



MANIPULATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS IN THE FILM THANK YOU FOR SMOKING: ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL CODE OF ETHICS VIOLATIONS

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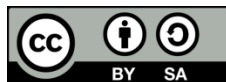
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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the representation of manipulation and violations of Public Relations (PR) professional ethics in the film Thank You for Smoking (2005), focusing on how unethical communication strategies are represented through visual and verbal narratives. This film was chosen because it explicitly shows the manipulative practices of tobacco industry spokespersons in shaping public opinion through persuasive rhetoric, issue framing, and obscuring facts. The research method used is qualitative content analysis with Roland Barthes' semiotic approach and critical discourse analysis. Data were collected through systematic observation of film scenes that show the practice of card stacking, conflicts of interest, information concealment, and violations of the principles of transparency and social responsibility. The analysis focused on the language structure, visual symbols, and the ideological context of the main character's actions as a representation of the PR profession. The results show that this film displays various forms of violations of the PR code of ethics, including the shifting of issues from public health to the discourse of individual freedom, the manipulation of rhetoric to justify unethical actions, and the creation of a professional image that is contrary to moral integrity. Symbols and language in the film are used strategically to construct perceptions that benefit the industry. The conclusion of this study confirms that Thank You for Smoking critiques PR practices that deviate from ethical values. These findings are significant for raising the ethical awareness of PR students and practitioners in facing the dilemmas of modern communication, which is rife with vested interests and manipulation.

Keywords: Public Relations, manipulation, ethics, film, semiotics

1. INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) is a strategic profession whose primary function is to build image, establish two-way communication, and maintain an institution's reputation in the public eye. Normatively, this profession is carried out based on a code of ethics that upholds the principles of honesty, transparency, social responsibility, and integrity in communication. In Indonesia, the Code of Ethics of the Indonesian Public Relations Association (PERHUMAS) serves as the primary reference for defining the boundary between professional communication strategies and manipulative or misleading communication practices (PERHUMAS, 2017).

The phenomenon of ethical violations in public relations practice is increasingly prevalent, particularly when PR is used as a tool to defend problematic corporate interests. The reality on the ground shows that various institutions, particularly those operating in controversial sectors such as tobacco, alcohol, or energy, frequently utilize biased, dishonest, and even manipulative communication strategies. The use of framing techniques, card-stacking, and pseudo-informative campaigns is increasingly found in lobbying practices and communication campaigns, ultimately violating the fundamental principle of public relations as the guardian of the integrity of public information (Yulistiani, 2023).

The film "Thank You for Smoking" (2005) is a powerful depiction of PR practices that deviate from professional ethics. The main character, Nick Naylor, is portrayed as a tobacco industry spokesperson skilled at rhetoric, framing health issues as ideological discourse, and manipulating public opinion to benefit the industry. Previous studies by Rumui (2007) and Suryaningsih (2020) have identified the film as a critique of individualistic capitalism and manipulative communication practices. However, these previous studies have generally focused on the narrative and social critique aspects of the film, without specifically analyzing violations of PR ethics systematically through semiotics and critical discourse approaches.

The research gap in this study lies in the lack of in-depth analysis linking the manipulative practices in the film to the principles of the PR code of ethics applicable in Indonesia. While Thompson's (2009) study highlighted issues of consumer ethics and individual freedom in the film, little research has examined how forms of manipulation in strategic communication can directly violate PR professional norms. This understanding is crucial for equipping young practitioners and communication students to distinguish between legitimate persuasive strategies and those that violate ethical principles.

This research offers novelty through a dual approach: critical discourse analysis and Roland Barthes's semiotics, which are used to analyze how language, symbols, and visual narratives in films shape misleading perceptions about public health issues. This approach makes theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of strategic communication by exploring the connotative meanings of

communicative acts in the context of violations of professional ethics. Practically, this research also highlights the importance of media literacy in developing critical awareness among communication students regarding the representation of the PR profession in popular media.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to update the understanding of ethics in PR practice amidst the rapid flow of strategic communication that prioritizes message effectiveness over integrity. Through this study, it is hoped that a new awareness will emerge among PR academics and practitioners that communication success is measured not only by the final result, but also by the methods and principles adopted. By examining the violations of PR codes of ethics in the film *Thank You for Smoking*, this study reinforces the importance of moral integrity in every public communication strategy (Haque & Ahmad, 2017; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

Ethics in Public Relations

The Public Relations (PR) professional code of ethics established by PERHUMAS (Indonesian Public Relations Association) is a moral and professional guideline that must be upheld by every public relations practitioner in carrying out their duties. This code emphasizes the importance of honesty, integrity, social responsibility, and a professional attitude toward clients, the media, and the wider public. In carrying out their communications function, a PR practitioner is prohibited from conveying false, misleading, or manipulative information and is required to maintain the confidentiality of strategic information obtained from clients or organizations.

PERHUMAS also emphasizes that PR practitioners must avoid all forms of bribery, bribery, or other unethical practices to maintain the objectivity and image of the profession. Responsibility to the public is a key principle, where public interests must be prioritized over personal or institutional interests. Furthermore, PR practitioners are required to refrain from actions that could tarnish the reputation of the public relations profession, whether through public statements, personal behavior, or within the context of professional work. Through this code of ethics, PERHUMAS strives to ensure that public relations practices in Indonesia remain ethical and support healthy, open, and responsible communication.

Manipulation Theory

Manipulation is a form of communication carried out with the aim of covertly influencing the opinions, attitudes, or behavior of an individual or group, where the manipulated party is not fully aware that they are being directed (Perloff, 2020). Manipulation typically exploits information gaps between the communicator and the recipient, exploiting the emotions, needs, or weaknesses of the audience to achieve specific goals (Ellul, 1965). In the context of public

relations, manipulation is an act that contradicts ethical principles, as it undermines public trust and compromises the values of transparency and honesty. One theory underlying the practice of manipulation is communication manipulation theory. This theory emphasizes that manipulation occurs when the communicator conceals the true purpose of the message, utilizing covert persuasive strategies to influence the audience without their awareness. The communicator uses rhetoric, imagery, selectively chosen data, or even misleading information to direct public opinion (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

In the film "Thank You for Smoking," manipulation is evident through the main character's lobbying communication strategy. Certain facts are deliberately obscured, public opinion is guided through deceptive rhetoric, and messages are crafted to defend the tobacco industry despite endangering public health. These practices also reflect a violation of the public relations profession's code of ethics, which prioritizes the principles of honesty, responsibility, and the public interest.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In communication studies, crisis discourse analysis is used to examine how crises are constructed, framed, and responded to through communication practices, particularly by actors such as public relations practitioners. This approach focuses not only on the crisis event itself, but also on how discourse about the crisis is shaped through the language, narrative, and communication strategies employed by the parties involved (Eka, 2020).

In the film "Thank You For Smoking," the primary crisis faced is the negative image of the tobacco industry, which is increasingly criticized for its health impacts. Nick Naylor, the main character and a public relations practitioner in the tobacco industry, depicts how this crisis is not addressed through transparency or accountability, but through manipulative discourse management. Nick constructs the crisis not as a public health issue, but as an attack on the individual's right to choose. This is a form of distorted meaning strategy, shifting public focus from the substance of the crisis to civil liberties (Rumui, 2016).

The analysis of the crisis discourse in this film demonstrates that language and symbols are key tools in shaping public perception, while also serving as a means to conceal ethical violations. Through Nick's role, this film invites the audience to see how discourse manipulation can be part of a communication strategy in facing a crisis that has a major social and moral impact.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative content analysis method with an interpretive approach to explore violations of the public relations code of ethics in the film "Thank You for Smoking." The film was analyzed as a cultural text rich in signs, symbols, and discourse, allowing for in-depth interpretation of the messages

conveyed. Data was collected through systematic observation of scenes in the film. The analysis focused on manipulative actions, the use of rhetoric in dialogue, and the characters' relationships with the public or clients. These scenes were categorized based on indicators of ethical violations, such as dishonesty, conflicts of interest, and lack of transparency.

To strengthen the findings, the study incorporated critical discourse analysis to examine the use of language in dialogue or monologues that contained information manipulation or justification for unethical actions. This analysis was linked to the PERHUMAS Code of Ethics standards to provide a professional perspective. Furthermore, semiotic analysis was used to uncover the symbolic meaning of visual and narrative elements in the film. Elements such as expression, symbolism, spatial arrangement, and narrative were used to identify connotations of ethical violations in public relations communication.

This research was conducted by accessing the film "Thank You for Smoking" through official streaming platforms such as Netflix or Amazon Prime. The analysis process was carried out over a specific period, following the stages of observation, data recording, interpretation, and report preparation.

The research subject was the researcher herself, performing qualitative and semiotic analysis. The object of the study was the film "Thank You for Smoking," specifically scenes representing violations of the public relations professional code of ethics, both visually, verbally, and narratively.

Data collection techniques in this study included: Film Observation, in-depth observation of scenes depicting unethical communication practices, such as rhetorical manipulation, conflicts of interest, and violations of communication integrity. Field Notes, structured recording of relevant scenes, dialogue, and visual symbols for further analysis. Discourse Analysis, an examination of language use in dialogue/monologue to identify communication strategies that conflict with professional ethics. Semiotic Analysis, a reading of signs and symbols appearing in the film, by interpreting the denotative and connotative meanings of these elements within the context of the PR profession.

Data analysis in this study utilized: Qualitative Content Analysis, encompassing data reduction, categorization, and interpretation of the theme of ethical violations in public relations communication. Discourse Analysis, Examining film narratives from linguistic and ideological perspectives, and their impact on public perception. Semiotic Analysis, Examining visual, symbolic, and cultural elements to identify ethical representations or violations in films.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Thank You for Smoking Film Biography

Thank You for Smoking is an American political satire-comedy film released in 2005. Directed by Jason Reitman and adapted from the novel of the same name by

Christopher Buckley, the film stars Nick Naylor, played by Aaron Eckhart, as a spokesperson for the tobacco industry working for the fictional Academy of Tobacco Studies.

The 92-minute film highlights public relations (PR) practices through Nick, who uses rhetoric, issue framing, and communication strategies to defend the tobacco industry amid pressure from the public, the media, and the government. The film presents a poignant irony about how the industry maintains its image through manipulative communication. Through a dark comedy and social critique, *Thank You for Smoking* depicts PR practices that deviate from professional ethics. The film has been widely studied in communication studies, media ethics, and modern propaganda.

Manipulation in Public Relations

Manipulation is a form of communication carried out with the aim of covertly influencing the opinions, attitudes, or behavior of an individual or group, where the manipulated party is not fully aware that they are being directed (Perloff, 2020). Manipulation typically exploits information gaps between the communicator and the recipient, exploiting the emotions, needs, or weaknesses of the audience to achieve certain goals (Indriati Yulistiani, 2023). In the context of public relations, manipulation is an act that contradicts ethical principles, as it undermines public trust and compromises the values of transparency and honesty. One theory underlying the practice of manipulation is communication manipulation theory. This theory emphasizes that manipulation occurs when the communicator conceals the true purpose of the message, utilizing covert persuasive strategies to influence the audience without their awareness. The communicator uses rhetoric, imagery, selectively chosen data, or even misleading information to direct public opinion (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

In the film *"Thank You for Smoking,"* manipulation is evident through the main character's lobbying communication strategy. Certain facts are deliberately obscured, public opinion is guided through deceptive rhetoric, and messages are crafted to defend the tobacco industry despite endangering public health interests. These practices also reflect a violation of the public relations profession's code of ethics, which prioritizes the principles of honesty, responsibility, and the public interest.

This analysis is further strengthened by Harold D. Lasswell's Propaganda Theory, which explains how communication is systematically used to influence the public in accordance with the sender's interests. This approach, if implemented without ethics, will lead to the formation of misleading public opinion.

Forms of Manipulation and Violations of Public Relations Ethics in Films

The film *"Thank You for Smoking"* clearly depicts various forms of deviation in public relations practices carried out by its main character. The following five key

points demonstrate how communication manipulation is systematically carried out and violates PR codes of ethics, including honesty, public responsibility, and representation of the profession itself.

a. Information Manipulation and Dishonesty

Nick practices card stacking, which involves only presenting information that benefits the industry and concealing the dangers of smoking. On a national talk show, he stated that there is no strong evidence that smoking causes death, while blaming consumers for it. This violates the principles of honesty and transparency in PR.

b. Diverting the Focus of the Issue Through Crisis Framing

Nick uses framing to transform a health issue into an ideological one, such as "freedom of choice." In a Senate hearing, he does not directly address the impact of smoking, but instead shifts it to parental rights. This reflects topic manipulation to gain public sympathy and obscure the core issue.

c. Conflict of Interest and the Creation of False Realities

Nick does not convey the truth, but instead constructs a positive image of the industry with exaggerated rhetoric and sarcastic humor. In the "MOD Squad" meeting scene, he and other industry lobbyists discuss how they can sway public opinion. This is a form of collusive communication that deviates from professional ethics.

d. Failure to Prioritize the Public Interest

Nick fails to educate anyone about the dangers of smoking, even when speaking to children. He refers to smoking as a "free choice," not a health issue. Vulnerable audiences become targets of covert propaganda, which contradicts PR's social responsibility.

e. Negative Representation of the Public Relations Profession

This film depicts PR as a propaganda tool, not an ethical profession. From the perspective of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the media in the film not only reflects reality but also creates a negative image of PR—namely, a profession full of falsehood and manipulation for the sake of power.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of Scenes in the Film "Thank You for Smoking"

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of the film "Thank You for Smoking" is used to uncover the meaning behind the visual and verbal signs appearing in key scenes. Barthes distinguishes meaning into two levels: denotation (literal or direct meaning) and connotation (additional meaning arising from social, cultural, or ideological associations). This analysis aims to identify how meaning is constructed through language, gestures, and the visual context in the film, and how these meanings are used to influence audience perceptions of the issue of smoking and the public relations profession.

Scene 1 – Television Talk Show

Nick appears as a guest on a national talk show. He states that there is no definitive scientific evidence that cigarettes cause death.

- a) Denotation: Nick speaks calmly and confidently on camera, defending the cigarette industry.
- b) Connotation: He frames the narrative that smoking is a matter of personal choice, not a public health issue.
- c) Analysis: Nick uses a professional speaking style, measured diction, and calm expression to project the image of being rational and objective. However, he is obscuring scientific facts. Language becomes a tool for distorting perceptions, not conveying the truth.

Scene 2 – “MOD Squad” Meeting

Nick meets regularly with lobbyists from the alcohol and arms industries. They call themselves the “Merchants of Death.”

- a) Denotation: Three lobbyists sit together in a restaurant, having a casual discussion over dinner.
- b) Connotation: Ethically problematic actions are presented as normal and professional.
- c) Analysis: The round table layout, informal dialogue, and friendly atmosphere are used to signal that their actions are legitimate and appropriate. In semiotics, this setting creates the connotation that manipulating the public is part of professional work, not a violation.

Scene 3 – Bribery to Former Marlboro Actor



Nick visits a former cigarette commercial actor who is now seriously ill from smoking, with the goal of silencing him from becoming an anti-smoking spokesperson.

- a) Denotation: Nick gives a suitcase filled with money as a form of “personal favor.”
- b) Connotation: Money is used as a tool to control the narrative and silence reality.
- c) Analysis: The camera pans slowly across the suitcase and the actor’s expression to emphasize the moral intensity of the dilemma. This scene suggests that in the PR world depicted, facts can be bought. Nick’s calm and smiling body language also connotes that his actions are considered normal and routine.

Scene 4 – Nick Giving a Class at Elementary School



Nick speaks to elementary school students about his work and the importance of “free thinking.”

- a) Denotation: Nick stands in front of the class with a smile, speaking to the children about choice and freedom.
- b) Connotation: Manipulative messages are subtly inserted into the educational forum.
- c) Analysis: The warm, informal atmosphere of the classroom is used to create a neutral impression. However, the content of the conversation instills doubt about the smoking ban. Nick exploits the cognitively unstable audience to insert messages that benefit the industry.

Scene 5 – Senate Hearing

Nick is summoned to a Senate hearing to discuss the dangers of smoking for children.

- a) Denotation: Nick appears formally in the hearing room, wearing a suit, and speaks about parents' rights in raising children.
- b) Connotation: A health issue is shifted to an ideological one.
- c) Analysis: Nick uses verbal strategies to change the subject. Instead of discussing the effects of smoking, he focuses on family freedom. His word choice and intonation demonstrate how PR can be used to sway opinion and undermine opposing arguments without directly denying the facts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the film "Thank You for Smoking" systematically represents a violation of the Public Relations (PR) professional code of ethics through its characterization of Nick Naylor as a spokesperson for the tobacco industry. The various communication strategies depicted—such as card stacking, issue framing, discourse shifting, and the use of manipulative symbols and rhetoric—demonstrate a serious deviation from the fundamental principles of PR: honesty, social responsibility, and professional integrity.

Using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach and critical discourse analysis, this study successfully identified how visual and verbal signs were used not only to convey messages but also to covertly shape public opinion. The film's language, expressions, and setting became dominant tools in creating connotations that supported industry interests while normalizing manipulative practices in strategic communication.

A key conclusion of this study is that the film is not simply a product of popular culture but also serves as a medium for criticizing the ethical degradation in modern PR. This film provokes profound reflection on how public communication can be exploited for purposes detrimental to society if not grounded in moral values. Academically, these findings expand the field of communication ethics studies by positioning the film as a critical, reflective text. Practically, this research serves as a reminder for PR practitioners and students to continue upholding a

code of ethics as the foundation for designing responsible and integrity-based communication strategies.

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