformation social listening, effective research, and stakeholder engagement are key elements to consider. Questions like: "Are our stakeholders believing what is being said or not? Are they confused? Are they believing our side? should all be raised. Once this has been addressed, a strategy should be put in place to deal with the issue at hand and success is if the company accomplished its goal. He emphasized that it has become increasingly difficult today because of the new information age and the dystopian world that we live in.

SME 16 highlighted that communicators need to figure out how to survive in the new information age and get enough of the stakeholders that matter to their company or client to understand their view. He mentioned that today, it is unrealistic for communicators to think that everyone will be on their side or that they can influence everyone to embrace their company. Therefore, professionals must strategize and focus on their company's key stakeholders. SME 17 added that there currently isn't a universal course correction for disinformation because of tribalism. He added that "today's information age is kind of like living with a virus. Once you get contaminated, we might give you or inoculate you against it where you can live your life and stay safe, but it's always going to be in your bloodstream and it's never coming out." He shared that this is unfortunately the unavoidable reality of the media age we currently live in.

He recommended that to effectively deal with disinformation today, public relations professionals and communicators must understand social media listening well and stressed on the importance of public relations and communications programs today teaching these skills to future professionals. SME 18 added that public relations professionals must approach the situation like a data scientist, eliminating emotion and individual bias from the equation. Simply look at facts and data and connect the dots using the tools they have and their judgment. Additionally, he pointed out the importance of them understanding human behavior and the social science aspect of this phenomenon.

When asked about his experience, SME 19 shared that when dealing directly with disinformation his goal was to simply get his side of the story out to the public. He understood that he wasn't going to change preconceived opinions and attitudes. Therefore, his goal was to simply allow his side to be presented to those his client or company cared about and was concerned about. He added that public relations professionals must understand that in today's media landscape and information age you can't change the whole narrative, so they must focus on targeting those their client or company cares about the most.

He added that as a public relations professional fact checking and measuring and understanding the overall sentiment is imperative when dealing with disinformation. In addition to being effective researchers, taking initiative, and having sound judgment. She added that the goal is to ensure that your side of the story is out when faced with disinformation. SME 20 emphasized that her goal wasn't to control the overall narrative or change the views of those with predetermined notions about her company as that is unrealistic. Her goal and the measure of success was to ensure her client or company's side of the story was out. She added that she had previously worked in huge companies that did not have a crisis team or plan for when an unexpected issue arises which was an issue she observed throughout her career.

Discussion

The research hypothesis suggests that public relations professionals can effectively respond to "fake news" aimed at harming the reputation of a corporation by implementing protocols to enable them to quickly identify "fake news" and efficiently respond to it. After analyzing the findings, the researcher found that all participants' comments support the hypothesis of the research. The findings of the research based on in-depth interviews conducted with a purposively selected sample of public relations professionals help strengthen the research's hypothesis and broaden the conversation topics for future research. The findings (1) help shed light on public relations and communication professionals' understanding of disinformation and "fake news," the threat it has on corporate reputations today, and how this has exacerbated in today's post-digital media landscape and polarized political landscape. (2) explore and better understand the experiences of public relations and communications professionals when faced with disinformation and the challenges they face.

Public relations and communication professionals' understanding of disinformation, the threat it has on corporate reputations, and how this has exacerbated today

According to the findings of the study, all participants differentiate the terms "fake news" and "disinformation," and some try to avoid using the term "fake news" because of the polarizing effect it has and their belief that it is more of a branding term used for political or personal gain by various parties today. This was consistent with the findings of Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who discovered two major motivators for "fake news": ideological and financial. The participants all agreed on the definition of disinformation as false and misleading information created with the intent to cause harm. These results support the literature and agree with Lazer et al. (2018, pp. 1094–1096) that disinformation is information that's intentionally spread to deceive someone. However, the participants' clear distinction between "fake news" and "disinformation" was at odds with most studies, which lumped disinformation and misinformation together under the umbrella term "fake news." Allcott and Gentzkow, for example, defined "fake news" as intentionally misleading information, which is also the definition of disinformation. This demonstrates that the two terms are commonly used interchangeably, even in academic studies that refer to disinformation or misinformation as "fake news." This blend was highlighted by Khan and Brohman (2022), who argued that when referring to false and misleading messages, the correct terminology should be based on the content and structure, such as stating "false video" rather than the broad and general term "fake news" (Khan & Brohman, 2022).

The research findings also suggested that while the experts agreed that lies, propaganda, and rumors have predated the internet, they all referenced and shared examples of how social media today and the algorithms created on social media, and the technologies available encourage the dissemination of falsehoods, quickly and at large volumes. They also pointed out that because

of social media and the internet today, "fake news" has become more of a widespread idea and issue. The experts also highlighted the term "fake news" was largely popularized and introduced into the public discourse because of Donald Trump. These findings are supported by the 2016 Pew Research study conducted right after the 2016 U.S. presidential election that found that 23% of Americans stated that they had shared politically fabricated stories themselves and 42% of them believe social networking sites contributed largely to the spread of fake news (Barthel, Holcomb & Mitchell, 2016). They are also supported by the literature that the term "fake news" was largely popularized and became a mainstream term during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections ("Evaluating Information: Fake News in the 2016 US Elections", 2022) because of former U.S. president Donald Trump.

Future discussions about terminology used to spread false information are likely to continue. Public relations and communications professionals provided a balanced perspective by distinguishing between "fake news" and "disinformation." While it differs from other academic ideas, it is consistent with some of them. Although they recognize the divisive nature of "fake news," these experts agree that "disinformation" includes intentionally false information intended to cause harm. As social media platforms, computational processes, and technological developments continue to influence the disinformation landscape, this subtle distinction may become even more apparent. Additionally, the ongoing use of the term "fake news," which is partly attributed to politicians like Donald Trump, is likely to have a long-lasting impact on public debate. It is now difficult to reconcile these differences in the context of academic and lay understandings of disinformation. This task becomes increasingly complex as we grapple with the evolving dynamics of disinformation in the digital age

The experiences and challenges faced by public relations and communications professionals when dealing with disinformation

Most participants mentioned and shared examples of how individuals who hold opposing views to their clients' or company's views refuse to believe the facts presented to them and, at times, are unwilling to engage in any conversation. Participants also agreed that because the majority of people get their information and news from social media and have an unbalanced media diet, it is becoming increasingly difficult to present their client's or company's side of the story or dispel myths. These findings help support another common theme that emerged from the interviews, where most of the experts agreed that most of the disinformation that targets their clients or company is politically motivated. This is more of an issue when the client is more vocal on controversial issues. These findings support those of Petrov & Fehon (2019), who stated that companies that are very vocal on controversial issues are usually much more likely to be the target of disinformation (Petrov & Fehon, 2019). On the one hand, these findings support the findings of Nyhan and Reifler (2010), who found that participants with a specific ideology did not change or

update their beliefs when presented with corrective information that was opposed to or contradicted existing views. The findings also support Thorson's (2016) findings, which revealed that when negative political misinformation is effectively and immediately discredited after it has circulated among the public, the negative information is what continues to shape public attitudes and beliefs. This phenomenon is known as "belief echoes" (Thorson, 2016).

The opinions of the participants, on the other hand, contradict Bode and Vraga's (2015) study, which discovered that when related stories correct a post that contains misinformation, participants' misunderstandings are significantly reduced (Bode and Vraga, 2015). It's important to note that Bode and Vraga's study was designed to specifically test a new function of Facebook and focused on correcting stories on social media only. The expert interviews, on the other hand, aimed to assess the issue of disinformation more broadly than just disinformation or misinformation on social media. The participants' responses were based on decades of experience working in various sectors, at various times, and with various audiences, which may explain the differences in viewpoints.

Another significant finding mentioned by participants was the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges posed by public health crises. They all agreed that such crises incite public outrage, fear, and confusion, and that people become more emotional as a result. According to the participants, these are the conditions in which disinformation and misinformation thrive. Some of the experts who dealt directly with vaccine misinformation highlighted the challenges they specifically observed with the exacerbation of disinformation and misinformation during the pandemic and the problems this posed for their clients. These findings support the studies discussed in the literature regarding the aggravation of misinformation and disinformation during public health crises. This was referenced in Martel, Pennycook, & Rand's (2020) study that revealed the relationship between relying on emotions and an increase in susceptibility to fake news (Martel, Pennycook, & Rand, 2020).

Another significant finding from the participants was that dealing with disinformation is a challenge today because it is a complex issue that is not black and white and consists of various layers and elements, making it a real challenge. The experts agreed that a challenge they face is that companies don't deal with disinformation until it becomes a major threat to their business. Companies typically take a reactive rather than proactive approach, waiting until they are in trouble. The participants also stated that many of the companies they have worked with do not understand the value of investing in skilled public relations and communications professionals who are specialized in dealing with this issue.

The final aspect of this research looked into how effective the tools and software available were for the experts who used them. When asked, the two participants, who both worked directly with managing disinformation and falsehoods online, stated that the most useful resources they used were those that were widely available today and allowed them to easily fact-check, monitor, track, and analyze

social media. They both agreed that third-party software designed to do this for them is useful, but it is flawed, so they cannot rely solely on it. These tools and software, however, still necessitate the use of a skilled public relations professional who can use them while also possessing the judgment, critical thinking, and logic to connect the dots and devise a well-thought-out and effective response. They added that they go hand in hand. One of the participants specifically mentioned how he is researching how artificial intelligence-based software for analyzing and identifying disinformation on social media platforms such as Twitter could be useful. Therefore, one suggestion the researcher makes is to conduct more research and explore how using AI software to analyze and combat disinformation could be used by upcoming public relations professionals to better equip them when dealing with disinformation.

The study's notable findings provide valuable insights into the difficult landscape of managing disinformation and misinformation. Participants agreed on the difficulty of changing the beliefs of people who hold opposing views, which is consistent with Nyhan and Reifler's 2010 study, which highlighted resistance to corrected information that contradicts established notions. Furthermore, Thorson's 2016 concept of "belief echoes" aligns with experts' observations that harmful political misinformation can persist and influence public opinion even after swift rebuttals. These findings, however, appear to contradict Bode and Vraga's 2015 study, which found that related stories on social media can help reduce misunderstandings when misinformation is corrected. The participants' emphasis on the escalation of disinformation during public health emergencies is consistent with previous research, such as Martel, Pennycook, and Rand's 2020 study, which linked emotions to increased susceptibility to fake news during such crises. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the multifaceted nature of disinformation, transforming it from a simple issue requiring proactive strategies and the expertise of public relations professionals to a complex issue requiring proactive strategies and the expertise of public relations professionals. The participants' reliance on readily available tools and software for fact-checking and monitoring emphasizes their significance, with potential future approaches incorporating artificial intelligence to improve misinformation analysis and response techniques. In summary, these findings shed light on the wide range of issues raised by misinformation and highlight the evolving strategies needed to effectively counteract its negative effects.

Effective strategies and essential skills for addressing disinformation in future professionals.

The final area the researcher wanted to explore through the in-depth interviews was the most effective strategies to combat disinformation and the skills public relations and communications professionals must have to effectively deal with disinformation impacting their client's reputation. The researcher raised questions including: (1) What the experts recommend or suggest can help improve the way public relations professionals detect, evaluate, and manage disinformation? (2) What "new skills" public relations professionals require to effectively deal with disinformation (3) What resources and strategies have been most effective when dealing with disinformation?

In terms of the most effective strategies, most experts agreed on (1) the importance of combating disinformation with the truth. They agreed that the best way to defeat falsehoods is with the truth. At the same time, they all referenced examples that controlling the entire narrative today is unrealistic due to the information age we currently live in. Therefore, public relations professionals must strategize and focus on getting their clients' truth out and understand that it's unrealistic to have everyone on your side. (2) They all highlighted the importance of having a proactive rather than reactive approach when dealing with disinformation. They shared that an organization must pay more attention to pre-bunking rather than debunking to inoculate its key stakeholders with the truth and build a trust reservoir for when a crisis involving disinformation hits. They all suggested that companies today must have a system to first identify early warning signs, monitor it, and categorize it. accordingly and place it in "the right bucket." This requires investing in skilled communications professionals to help them achieve this. (3) Another critical component the experts suggested is to understand that not every falsehood created is a crisis and to avoid overreacting.

The experts emphasized that the most effective response to combating disinformation is built on a clear understanding of who the most important stakeholders to the company are and devising a strategy to effectively influence them and ensure they aren't negatively impacted by the falsehoods.

They suggested that when public relations professionals understand their business well and strategize what response is too much, too little, or just enough, they can find the correct balance and ensure that they aren't overreacting or underreacting. They referenced how the best strategy when dealing with disinformation is both an art and science supported by research, objectivity, critical thinking, and a sound understanding of psychology and human behavior.

Additionally, the findings revealed that the most effective skills public relations and communications professionals must have to effectively deal with disinformation include:(1) Objectivity. They must approach the situation objectively and not allow individual bias to take over. By being objective and consuming a balanced media diet, public relations professionals can give diplomatic, logical, and reasonable advice that is in the best interest of the organization and its public. (2) Public relations and communications professionals must be critical thinkers, question everything, trust, but at the same time verify. (3) They must be skilled and thorough researchers. The experts highlighted that the foundation of a successful response is comprehensive research. (4) Public relations professionals must possess the technical skills to efficiently use the monitoring and tracking tools available when dealing with online disinformation while simultaneously understanding the psychology behind disinformation. They must approach the situation with both the mind of a data scientist, focusing on facts and eliminating emotion, but at the same time approach it from the perspective of a social scientist and understand human behavior and the psychology behind the situation. All experts agreed that it is through combining both sides of the brain or in other words combining the ethos, pathos, and logos that the most effective, comprehensive, and logical response is reached.

These results support the literature that highlights the importance of understanding the psychology behind disinformation to best deal with it. This includes "inoculating your audiences" from disinformation by applying "Inoculation Theory" (Roozenbeek, & Van Del Linden, 2021) when dealing with disinformation. Additionally, the primary research findings support and shed light on one of the very first concepts applied in public relations by the father of public relations, Edward Bernays who stated that public relations professionals must understand their key stakeholders to effectively reach and influence them and this entails understanding and approaching the situation as a "Social Scientist" that is skilled in understanding social attitudes and the environment around them to skillfully counsel their client. This was emphasized by Garcia (2012, p.240) who stated that communication professionals must engage their stakeholders quickly and effectively and adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach when dealing with a crisis (Garcia 2012, p.240).

Contribution to the field

This study contributes to the academic field by shedding light on the multifaceted nature of misinformation issues and emphasizing the importance of dynamic, adaptable strategies for effectively addressing these challenges, as follows:

Most studies have focused on exploring the impact "fake news" has politically or socially. How is it affecting public trust in institutions and leaders? How is it impacting free speech and democracy today? While this is fundamental to explore, there has been a noticeable lack in the number of studies that have explored the impact "fake news" has on the reputations of companies today and what the experiences, attitudes, and challenges public relations and communications professionals' dealing with this growing phenomenon look like. There has also been a lack in the number of studies that have explored what the best practices for dealing with "fake news" are for upcoming professionals in the field. While the literature review did help address some parts of the research questions raised. There was a clear gap in the literature which the findings of this study helped fill in.

The study explored the unique experiences and challenges faced by industry experts when dealing with disinformation, searching for similarities, common themes, or potential contrasts. The main contribution to the field these results provide is that they identify where most of the disinformation targeting companies comes from and when falsehoods tend to increase. This was accomplished by researching common themes and noticeable similarities and differences based on industry experts' experiences. By being aware of the root cause of an issue, when it exacerbates it, and the factors that lead to it, public relations professionals and companies can devise more effective and tailored strategies to deal with this growing issue.In addition, the study provides practical insights into misinformation management by drawing on expert observations and aligning them with prior academic research. Furthermore, because this study bridges academic research and practical expertise, it is applicable to both scholars and professionals dealing with misinformation.

Limitaions and recommendations for future research

It is important to highlight that there are potential limitations that the primary research findings of this research present. To begin, the in-depth interviews were conducted solely with experts from the United States, with a focus on the US market. While the expert had experience in a variety of industries and all worked for global multinational corporations, their experiences were primarily focused on the United States, and the examples they shared were based on the American market. This poses a limitation to the research because experts from different countries and cultural backgrounds may reach different conclusions.

Future research

Recommendations for future research can be drawn from the limitations of this research. Interviewing a larger number of industry experts, with a focus on interviewing younger public relations professionals, is one of them. For future research, focusing on gaining more perspectives from young professionals is recommended. Another suggestion is to fund and support a team of professionals from various countries around the world to collaborate on further researching this topic. This would allow for new findings to be drawn from countries with different cultures and traditions than the United States, providing greater insight into the subject.

Another suggestion for future research is to concentrate on this topic in a single industry rather than several. For example, by focusing on interviewing public relations and communications experts who only work in the healthcare industry, different results may be reached due to the unique nature of each industry. This would be especially beneficial to those working in the specified industry because more tailored and detailed results could be generated.

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