Persuasion, Parasociality, and the Press Agentry Model: Ethical Boundaries in Emotion-Driven and Influencer-Based Public Relations

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Public relations (PR) is inherently persuasive, aiming to shape public opinion and influence behavior. Two key strategies are emotion-driven persuasion, intentionally crafting messages to evoke strong emotional responses, and the rapidly expanding practice of influencer marketing, which leverages social-media personalities and parasocial relationships to build trust and shape audience perception. While both strategies can boost engagement and brand visibility, they also pose ethical challenges when deception is prioritized over transparency and respect. This paper examines how emotion-driven campaigns and influencer partnerships can cross the line from persuasion into manipulation, using the press agentry model to frame these ethical boundaries.

The earliest definitions of PR emphasized press agentry and publicity, while more modern definitions incorporate concepts of engagement and relationship building (PRSA, 2025). Over time, PR practitioners have grown to avoid models that prioritize propaganda or manipulative tactics, but it is important to examine the historical roots of these approaches. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined press agentry as a one-way, asymmetrical model of PR that often utilizes “incomplete, distorted, or half-true information” (p. 21) to persuade and manipulate its targets. Press agentry has been labeled the “public be damned model” because of its use of publicity stunts designed to generate artificial interest in a client’s offerings (Goldman, 1948). Dating back to the early 20th century, when press agentry was first employed by promoters such as circus icon Phineas Taylor (P.T.) Barnum to boost attendance at circus venues, scholars argue that press agentry sought attention for the organization by any means necessary, regardless of ethical standards or accuracy. Brown's (1921) essay described press agentry as a “parasite, … menace, … [and] instrument of infection” (p. 610), while Rodgers (2010) notes that the press

agent was accused of "adding to the confusedness of modern life by making it as difficult to discern the truth in public affairs" (p. 52).

Despite these critiques, the ability of press agentry to influence the public was undeniable. Goldman (1965) contended that "the conscious and controlled use of publicity" was poised to affect national life almost as much as any other single factor in the 1900s. Recognizing that press agentry was largely incompatible with ethical business practices, companies gradually shifted toward more principled uses of PR, aligning with a widely accepted definition of PR as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2025). By emphasizing mutual benefit, this modern approach stands in stark contrast to the one-way, manipulative, and often abusive methods of press agentry. Nevertheless, remnants of press agentry persist in contemporary PR and advertising. While less overt, they continue to shape strategies that prioritize attention and influence. Both emotion-driven persuasion and influencer-driven marketing exemplify the lingering influence of press agentry principles, which prioritize visibility, hype, and attention-getting tactics to shape public perception.

Emotion-driven persuasion in PR refers to strategies that aim to influence audiences by eliciting strong emotional responses, rather than relying solely on factual information or logical argumentation. PR practitioners often craft messages that tap into empathy, fear, excitement, or outrage to make organizations appear relatable, trustworthy, or meaningful (Kent, 2015). For nonprofits, activist groups, or social causes, these techniques can be especially effective in fostering identification and motivating action. While emotion-driven persuasion can strengthen engagement and connection, it also raises ethical concerns. These tactics exploit the ways audiences process and respond to emotionally charged content, whether narratives, images,

slogans, or other media, potentially tipping into manipulation. Research indicates that heightened reliance on emotion, rather than reason, can increase susceptibility to misinformation, and individuals who process information more emotionally are more likely to perceive fabricated content as accurate, whereas analytic, reason-based thinking improves discernment between true and false information (Pennycook et al., 2020). In this context, emotion-driven persuasion can blur the line between meaningful engagement and manipulative influence.

Marketing and PR professional (and self-described media manipulator) Ryan Holiday provides striking examples of ethically questionable, emotion-driven strategies. Early in his career, he deliberately placed nude advertisements on small websites to spark controversy and public conversation, explaining that he "made it [his] strategy to manufacture chatter by exploiting emotions of high valence: arousal and indignation," later noting that "a slight slap on the wrist or pissing off some prudes was a penalty way worth paying for, for all the attention and money we got" (Holiday, 2012, p. 66). At another point, Holiday describes provoking anger, sympathy, and disgust from the public to drive traffic to a media site, recounting that by "whisper[ing] to a blog about something disgusting that Tucker Max supposedly did…[he was] invit[ing] the readers to comment with 'Eww!!!' or 'What a misogynist'…Nobody involved actually cares what any of these people think or are feeling–not even a little bit. But I am giving the blog a way to make money at their expense" (Holiday, p. 73).

These examples illustrate how emotion-driven persuasion can be leveraged to manipulate audiences for attention and organizational gain, echoing the principles of the press agentry model. Like early press agents, who prioritized publicity and hype over accuracy or ethical considerations, modern emotion-driven campaigns exploit audience responses to generate visibility and engagement. The underlying tactics of stirring strong emotional reactions for

strategic gain demonstrate how press agentry's asymmetrical, manipulative impulses persist in more subtle, digital-era forms.

While emotion-driven persuasion taps into audience feelings to drive engagement, influencer marketing relies on perceived trust and personal connection to shape behavior, illustrating another contemporary avenue where PR must navigate the line between influence and ethical responsibility. Influencer marketing is a form of digital brand communication in which organizations collaborate with individuals who maintain large, engaged social-media followings to promote products or services. These influencers are often perceived as more relatable and trustworthy than traditional celebrities or conventional advertisements, allowing brands to leverage audience trust and attention (Khan, 2024). The scale of this strategy is substantial: research indicates that 62% of social media users trust influencers more than A-list celebrities, and 46% report having purchased a product promoted by an influencer (IZEA Worldwide, 2022). Its use is becoming more common among marketers, with nearly 70% of U.S. marketers at companies with over 100 employees utilizing influencer marketing in 2021. Projections suggest the figure will rise to 86% this year (Sprout, 2025). These trends highlight the growing influence of social media personalities and their ability to drive purchasing decisions and shape positive public opinion.

Influencers and brands collaborate not simply to shape consumer behavior, but to actively manipulate it. Influencer marketing relies on more than reach or product placement; it is built on the illusion of intimacy between influencers and followers, known as a parasocial relationship. Followers frequently regard influencers as friends or trusted advisors, granting them a level of persuasive power that far exceeds traditional advertising (Yi, 2023). This relational dynamic reduces consumers' critical evaluation, making them more likely to accept endorsements at face

value. Such trust is frequently exploited when influencers accept sponsorships without transparency or honesty (Vuković & Pavković, 2025). Moreover, when the influencer–product match is strong and the follower–influencer bond is high, follower resistance to persuasion decreases significantly, leaving consumers more susceptible to impulsive purchases (Du et al., 2023).

A further dimension of influencer persuasion involves the manufacturing of desirability through performances of luxury, exclusivity, and authenticity. One strategy is the creation of artificial scarcity or illusions of high-status lifestyles. The 2017 Fyre Festival illustrates how this tactic can be utilized and fail, on a large scale: 63 mega-influencers were paid up to $250,000 for a single post promoting an exclusive, luxury music festival that ultimately offered none of what was promised, leaving attendees without adequate food or accommodations (Khan, 2024). A similar dynamic appears in the case of influencer Anna Delvey, who constructed the appearance of wealth and elite social standing by presenting rented penthouses and cars as her own (Khan, 2024).

At times, the performance is more subtle but no less deceptive. Egyptian influencer Sarah Elshamy promoted Huawei's Nova 3 smartphone using a staged "selfie" that was later revealed to have been taken with a DSLR camera, not the smartphone. In other cases, influencers attribute their physique or well-being to supplements they have never used. Research shows that such practices are especially concerning when influencers endorse products linked to health risks, including detox teas, weight-loss supplements, and high-sugar foods, as these endorsements can glamorize harmful consumption patterns and normalize unhealthy behaviors among young audiences (Corcoran et al., 2024).

These dynamics mirror the attention-first tactics of the press agentry model: influencers create visibility and exploit emotional connection, often without accountability or transparency. When influencers promote products they don't truly use or hide their sponsorships, the trust that followers place in them becomes a vehicle for manipulation rather than genuine engagement.

Emotion-driven persuasion and influencer marketing show how modern PR can mirror the manipulative tendencies of the press agentry model, exploiting emotions, parasocial bonds, and curated images to influence audiences. High-profile cases demonstrate the risks of such strategies when transparency and accountability are lacking. Yet, by following ethical guidelines, such as the PRSA Code of Ethics, and implementing two-way communication, audience-centered design, and ethical review processes, practitioners can balance persuasive impact with moral responsibility (PRSA, 2024). Effective public relations, therefore, depends on achieving influence without compromising trust or ethical standards.

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