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Making sense of public relations - a visual ethnography of students' interpretations of the public relations profession

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Public relations (PR) is a relatively new academic discipline, which is frequently misrepresented in the mainstream media and misunderstood by the broader public (Bowen, 2009). These representations unquestionably influence new students' understanding and expectations of their chosen field of study, as well as career ambitions (Bowen, 2003; Wolf, 2009).

Although students are commonly prompted to reflect on their ideas and understanding of public relations as part of in-class exercises, in subsequent online activities, as well as part of structured assessments, sense-making processes can take place anywhere. This project draws on visual ethnography methods (Pink, 2011) for data collection purposes to capture and track learners' understanding of the PR industry throughout their higher education journey, with the aim to gain an insight into how the next generation of professionals conceptualises the role of public relations in practice, as well as its role in society.

Visual, sensory and physical elements are playing an increasingly vital role in PR practice and scholarship (Collister & Roberts-Bowmann, 2018), although levels of visual communication skills are still lagging across the industry (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2017). Contrary to the PR status quo, millennials are commonly comfortable with life in an increasingly visual society, given their preference for visual communication methods (Jakus, 2018; Kott, 2018), exemplified by the continued popularity of image (and video)-based social media platforms such as Instagram (Sensis, 2018). Hence, the design of this project was motivated by the desire to initiate reflection in a style and forum which made learners feel comfortable, hence encouraging a greater level of engagement and hence potentially a deeper level of reflection throughout the learning journey, supported by multiple unit-specific 'prompts' throughout the PR curriculum.

By allowing learners to reflect on their understanding of their chosen discipline in their own time, in work spaces, and different study contexts, with no limits in terms of geography and creative interpretation, the research team set out to gain an authentic insight into the student journey, validating the effectiveness of the current curriculum, as well as informing future changes and areas of focus.

Beyond the PR discipline and its professional context, the authors believe that visual ethnography methods are valuable across a broad range of academic and professional contexts, due to their ability to provide authentic, first-hand insights in a way that encourages learners' engagement and creative interpretation.

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