
BALANCING HONESTY AND ADVOCACY: ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS – “A CASE STUDY OF POONAM PANDEY’S CERVICAL CANCER AWARENESS CAMPAIGN”

Preethi Rao

Nagindas Khandwala College (Empowered Autonomous), Affiliated to the University of Mumbai

ABSTRACT

Ethical dilemmas in public relations challenge professionals to balance competing values, such as honesty and advocacy. This concept paper examines a controversial campaign involving Indian influencer-model Poonam Pandey, who staged a death hoax to raise awareness about cervical cancer. The case explores the ethical conflict between honesty and creative autonomy in communication advocacy, emphasizing the need to weigh short-term impacts against long-term outcomes. The case contributes to responsible communication models for social good. Through ethical frameworks like Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and the MERITS Approach, the paper evaluates stakeholder concerns, outcomes, and potential alternatives to the chosen strategy in the case under study. It underscores the importance of aligning communication strategies with ethical principles of decision making to build credibility and foster public trust while achieving campaign objectives.

Keywords: Media Ethics, Cervical Cancer Awareness, Advocacy Communication, Ethical Decision Making, Public Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations professionals often navigate complex ethical dilemmas, particularly when balancing honesty with creative strategies to achieve advocacy goals. This case study examines a controversial awareness campaign led by Poonam Pandey in February 2024.

Cervical cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women in India. More than 77,000 women die each year due to cervical cancer, accounting for 23% of all cervical cancer deaths globally.¹ The campaign leveraged shock appeal by faking the actor's death to emphasize the importance of cervical cancer screening. While the campaign succeeded in capturing public attention, it raised ethical questions about honesty, emotional manipulation, and the long-term implications of such tactics.

The Case

On February 3, 2024, an Instagram post announced the death of Poonam Pandey at age 32, attributing her passing to cervical cancer. The announcement shocked her 1.3 million followers, eliciting widespread grief. However, a day later, Pandey revealed in a video that the post was a staged hoax aimed at raising awareness about cervical cancer. She stated that thousands of women die annually due to a lack of awareness and timely screenings, emphasizing that her intent was to save lives through this dramatic appeal.

The campaign drew significant attention, sparking debates about the ethics of its approach. While some praised its impact in highlighting a critical health issue, others criticized it as manipulative and detrimental to Pandey's credibility.

The digital agency Schbang, which had curated this campaign, apologized on Instagram. However, it sought to defend its method as the agency claimed that post its initiative, "Cervical Cancer" became one of the most searched topics on Google.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

A mixed research methodology has been followed to present this case study. Primary data was collected from 123 respondents of the age group of 15-24 years for understanding their opinion on the elaborate death hoax and a deductive case study approach has been adopted to understand the relevance of three social innovation theories-Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism and the MERITS Approach when faced by ethical dilemma in decision Making.

Ethical Dilemma

The campaign highlighted a fundamental ethical conflict between:

Honesty and Credibility: Transparency is vital for building trust in public relations. Deceptive tactics risk eroding credibility.

Autonomy in Advocacy: Public relations professionals have the creative freedom to design impactful campaigns, but this freedom must be exercised responsibly. Often emotions and fear appeal are used to persuade the target audience but vulnerable audiences and bystanders can also be affected.

The decision to stage a death hoax reflected a trade-off between these values, aiming to achieve the greater good of public awareness at the expense of honesty.

Stakeholders and Their Concerns

Ethical dilemmas in communication affect multiple stakeholders, each with distinct concerns and priorities.

In the case under study there are several stakeholders who faced an ethical dilemma and a backlash for choosing to go ahead with the advocacy communication strategy. This has been discussed in the below given template.

Serial Number	Name of Stake Holder	Role	Impact
1	Poonam Pandey	Central Figure in the campaign	Risked her credibility and Public Trust for potential benefits of the campaign
2	Schbang the PR Agency	Designed the cervical cancer awareness campaign	Faced backlash for crafting manipulative tactics to create awareness
3	Consumers (Followers and General Public)	Target audience of the campaign.	Experienced emotional manipulation, with some benefiting from increased awareness and others distressed by the deceptive approach.
4	Medical Fraternity and Affected Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocates for ethical and sensitive communication. Expect sensitivity toward the emotional and psychological well-being of the public. 	Manipulative tactics may undermine trust in health-related messaging.
5	Health Ministry and Advocacy Groups	Key promoters of cervical cancer awareness.	Benefited from increased awareness but could face potential
6	Advertising Standards Council of India	Regulator ensuring adherence to ethical communication guidelines	Tasked with evaluating the ethicality of the campaign and its broader implications.

FINDINGS

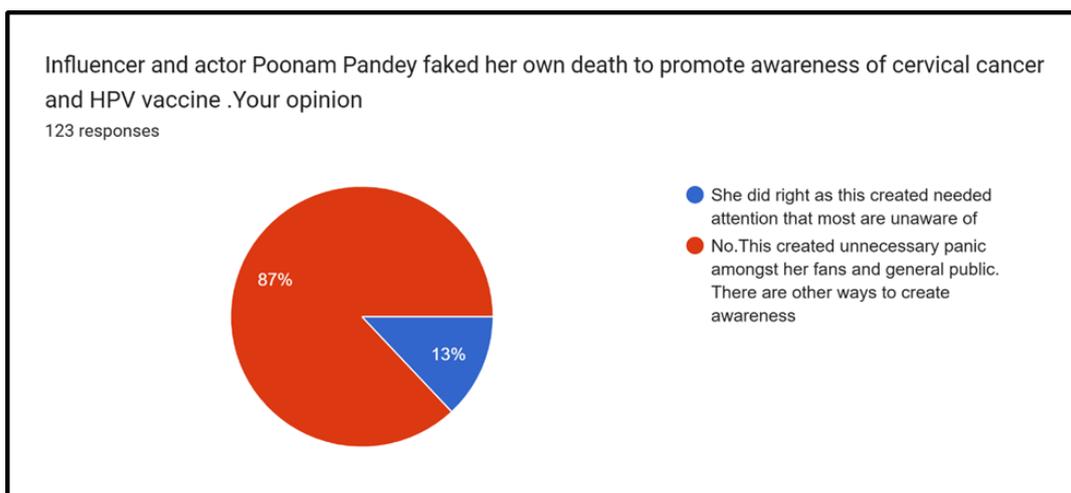


Figure 1

As the above diagram clearly indicates an overwhelming majority of respondents believe that Poonam Pandey was wrong in associating herself with a campaign that was built around her death. Only 16 respondents out of the 123 felt that the end justifies the means. The positive outcome of attention generation to cervical cancer and its dangers far outweighed the manipulation of public mind through shock appeal. Herein lies the dilemma.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN DECISION-MAKING

While designing a communication strategy occasions arise when ethical principles clash with each other. In Public Relations this dilemma emerges when one has to choose between two equally good values. In the Poonam Pandey Case the dilemma was between using fear and shock appeal through a death hoax to draw attention to cervical cancer or use a more rational and honest way to persuade the public and draw its attention to a serious health issue.

In Media Governance there are several models prescribed to guide a Public Relations Practitioner in decision making. In this study, three models have been applied and its relevance analyzed.

1. Virtue Ethics in Public Relations

Virtue Ethics, rooted in the philosophies of Aristotle, emphasizes the character and moral virtues of the individual engaging in an action, rather than focusing solely on the consequences. It promotes the idea that ethical actions stem from the inherent goodness and integrity of the individual or organization, guided by virtues such as honesty, courage, compassion, and fairness.

APPLICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

In Public relations, Virtue Ethics serves as a foundation for fostering trust and credibility. PR professionals are often the face of ethical communication, and their personal integrity significantly impacts their ability to represent organizations and causes authentically.

Honesty: A virtue essential for maintaining credibility and building trust with stakeholders. Transparent communication avoids misinformation and helps cultivate long-term relationships.

Courage: The ability to address sensitive issues responsibly, even when the messaging may not be popular or easy.

Compassion: Understanding the emotions and needs of the target audience, ensuring campaigns are empathetic rather than exploitative.

RELEVANCE TO THE CASE

In the Poonam Pandey cervical cancer awareness campaign, the virtue of honesty was overshadowed by the tactic of faking her death. While the campaign aimed to create awareness (a virtuous goal), the means employed undermined the ethical integrity of the communication. From a Virtue Ethics perspective, achieving a positive outcome does not justify actions that compromise core virtues like honesty.

2. Consequentialism in Public Relations

Consequentialism, often associated with utilitarian philosophy, evaluates the morality of an action based on its outcomes. An action is deemed ethical if it results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Application in Public Relations

In Public Relations, Consequentialism provides a framework for making decisions in high-stakes scenarios where trade-offs are inevitable. Campaigns can be designed to maximize positive societal impact while carefully mitigating negative consequences.

Relevance to the Case

The Poonam Pandey campaign aligns with Consequentialist thinking, as it prioritized increasing awareness about cervical cancer over concerns about honesty. The campaign's immediate success in driving online searches and sparking conversations suggests that the ends (awareness) justified the means (death hoax). However, this approach risked long-term harm to Pandey's credibility and potential distress to her audience, highlighting the limitations of a strictly outcome-driven perspective.

3. The MERITS Approach in Public Relations

The MERITS Approach is a structured decision-making model in communication ethics that emphasizes a balanced evaluation of ethical dilemmas. It helps PR professionals navigate complex scenarios by considering the following components:

APPLICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

The MERITS Approach is particularly effective in designing campaigns that align with ethical standards while achieving organizational objectives. By systematically evaluating the consequences of actions and the values they reflect, PR professionals can make informed decisions that balance competing priorities.

STEPS IN APPLYING THE MERITS APPROACH

- **Identify Stakeholders:** Determine all parties affected by the campaign, including the target audience, collaborators, regulators, and the broader community.

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- **Evaluate Consequences:** Assess both short-term and long-term impacts of the campaign, identifying potential harms and benefits.
 - **Balance Trade-Offs:** Consider whether the benefits outweigh the harms and ensure that ethical compromises are minimized.
 - **Respect Values:** Uphold key ethical principles such as honesty, transparency, and social responsibility.
 - **Strategize for Ethical Implementation:** Develop a campaign that achieves objectives while maintaining trust and minimizing risks.

RELEVANCE TO THE CASE

Applying the MERITS Approach to the Poonam Pandey campaign involves the following steps:

Stakeholders Identified: Poonam Pandey, health advocacy groups, the medical fraternity, the target audience, and regulators.

Evaluating Consequences: Immediate benefits included heightened awareness about cervical cancer. Harms involved emotional distress to followers, damage to Pandey's credibility, and ethical scrutiny of the campaign.

Balancing Trade-Offs: While the campaign succeeded in sparking awareness, alternative strategies could have achieved similar results without compromising honesty.

Respecting Values: A more transparent approach, such as sharing survivor stories, would have aligned with ethical values while achieving the campaign's goals.

Strategizing Ethical Solutions: A collaborative campaign involving medical professionals and advocacy groups could have delivered impactful messaging without the use of a death hoax.

OUTCOMES OF THE CAMPAIGN

Positive Outcomes

- The campaign generated significant attention, leading to a surge in online searches about cervical cancer.
- Raised public discourse on the importance of timely screenings.
- **Public Engagement:** The dramatic tactic successfully cut through information clutter, prompting widespread discussion.

Negative Outcomes

- **Erosion of Credibility:** Pandey's staged death undermined her credibility as a public figure, potentially affecting her future advocacy efforts.
- Public skepticism about health-related campaigns may increase.
- **Emotional Distress:** Vulnerable audiences, especially those with personal experiences of cancer, experienced distress.
- Manipulation of emotions raised ethical concerns about the campaign's approach.

Alternative Strategies

Ms. Pandey and the agency could have veered away from shock appeal and morbid marketing and crafted a more acceptable method of creating an awareness.

A few alternate strategies that could have been considered are as follows

Personal Storytelling

Pandey could have shared stories of real cervical cancer survivors or victims to convey the message authentically.

This approach would preserve credibility while maintaining emotional resonance.

Collaborative Campaigns

Partnering with healthcare professionals, NGOs, and survivor networks could add credibility and depth to the campaign. Collaborative efforts would distribute the responsibility of messaging across trusted entities.

Creative Visual Narratives

Employing compelling visuals, data storytelling, and testimonials could drive engagement without resorting to deception.

Key Take Away

The Balance Between Creativity and Ethics

Public relations campaigns must balance innovative tactics with ethical responsibility. Shock appeals, while impactful, must avoid deception that could harm credibility.

Stakeholder-Centric Decision-Making

Ethical decision-making must consider the perspectives and well-being of all stakeholders, including the target audience, collaborators, and regulators.

Transparency in Advocacy

Honest and transparent communication fosters long-term trust and credibility, even when addressing challenging topics.

Integrating Ethical Frameworks in Public Relations

Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism, and the MERITS Approach each offer unique insights into ethical decision-making in public relations. Virtue Ethics emphasizes the importance of moral character and integrity, while Consequentialism prioritizes outcomes and societal impact. The

MERITS Approach provides a balanced framework that integrates both principles, ensuring that campaigns are not only effective but also ethically sound.

In the Poonam Pandey campaign, these frameworks reveal the complexity of the ethical dilemma and underscore the need for PR professionals to align creativity with ethical responsibility. By adopting a comprehensive approach to decision-making, PR practitioners can create campaigns that inspire meaningful change while upholding trust and credibility.

CONCLUSION

The Poonam Pandey cervical cancer awareness campaign illustrates the ethical complexities of public relations. While it succeeded in raising awareness, its reliance on a staged death hoax compromised key ethical principles.

By adopting honest and transparent approaches, public relations professionals can achieve meaningful outcomes while maintaining trust and fostering lasting engagement. This in this case is best achieved through the MERITS Approach.

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