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Public Relations and Feminist Activism: Strategic Consensual Persuasion or Propaganda?

Relações Públicas e Ativismo Feminista: Persuasão Estratégica Consensual ou Propaganda?

Relaciones Públicas y Activismo Feminista: ¿Persuasión Estratégica Consensuada o Propaganda?

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Abstract

The global threat to democratic ideals and fundamental rights and freedoms requires that citizens critically assess the differences between consensual forms of persuasion and non-consensual, manipulative, and propagandistic forms of persuasion in order to make free and informed choices. Based on an ethnographic work with a Portuguese women's rights organization during six months (January-June 2021), this paper analyses the intersection of activist public relations and organized persuasive communication within feminist campaigns. Propaganda appears a multi-layered sociological phenomenon and the communication campaigns analyzed in this study indicate that, in principle, feminist activist communication can operate within the realm of strategic consensual persuasion and not on propaganda. Findings also illustrate the possible contributions of public relations for social mobilization, civic participation, and democratic adhesion. Observations showed that not all types of persuasion are harmful or false, and that propaganda does not only serve to change opinions but often intends to maintain dominant trends and the status quo.

Keywords: Propaganda; Persuasion; Public Relations; Feminism; Activism.

Resumo

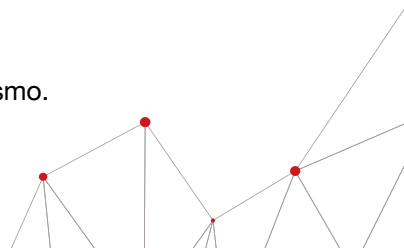
A ameaça global aos ideais democráticos e aos direitos e liberdades fundamentais exige que os cidadãos avaliem criticamente as diferenças entre formas de persuasão consensuais e formas de persuasão não consensuais, manipuladoras e propagandísticas, a fim de fazerem escolhas livres e informadas. A partir de um trabalho etnográfico com uma organização portuguesa de defesa dos direitos das mulheres durante seis meses (janeiro-junho de 2021), este artigo discute a intersecção das relações públicas ativistas e da comunicação persuasiva organizada no âmbito de campanhas feministas. A propaganda surge como um fenómeno sociológico multifacetado e as campanhas de comunicação analisadas neste estudo indicam que, por princípio, a comunicação ativista feminista pode operar no âmbito da persuasão estratégica consensual e não da propaganda. Os resultados também ilustram as possíveis contribuições das relações públicas para a mobilização social, participação cívica e adesão democrática. As observações mostraram que nem todos os tipos de persuasão são prejudiciais ou falsos e que a propaganda não serve apenas para mudar opiniões, mas muitas vezes pretende manter as tendências dominantes e o status quo.

Palavras-chave: Propaganda; Persuasão; Relações Públicas; Feminismo; Ativismo.

Resumo

La amenaza global a los ideales democráticos y los derechos y libertades fundamentales requiere que los ciudadanos evalúen críticamente las diferencias entre las formas de persuasión consensuadas y las formas de persuasión no consensuadas, manipuladoras y propagandísticas para poder tomar decisiones libres e informadas. Basado en un trabajo etnográfico con una organización por los derechos de las mujeres portuguesas durante seis meses (enero-junio de 2021), este artículo analiza la intersección de las relaciones públicas activistas y la comunicación persuasiva organizada en el marco de las campañas feministas. La propaganda surge como un fenómeno sociológico multifacético y las campañas de comunicación analizadas en este estudio indican que, en principio, la comunicación activista feminista puede operar en el ámbito de la persuasión estratégica consensuada y no de la propaganda. Los resultados también ilustran las contribuciones potenciales de las relaciones públicas a la movilización social, la participación ciudadana y la adhesión democrática. Las observaciones han demostrado que no todos los tipos de persuasión son dañinos o falsos y que la propaganda no se trata solo de cambiar opiniones, sino que a menudo pretende mantener las tendencias dominantes y el statu quo.

Palabras clave: Propaganda; Persuasión; Relaciones Públicas; Feminismo; Activismo.



1. Introduction

In June 2022 the United States Supreme Court decided to end the constitutional right to abortion paving the way for individual states to ban the procedure. This controversial decision immediately unleashed much more than the fury and anguish of those who defend the right to abortion as a fundamental and inalienable right of American women conquered in 1973. It has accentuated political divisions in a highly fragmented and polarized nation, taking thousands of activists to the streets. The tensions arising from this decision were seen as another sign of the weakening of the democratic values and as a civilizational setback. Professor Mary Ziegler (2022, p.1) even stated that the decision came to show that “no one should get used to their rights” because “rights can vanish”.

The decline of democracies in recent years has generated several violations of human rights and setbacks in terms of basic freedoms. The advance of authoritarian regimes and ideologies that seek to corrupt the institutions and democratic values distort reality to promote hatred, violence, and uncontrolled power. For example, during the 2020 protests against fraudulent elections in Belarus, the Kremlin sent Russian propagandists to replace the Belarusian journalists who were on strike. US television celebrity Tucker Carlson spent a week in Hungary in 2021, enthusiastically presenting his millions of American audiences to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s xenophobic propaganda, disrespect for democratic principles, and denial of international human rights standards (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022).

This paper’s main objective is to contribute for citizenship and democracy literacy illustrating, through the analysis of a case study, the differences between consensual forms of persuasion and non-consensual, manipulative, and propagandistic forms of persuasion.

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric I and II* presents his technical or artistic (*technê*) approach to persuasion. The persuasion triad or the means of persuasion, are technical in the sense that they are based on the rhetorical method and are provided by the speech. And speech can produce persuasion either through the character (*êthos*) of the speaker, the emotional state (*pathos*) of the listener, or the argument (*logos*) itself (Rapp, 2012, 2022). In this sense the ‘good persuasion’ is the one that is provided by the *technê* and, if “properly understood is a matter of argument and proof” (Rapp, 2012, p. 591). But the proof of argument is not enough to convince an audience. For Aristotle the proper account of persuasion implies dialectic, to the degree that as to do with arguments, and implies moral psychology since it does not rely exclusively

on arguments (Rapp, 2012, pp. 591–594). Not everyone forms their judgments according to the rationality of the persuasive process proposed by the philosopher. Thus, *êthos* and *pathos* can be used in ways that influence the audience's judgment process even in circumstances that do not provide evidence of arguments (Rapp, 2012).

In Plato's *Gorgias*, the idea that persuasion without knowledge affects the reach of truth is also present. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato also relates dialectic and rhetoric, arguing that the way to achieve genuine knowledge depends both on the subject matter of a speech and the soul of the audience (Rapp, 2022).

We live in paradoxical times when there has never been so much information available and yet we are increasingly vulnerable to incorrect or false information. In his philosophical treatise, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1991) discussed the relationship between reality, symbols, and society. While in the *simulation* we can still perceive that we are, in some way, being deceived, or that we are experiencing something that is supposedly not real, in the *simulacrum*, we completely lose this notion and assume as presumptive truth a concept that does not allow us to discern if it is a distortion or a simulation.

As public relations are one of the most specialized persuasive communication areas in discursive logic and symbolic representations, this paper discusses the intersection of activist public relations and organized persuasive communication within feminist campaigns. Based on an ethnographic work with a Portuguese women's rights organization during six months, between January and June 2021, the new conceptual framework of Organized Persuasive Communication (OPC), by Bakir et al. (2019, p. 319) was applied to examine a case study in the context of activist public relations.

Propaganda appears as a multi-layered sociological phenomenon and the communication campaigns analyzed in this study indicate that, in principle, feminist activist communication can operate within the realm of strategic consensual persuasion and not on propaganda. Findings also illustrate the possible contributions of public relations for social mobilization, civic participation, and democratic adhesion. Observations showed that not all types of persuasion are harmful or false, and that propaganda does not only serve to change opinions but often intends to maintain dominant trends and the status quo. As in Aristotle's conception of the persuasive process, persuasion in this study not only involves the use of logical rhetoric (*logos*). It was also observable the dialectic tension between the subject matter of a speech and the soul of the audience, through *êthos* and *pathos*.

2. Public Relations and Feminist Activism

Public relations and activism have a complex relationship, since historically, organizational investment in public relations services, which gave rise to the areas of issue and crisis management, emerged as a strategy to protect conservative corporatism against the criticism of radical social movements and the student protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This historical legacy led to the formation of quite rigid identities based on binary and simplistic oppositions, within the discipline, with regard to the interpretation of social dynamics involving pressure groups, activists, and public relations professionals (L'Etang, 2016; Thompson, 2016). When we talk about activism, it is important to bear in mind that this is not a homogeneous social category, nor necessarily a positive one, since activists are involved in power struggles that vary widely across the ideological spectrum, often opposing each other in a competitive manner, to achieve the best results for their organizations (L'Etang, 2016).

In the last decade, however, activism has received more attention in public relations research within critical and sociocultural theoretical traditions (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b; Holtzhausen, 2012; Demetrious, 2013; L'Etang, 2016; Ciszek, 2017; Müller, 2022b).

Demetrious, (2011, p. 1) defined *activist public relations* as:

A focused view of communication activity by politicized third sector groups such as social collectives, community action groups, and NGOs to foster their public legitimacy as voices for social change. (...) This voice consists of activists employing strategies, tactics, and especially worldviews to challenge dominant positions.

Activist public relations feature both spontaneous activities (protests) and long-term, planned ones (dissent) addressing multiple stakeholders (Adi, 2019) and activists are producers of strategic communication for social change (Ciszek, 201; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Müller, 2022 (a)).

There is some disagreement within the field of public relations about what strategy is. The power of *influence*, *attraction* or *commitment* of public relations is accomplished as a result of symbolic communicative and discursive logics (Verčič, 2008; Servaes, 2012). Power is thus deployed in the public arena through structures of meaning (Heath et al., 2009). Public relations instruments aim to induce intentional representations of reality and are premeditated expressions used to influence others.

Intentional positioning in public relations is described as the “strategic attempt to demarcate and occupy a place of intentional representation in the contested space where meanings are constructed, questioned and reconstructed” (James, 2011, p. 98).

In this sense, “all public relations activity is strategic” (James, 2009, p.111), since strategic planning is not always about projecting the future, but also maintaining a strategic presence in everyday choices. *Emergent* strategy focuses on strategic flexible learning considering complex interactions and uncertainties. The *deliberate* strategy is more occupied with the notions of direction and control and the efforts on how to operationalize a static strategic plan (Heath et al., 2018).

Moreover, Moloney (2006, p. 168) suggests that all actors (corporate or activist) employing strategic communication are doing “propaganda”, that is, the communication of one of the parties (individuals or groups of social actors) that has an inevitable selective and manipulative dimension because it is based “in the pluralist, self-advantaging promotional culture¹ associated with liberal democracy”. Nevertheless, in the updated version on public relations, propaganda, and democracy the power of public relations is conceptualized in its crucial rhetorical dimension including the capacity for persuasion and the social value produced by advocacy and counter-advocacy (Moloney & McGrath, 2020).

“Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (Arendt, 1969, p. 44). To that extent, the power of communication corresponds to the ability to develop and disseminate collective perspectives and calls to action. But the social actors who want to win the hearts and minds of the publics to advance social change do not operate in a field of equality with equivalent access capacity to mass media, communication technologies and networks of influence. Some social actors face increased challenges in relation to others as it is easier to reinforce mainstream points of view (dominant and easily accepted by the majorities), than it is, for example, to criticize these points of view and introduce alternative or opposing perspectives (Ryan & Jeffreys, 2019). And it is in this field that feminist struggles operated and still operate.

1- Although the literature on promotional cultures has focused more on marketing, advertising, and branding, promotion, that is, the use of certain techniques by companies, governments, and other organizations to sell things, ideas, and ways of life has become an institutionalized form of action for organizations in all sectors, and it is constantly present in debates on global problems (Bakir, et al., 2019, p. 318).

When activists develop and implement social change communication strategies (improve leadership, create, and distribute messages, build working relationships with allies), they must also pay attention to building sustainable communication power. These practices are considered strategic “because they unite social groups with compatible interests to shift power relations to effect desired changes” (Ryan & Jeffreys, 2019, p. 53).

In the logic of activist public relations feminist collective self-affirmation represents an intentional symbolic positioning as a ‘strategic actor’ in social power struggles (Nothhaft et al., 2021). Feminist movements resort to “public communication tactics of a public relations nature to put their message across, by providing counterarguments, information, and polemic in an effort to galvanize and mobilize both publics and policymakers, but also to impact public debate” (Gudkova & Sarikakis, 2020, p. 87).

The feminist movement is a vast field of study in sociology, political science, and gender studies, but has not received attention in the area of public relations. However, feminists employ numerous “public relations techniques in the ideological war against patriarchal values” (Bıçakçı & Hürmeriç, 2019, p. 66). Feminism intends to obtain social changes towards a more equitable treatment of women, to question the status quo and to protest about injustices and structural imbalances of power. It continues to this day to put matters on the public agenda that might otherwise not receive attention (Gudkova & Sarikakis, 2020).

Regardless of its diverse pluralities and inner contradictions, feminism is concerned with the fifth objective of the United Nations 2030 agenda “to achieve gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination, violence and any harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres. It also calls for the full participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political and economic decision-making” ([The Global Goals](#)). There are different methods and perspectives on feminist activism, but in general it intends to change perceptions about the cultural values that keep women – and other minorities – locked in a system of power inferiority (Gudkova & Sarikakis, 2020).

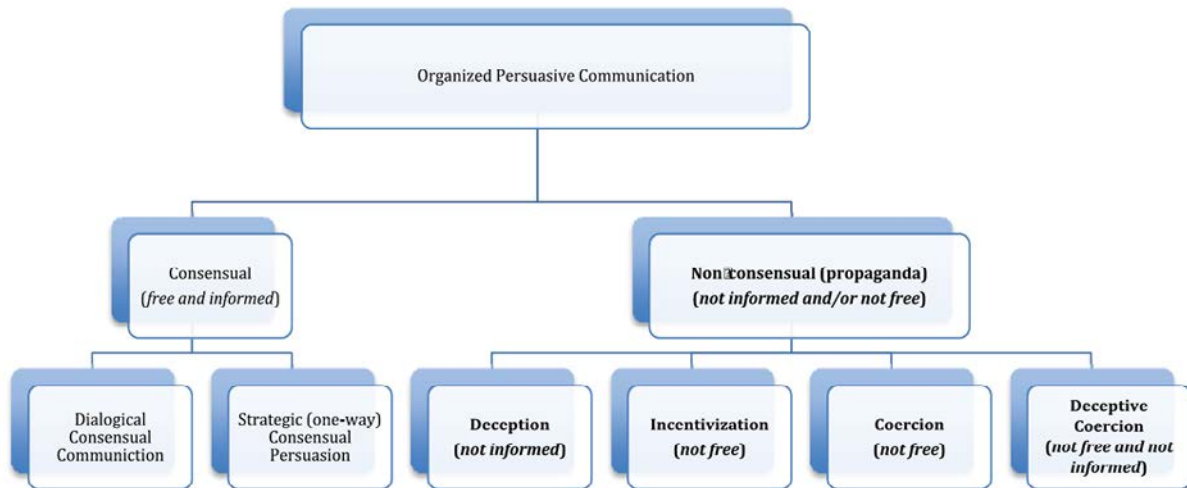
3. Placing Propaganda within Organized Persuasive Communication

Jacques Ellul (1973, p. 5) envisaged propaganda as a sociological phenomenon — more evident in technological societies — instead of something made by certain people with specific purposes. We are all more susceptible to propaganda precisely because we believe that what is true cannot be propaganda. But modern propaganda, argues the author, is substantially different from the “ridiculous lies of the past” and operates with different dimensions and layers of truth. Another basic misconception that makes people susceptible to propaganda is the belief that it serves only to change opinion. That is one of its goals, although a limited and subordinated one. More significantly, propaganda seeks to strengthen existing trends, to sharpen and focus them, and, most of all to lead people to action or inaction through terror and discouragement if the intended purpose is to keep people from interfering with certain decisions.

Ellul (1973) distinguishes various forms of propaganda — not all necessarily negative within the various layers of persuasion — and argues that the creation of pseudo-needs and the offer of pseudo-satisfactions for those needs is pernicious and manipulative. But also assert that the nature of propaganda can only be truly understood in a specific applied context considering its effects and effectiveness.

Bakir, et al. (2019) claim that there is a terminological confusion in the fields of persuasion and propaganda. The areas of persuasive communication activities such as strategic communication, public relations, and promotional culture concentrate on what they think to be non-manipulative forms of Organized Persuasive Communication (OPC) happening in contemporary liberal democracies. While researchers of propaganda emphasize on its manipulative practices and in historical situations in the context of non-democratic societies. As a result, there is a gap in knowledge development regarding manipulative forms of OPC concerning deception, incentivization and coercion within liberal democracies. The authors developed a new conceptual framework (Figure 1) based on interdisciplinary contributions that theorizes about manipulative forms of OPC and demarcates what counts as nonmanipulative or what we call consensual, forms of persuasion.

Figure 1
Organized Persuasive Communication (OPC)



Note: By Bakir, et al. (2019, p.319)

3.1. Consensual Organized Persuasive Communication or Non-Manipulative Persuasion

The idea of consent is at the base of the authors' conceptualization. Consent is defined "as informed and freely given agreement with something, be it a view or an action by that person or someone else" (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 319). Consent is not given voluntarily if a person is persuaded using false moral or legal arguments, encouraged through the promise of benefits, or coerced through threats, or the costs of his choices (including the withdrawal of benefits). For it to be considered consensual OPC, the communicative approach must fully inform and fulfill two requirements: "first, absence of deception; and second, absence of incentivization and coercion, therefore, consent is given freely" (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 320).

The two subcategories within the scope of consensual persuasive communication are:

(1) *Dialogical Consensual Communication* – the authors rely on Habermas's (1984) concept of 'communicative action' that involves two-way dialogical communication

oriented towards consensus. In this subcategory the actors are effectively seeking to coordinate their actions to obtain an agreement and/or mutual understanding according to four basic ‘ideal speech’ conditions: 1) all those who can make a significant contribution are included; 2) equal voice for all participants, 3) freedom to express their opinion without deception or self-deception, and 4) no coercion is present. This perspective “does not involve one-way persuading others of one’s own views”, nor resort to unbalanced power relations, since the purpose is persuasive reciprocity in order to cooperate to achieve common goals (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 320).

(2) *Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* — The authors explain that ideal discourse conditions required for dialogical consensual communication are difficult to achieve and that strategic one way attempts to persuade are apparently unavoidable in contemporary mass democracies. However, this subcategory has sufficient consensual elements to be considered consensual (free and informed). Examples are provided regarding strategic consensual persuasion such as anti-smoking campaigns. They involve rational and emotional arguments about the risks of smoking and are not misleading because smoking is bad for health. Likewise, if a country faces real threats, OPC to mobilize the population for war to defend it can also be considered consensual. If democracy is to be realized in an electoral campaign, OPC should be non-deceptive, non-coercive and avoid incentivization (Bakir et al., 2019, pp. 320–321).

3.2. Non-Consensual Organized Persuasive Communication (Propaganda)

The new conceptual framework organized non-consensual OPC (propaganda) into the categories of deception, incentivization, coercion and deceptive coercion assuming that these practices can occur across democratic and non-democratic states.

(a) *Deception* — deceptive information management is defined as “persuasion via lying, distortion, omission, or misdirection” and it is non-consensual due to the violation of the requirement of informed consent. The persuasion target is not able to make a free and informed decision because the information is not adequate. On *deception through lying*, even propagandists know that this

kind of persuasion should be a last resort. Because if a statement is proven or suspected to be false and the person/organization making it intended to deceive, their reputation and credibility are negatively affected. For this reason, more subtle forms of persuasion are used. *Deception through omission*, implies hiding part of the information, because it is known that if the interlocutors have all the information, they will be less permeable to persuasion. This also involves disguising the identity of the sender of the information. *Deception through distortion*, “involves presenting a statement in a deliberately misleading way to support a viewpoint. One form of distortion is exaggeration, but it can also involve de-emphasizing information (Bakir et al., 2019, p.322). *Deception through misdirection*, implies the production and dissemination of truthful information with the aim of diverting attention from other problematic issues. It involves the construction of events or “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1961) to draw attention away from other important events.

(b) *Incentivization* — Is defined by the authors “as a process of persuasion that involves promising or providing benefits. Broadly, this involves creating a benefit (an extrinsic motivation) aimed at overcoming an individual’s actual desire/belief (their intrinsic motivation)” (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 323). Not all forms of persuasion through incentives are non-consensual, for example, incentives to ride more bicycles are consensual because extrinsic motivation (taking cars out of cities or encouraging sports habits) is compatible with the will of individuals (intrinsic motivation) to do it. “Incentivization becomes manipulative when the extrinsic motivation conflicts with an individual’s intrinsic motivation” (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 323). For example, the promise of tax cuts in an election campaign to get people to vote for a candidate (extrinsic motivation) who without that promise would not be particularly inclined to vote for that candidate (intrinsic motivation) is a form of non-consensual persuasion because the person is convinced to do something he or she would not otherwise want to do.

(c) *Coercion* - The relationship between coercion and persuasion has been little studied. Coercion operates in a number of different circumstances and implies the exploitation and the threat of inflicting costs such as economic sanctions, the use of physical force or the withdrawal of benefits. Communicative threats become more powerful depending on physical, social, and economic contexts. The authors

define coercion as “an act of persuasion that compels an individual to act against their will through the threat or infliction of costs including, but not limited to, physical force” (Bakir, et al., 2019, p. 324).

(d) *Deceptive Coercion* - Coercion can be interrelated with deception through manipulation of fear, it is “persuasion through deceptive manipulation of fear of costs” (Bakir, et al., 2019, p.324). Here people are deceived by the manipulation of their perceptions of a threat or a danger. “For example, if a government warns of a non-existent threat, people may be scared into supporting its abuses of civil liberties: people are literally deceived into thinking that their lives are in danger and that supporting their government is essential” (Bakir, et al., 2019, p. 324).

Through this framework the authors sought to fill the gaps in knowledge about the various forms of organized persuasion communication that were separated between scholars of PR (and related areas) who generally understand their object of study as non-manipulative, scholars of propaganda that tend to focus only with manipulative persuasion, and researchers of promotional culture who examine OPC through the lens of commercial advertising and ‘salesmanship’. These divisions make the conceptual and empirical study involving deception, incentivization and coercion in democratic contexts very limited.

4. Methodology

This research used an ethnographic work with a Portuguese women’s rights organization UMAR — Alternative and Answer Women’s Union in Portuguese (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta) during six months.

UMAR is a nonprofit NGO based in Portugal and founded in 1976 after the Carnation Revolution of 1974, that made Portugal transition from an authoritarian regime to become a democracy. UMAR is today an association dedicated to awakening feminist consciousness in Portuguese society. UMAR’s fieldwork includes involving itself with women in their major concerns and social struggles, but also as a way to build feminist daily lives and cultures, valuing the diversity of women’s ways of understanding life and the world. In this way, the construction of the feminist agency is articulated with cultural activity, organizing events of a public nature including pressure, denunciation, proposals, contests, protests, and tributes, as well as parties, gatherings, concerts, poetry sessions, etc. (UMAR 2021).

Ethnography is a qualitative method for data collection based on “participant

observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials prepared by others (examining)” (Wolcott, 2008, pp. 48–49). The purpose is to “describe what the people in some particular place or status ordinarily do and the meanings they ascribe to the doing” and that description will focus on the consistencies involving cultural process (Wolcott, 2008, p. 73). The origins of ethnography lie in anthropological studies and uses a cultural lens to the study of people’s lives within their communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The sociocultural lens in public relations refers to ethnography as a methodology with innovative potential for the advancement of research and practice (Vujinovic & Kruckeberg, 2010; Everett & Johnston, 2012; L’Etang et al., 2012; Xifra 2012). In public relations research, ethnography will examine how individuals and groups understands, experiences, and adapts to their environment (Winthrop, 1991; Pieczka, 1997; Sutton & Anderson, 2004).

This study intends to answer the following *research questions*:

- (1) How do UMAR’s communication campaigns in the period under analysis fit into the conceptual framework of organized persuasive communication (OPC)?
- (2) What public relations tools did UMAR use during the observation period?

The data were collected between January 1st and June 30th, 2021. In addition to participant observation, documents produced by UMAR were also analyzed and nine semi-structured interviews were carried out (online and offline). As can be seen in table 1, in total about 848 hours were spent with participant observation (average of 4 hours a day including weekends and holidays) at this organization, during which 30 events and visits were monitored (lectures, conferences, reading groups, training, book presentations, thematic forums, and demonstrations - online and offline - summarized and partially transcribed for the field diary).The organization’s activity on social media was also observed, in a total of 62 posts on Facebook and 13 on Instagram. The fieldwork observation data were documented in the field diary (196 pages), and all recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher as they were undertaken (Baszanger & Dodier 2004). Ethical issues were considered making the role of the researcher and the research objectives clear and transparent and an informed consent form to participate in the study was signed by the directors of UMAR.

Table 1*Systematization of Data Sampling and Sources*

Total Hours	Events	Interviews	Posts	Documents analyzed
848	30 (approximately 53 hours and 45 minutes)	1. Manuela Tavares (MT) 2. Joana Sales (JS) 3. Beatriz Santana (BS) 4. Beatriz Pires (BP) 5. Tatiana Mendes (TM) 6. Sara Anselmo (SA) 7. Olímpia Pereira (OP) 8. Janica Ndela (JN) 9. Anabela Gomes (AG)	Facebook – 62 Instagram – 13	Press releases (7) <hr/> Contents (graphics and written) at UMAR website Association Statutes Annual activity plan 2021 Feminist Manifesto UMAR manifesto for the 8th of March Contents (graphics and written) of the Feminist Strike 2021 Website Open Letters (4) Manifesto of the 22nd Lisbon LGBTI+ Pride March Petition for the conversion of the crime of rape into a public crime

Notes: (1). Observation period [UMAR](#) - between 01.01.2021 and 06.30.2021 - 185 days. (2) Field diary: 196 pages.

A very high quantity of data was obtained through ethnographic immersion and interviews, and that required a careful selection process of meaning units. Converting data through description, analysis, and interpretation is not a linear process in ethnographic approaches (Wolcott, 2008). To select the information relevant to answer the research questions of this study, *two main selection criteria* were used:

- a) Type of OPC in UMAR campaigns during the observation period
- b) The use of public relations tools

5. Findings

- a) *Type of OPC in UMAR campaigns during the observation period*

UMAR launched the following campaigns in the observation period:

- “We are still here for you” [campaign](#). It warns that isolation can increase the risk of domestic violence and reminds women that they can ask for help. Likewise, it promotes a Service Center that offers, confidentially and free of charge, psychological, social, and legal assistance to any woman victim of violence. *Main message*: “Violence against WOMEN is a crime! Talk to us, we can support you in building your new life project!”. *Type of OPC*: *Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* – strategic attempt to persuade women victims of domestic violence to ask for help and change their lives. Involve rational (legal assistance free of charge) and emotional (psychological support to build a new life free of violence) arguments.

- Campaign “[It’s not your fault. The complaint belongs to everyone!](#)” – Within the scope of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. An online campaign through which they appeal to women (cis and trans) survivors of gender violence, in its most varied forms, to “share their testimonies, experiences and resistance against the sexist and patriarchal brutality” that affects them daily. *Main message*: “This initiative aims to stimulate sharing and communication between women, to demonstrate that episodes of sexist violence are not isolated cases and that we are not alone”. *Type of OPC*: *Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* – A successful OPC campaign needs to be concise but still provide all relevant information that allows for rational and informed decision making (Bakir, et al., 2019). The longer texts presented in this campaign provide all the information and contacts for participants to choose to share their experiences in a consensual and informed way.

- Dating without violence campaign ([#NamorarSemViolência](#)) - with the aim of alerting and raising awareness among young people to better identify and reject violent behaviors in dating relationships, including those that are exercised through social media. *Main messages*: “The one who loves you, does not attack you!” and “Dating with Fair Play and Mutual Respect”. *Type of OPC: Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* - It is assumed that the campaign is carried out in partnership with the Portuguese government due to information/scientific data about the increase in dating violence among young people.

- Campaign [#feministstrike2021](#) (March 8). UMAR Manifesto for the international feminist strike 2021 affirms that “we cannot leave anyone behind with their multiple demands (...) against the sexist, and misogynist mentality, which is at the base of violence against girls and women in intimacy, harassment, and sexual violence”. *Main message*: “Let’s come together to share our struggles! Let’s come together to override our voices to those that try to silence us!”. *Type of OPC: Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* - Despite having a markedly emotional/fighting tone there is no intrinsic reason why this kind of persuasion approaches “should be understood as necessarily deceptive, coercive or, with respect to emotions, irrational” (Bakir, et al., 2019, p.321). The benefit created for participating in the strike - strength of the collective struggle for women’s rights - (extrinsic motivation) is compatible with the will of individuals - women who want to participate in the protest and advocate for social changes - (intrinsic motivation).

- [Stand by Her campaign](#) - anti-harassment campaign to prevent and denounce sexual violence with a strong connection to the international #MeToo movement. *Main message*: “No is No! If you can look, see. If you can see, act! *Type of OPC: Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion* - Another example of consensual persuasion intent with the provision of detailed data available (rational arguments) and personal storytelling (emotional) with the aim of convincing the public to denounce situations of harassment.

b) *The use of public relations tools*

1) *Celebrity endorsement* — Several Portuguese artists publicly support UMAR’s campaigns and work. This is one of the widely used public relations tactics, whether in a commercial and corporate context, or in the context of public interest campaigns.

2) *Public affairs management* – Such as an appeal to vote in the 2021 Presidential Elections; support for the approval in parliament of the medically assisted death law; taking advantage of the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the European Union to claim gender quotas on the boards of directors of companies, among other issues.

3) *Strategic use of symbolic celebrations* – The organization uses symbolic dates as a way of obtaining attention and publicly legitimize its messages. The #NamorarSemViolência and Stand by Her campaigns are examples of this, the first was launched on the last working day before Valentine’s Day (February 14) and the second on the symbolic date of Freedom Day in Portugal (April 25).

4) *Win win partnerships* – UMAR establishes partnerships with various stakeholders relevant to its activity, as with other collectives and associations, Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, several universities, cafes, libraries and other cultural spaces and City Councils (local authorities).

5) *Political Advocacy* – The organization adopts a vigilant role in denouncing human rights abuses and defending the rights of civil society, positioning itself on various issues as a contentious social actor that rejects the “dictatorships of thought, politics and patriarchy”, being neither outside nor completely inside of politics.

6) *Media Relations* – Several proactive attempts to influence the media agenda and proximity to some journalists who follow certain topics.

7) *Citizen Lobby* – That is the reasoned presentation of a legitimate interest to political power. For example, contribution to the discussion in the Parliament of the petition that provides for the status of victim for children exposed to contexts of domestic violence.

8) *Intentional discursive positioning in public relations* – In the public affairs in which UMAR is involved, the organization positions itself, sometimes in opposition, sometimes as a supporter, resorting to the intentional positioning or discursive repositioning of others. Attentive care is observable with the type of narratives and interpretations they want to stimulate in each issue and context.

6. Discussion

This paper discusses the intersection of activist public relations and organized persuasive communication within feminist campaigns. Feminist struggles have had a propagandistic ideological historical framework (Barbakadze, 2020), and although several recent events have brought new attention to feminism — Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 2017 TED talk “We should all be feminists” has been viewed more than 6 million times (Adichie, 2017) — many people who defend gender equality do not identify themselves with the term “feminist” (Scharff, 2019). This must be related to several factors that go beyond the focus of this work, however, the propagandistic association with radical social movements for women’s rights should have some influence on the discomfort that the term still triggers.

The findings illustrate well Jacques Ellul (1973) perspective that not all types of persuasion are harmful or false, and that propaganda does not only serve to change opinions but often intends to maintain dominant opinions and the status quo. As in Aristotle’s conception of the persuasive process, persuasion does not only involve the use of logical rhetoric (*logos*). Persuasion also implies the dialectic between the subject matter of a speech and the soul of the audience, through the character (*êthos*) of the speaker and the emotional state (*pathos*) of the listener. According to the findings of current research this process may involve one-way consensual persuasion. Within the scope of this study, feminist campaigns intend to challenge what they consider to be the vision of the dominant values of patriarchy that still persist in societies.

Although the moral aversion of the term propaganda has contaminated persuasive communication, it would be naive not to admit that modern cultures are permeated by persuasive content and messages of all kinds (Fawkes, 2007). For this reason, “it cannot be seriously maintained that all persuasion is bad or undesirable” (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994, p. 128) and it is necessary to understand the differences between the numerous attempts at persuasion as a way of increasing citizens media and digital literacy. Based on the new conceptual framework by Bakir et al. (2019), this research analyzed the content of the communication campaigns of a feminist organization to better understand what distinguishes manipulative forms of OPC and nonmanipulative or consensual forms of persuasion.

All UMAR’s communication campaigns in the period analyzed fit into the category of *Strategic (One-Way) Consensual Persuasion*. Activist persuasion communication

strategies can be more or less rational, gentle, or aggressive depending on the identity, the experience, the methods of activism and the symbolic positioning of these groups in the public space. But the campaigns analyzed indicates that, in principle, they can operate within the realm of strategic consensual persuasion and not on propaganda or non-consensual organized persuasive communication. The analyzed campaigns meet the two requirements for consent to be considered voluntary, free, and informed: 1) No deception was detected (deliberate or not) and 2) Although public interest campaigns to prevent violence seek to persuade by highlighting the (social and personal) benefits of violence-free relationships, no evidence of incentivization or coercion, as defined by Bakir et al. (2019) was detected.

Looking at the second research question of this study, it was possible to confirm that during the observation period UMAR used several public relations tools such as (1) Celebrity endorsement; (2) Public affairs management; (3) Strategic use of symbolic celebrations; (4) Win win partnerships; (5) Political Advocacy; (6) Media Relations; (7) Citizen Lobby and (8) Intentional discursive positioning. The study fits the description of activist public relations as it features both spontaneous activities (protests) and long-term, planned ones (dissent) addressing multiple stakeholders (Adi, 2019).

7. Conclusion

Recent political transformations with the election of populist and authoritarian rulers, the formation of antidemocratic governments and the dissemination of hate speech, mainly on online social networks (Ortega-Sánchez et al., 2021) highlight the need for citizens to understand and critically assess the multiple contexts, nuances and intentions underlying the messages that circulate quickly, whether in conventional media or in virtual environments.

As Bakir et al. (2019, p. 325) stated “a society where citizens are routinely incentivized, deceived and coerced by powerful actors is not one that approximates to democratic ideals”. This approach to the democratic ideals that are being threatened and that we have taken for granted in recent decades requires that citizens critically assess the differences between consensual forms of persuasion and non-consensual, manipulative, and propagandistic forms of persuasion to make free and informed choices.

Although the authors of the new conceptual framework on Organized Persuasive Communication have asked for more research on manipulative OPC in democratic contexts (Bakir et al., 2019), this analysis about the strategic consensual persuasion campaigns of a feminist organization helped to clear up some confusion about the so-called and broad term of “feminist propaganda”.

It is important to identify some aspects that may have limited the research and consequently the results obtained. Firstly, the risk of reducing external validity or representativeness, inherent to the chosen procedure for obtaining data, the case study. It is difficult to predict what would be the results of the study applied in a different time period or to other activist organization in the field of human rights. The study sought to mitigate these risks by questioning situations, and relating data and theories present in the conclusions previously obtained by other authors. These limitations, and others that may not have been identified, also open up a wide range of possibilities for future studies in this area.

More research is needed to explore power inequalities between activist groups and political and corporate elite groups in the processes of framing news or other public discourse online and offline. Situating strategic consensual persuasion in activist public relations illustrates the contributions of the field for civic participation dynamics that is fundamental to strengthen democracies and opens the way for future research that explores the different possibilities of activist persuasion strategies oriented towards social change in the defense of democratic values and human rights advocacy.

This study illustrated, in a context of applied communication — that it is not intended to be representative of the diversity of feminist messages and campaigns — the symbolic dimension of the power struggles implicit to social movements, framing public relations activities within the scope of perceptions management oriented to intentionally interfere in the attribution of meanings about the social reality.

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