Public opinion is a phenomenon of significance to all kinds of people.

Politicians, political scientists, political journalists, and social philosophers all deal with public opinion as a vital part of a people’s political life.
* It can take an organization or individual many years to build the credibility and nurture the trust that goes into winning favorable public opinion.
However, it can take only a matter of minutes to destroy all that has been developed.

PR practitioners must therefore understand how public opinion is formed, how it evolves from people’s attitudes and how it is influenced by communication.
According to John Dewey, public opinion is judgement formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs.
According to Kimball Young an opinion is a belief somehow stronger or more intense than a mere notion or impression but less strong than positive knowledge based on complete or adequate proof.
Morris Ginberg observes that by public opinion is meant the mass of ideas and judgements operative in a community which are more or less definitely formulated and have certain stability and are felt by the people who entertain or hold them to be social in the sense that they are a result of many minds acting in common.
James T. Young writes that public opinion is a social judgment of a self-conscious community on a question of general importance after rational public discussion.
For some authors, two basic conceptions have emerged from the term public opinion:

- **Collective view** of public relations which refer to issues that emerge through rational discussion in the population.

- **Aggregate view** which refers to the sum total of individual opinions of the population.

NB: The latter view seems to be popular among PR practitioners.
Seitel (2007) and some other authors believe that the concept of public opinion can best be explained when the phrase is split into its two components:

- Public
- Opinion
Public signifies a group of people who share a common interest in a specific subject.

For example students or community of residents.
An opinion is the expression of an attitude on a particular topic.

According to Kimball Young, public refers to a rather loosely organized and conjoined grouping of people with a common interest.

Ginberg defines public opinion as an unorganized and amorphous aggregation of individuals who are bound together by common opinion and desires but are too numerous for each to maintain personal.
For the social scientist three distinct perspectives emerge from the many different definitions of the concept:

- Individual
- Collective
- Process
Public opinion thus refers to a group of people who are confronted by an issue, are divided in their ideas as to how to meet the issue, and engage in discussions over the issue.

Public opinion is also viewed as a communication process that allows people to organize into publics within which opinions are formed and which enable them to exercise their influence.
Nearly all scholars of public opinion, regardless of the way they may define it, agree that, in order for a phenomenon to count as public opinion, at least four conditions must be satisfied:

1. There must be an issue
2. There must be a significant number of individuals who express opinions on the issue
3. There must be some kind of a consensus among at least some of these opinions
4. This consensus must directly or indirectly exert influence
One can conclude that an appropriate definition of public opinion will be an aggregate of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a community.
Attitudes are basically a reflection of one’s values and the norms that one abides by.

They reflect some state of mind about an object, fact or situation.
Attitudes are evaluations people make about specific problems or issues.

An individual’s attitude may differ from issue to issue.
* Attitudes are based on a number of characteristics which include the following:

1. Personal
2. Cultural
3. Educational
4. Familial
5. Religious
6. Race

Other factors too such as experience, economic class, political and organizational membership.
COMPONENTS OF PUBLIC OPINION

* Values (Robert Worcester suggested that values are “the deep tides of public mood, slow to change, but powerful”)

* Attitudes (Attitudes are “the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger”)
Some opinion researchers have contended that the standard technical concept of attitude is not useful for understanding public opinion, because it is insufficient complex.
Crespi, for example, preferred to speak of “additional systems,” which he characterized as the combined development of four sets of phenomena:

- Values and interests
- Knowledge and beliefs
* Feelings
* Behavioural intentions
Once an issue is generally recognized, some people will begin to form attitudes about it.

If an attitude is expressed to others by sufficient number of people, a public opinion on the topic begins to emerge.
Not all people will develop a particular attitude about a public issue; some may not be interested, and others simply may not hear about it.
A seemingly homogenous body of public opinion may therefore be composed of individual opinions that are rooted in very different interests and values.

If an attitude does not serve its function, it is unlikely to be formed: an attitude must be useful in some way to the person who holds it.
HOW ARE ATTITUDES INFLUENCED?

* Attitudes are positive, negative or neutral. A person is for something, against it or neutral.

* There is a small percentage of people who express strong support, and another small percentage who express strong opposition. The vast majority are indifferent or neutral.
They are sometimes called the ‘silent majority’. It has been observed that it is hard to change the mind of a person who is staunchly opposed to a particular issue or individual.

Likewise, it is easy to reinforce the support of a person who is totally in favour of an issue or individual.
Social psychologists have a number of theories about how attitudes are influenced.

1. Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

2. Social Judgement Theory
Social scientist Leon Festinger discussed this concept. He believed that individuals tend to avoid information that is dissonant or opposed to their own points of view and tend to seek out information that is consonant with or in support of their own attitudes.
Cognitive dissonance describes how we rationalize internal conflicts to ourselves. We are usually reluctant to change our behaviour and prefer to alter our thinking to make our behaviour fit our ideas than vice versa.
Cognitive dissonance theory begins with the idea of cognitions. Cognitions are simply bits of knowledge. They pertain to any variety of thoughts, values, facts or emotions.

Most cognitions have nothing to do with each other.
However, some cognitions are related. These cognitions are “consonant,” meaning that they are related and that one follows from the other. They go together, so to speak.
However, sometimes we have cognitions that are related, but do not follow from one another. In fact, they may be opposite.

These types of cognitions are referred to as “dissonant”.
The basic idea behind cognitive dissonance theory is that people do not like to have dissonant cognitions.

Creating cognitive dissonance in an audience can be a powerful tool for disrupting habits of thought and consequently increasing the chances of altering their behaviour.
Thus, if a PR practitioner provides relevant thoughts (alter cognitions) and/or raise the importance of the relevant thoughts, he/she may leave an audience with no choice but to alter their behaviours.
This theory suggests that people may have a range of opinions on a certain subject, anchored by a clear attitude. While it is rarely possible to change this position, communicators can work within this range called a person’s “latitude of acceptance” to modify a person’s opinion.
FIVE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUDGEMENT THEORY

Principle 1
We have categories of judgement by which we evaluate persuasive positions.

Principle 2
When we receive persuasive information, we locate it on our categories of judgement.
* Principle 3
Our level of “ego-involvement” affects the size of our latitudes.

* Principle 4
We tend to distort incoming information to fit our categories of judgement
Principle 5
Small to moderate discrepancies between our anchor positions and the one advocated will cause us to change; large discrepancies will not
This theory offers some powerful guidelines for persuasion.

1. Work in the latitude of acceptance and avoid the latitude of rejection

2. Expect change to happen in many small steps over a long time period
3. Watch out for ego-involvement
Motivation is the inner power or energy that pushes one toward performing a certain action.

Motivation has much to do with desire and ambition, and if they are absent, motivation is absent too.
One of the famous reasoning of what motivates people is Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory.

This theory helps define the origins of motivation which in turn helps explain attitude change.
ABRAHAM MASLOW’S HIERARCHY
OF NEEDS THEORY

- Maslow’s postulated a five-level hierarchy:

1. **Physiological need**: a person’s biological demands - food and water, sleep, health, bodily needs, exercise and rest and sex.

2. **Safety need**: security, protection, comfort and peace and orderly surroundings.
3. **Love needs**: acceptance, belonging, love and affection and membership in a group.

4. **Esteem need**: recognition and prestige, confidence and leadership opportunities, competence and strength, intelligence and success.
Self-actualization: self-fulfillment and achieving a goal for the purpose of challenge and accomplishment.
Another popular approach to motivating attitude change is the **ELM**. This model posits that there are essentially two ways that we make decisions and hence get persuaded:

1. When we are motivated and able to pay attention, we take a logical, conscious thinking, **central route** to decision-making. This can lead to permanent change in our attitude as we adopt and elaborate upon the speaker’s arguments.
2. In other cases, we take the peripheral route. Here we do not pay attention to persuasion arguments but are swayed instead by surface characteristics such as whether we like the speaker. In this case although we do not change, it is only temporary.
Persuasion is quite simply, the use of message to influence an audience.

It means getting another person to do something through advice, reasoning or just plain arm-twisting.
Persuasion is the goal of the vast majority of public relations programmes.

It has been said that if you want to persuade people you must cite evidence that coincides with their own beliefs, emotions and expectations.
THINGS WHICH WILL PERSUADE US

1. Facts
2. Emotions
3. Personalizing
4. Appealing to ‘you’
The power to persuade - to influence public opinion – is the measure not only of a charismatic but also an effective leader.
FACTORS INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION

* Environmental factors
* The mass media
* Interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s)
The ‘laws of public opinion’ developed many years ago by Hadley Cantril which remain very pertinent to us today.

1. Opinion is highly sensitive to important events
2. Opinion is determined more by events than words
3. At critical times, we are more sensitive to the adequacy of leadership
4. Once self interest is involved, opinions are slow to change.

5. People have more opinions and are able to form opinions more easily on goals than on methods to reach those goals.
6. If people in a democracy are provided with educational opportunities and access to information, public opinion reveals a hard-headed common sense.
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If people in a democracy are provided with educational opportunities and access to information, public opinion reveals a hardheaded common sense.
THE TRAPS OF PUBLIC OPINION

* Cast in stone
* Gut reaction
* General public
* Words move mountains
* Brother’s keeper
ROLE OF OPINION LEADERS

* Opinion leaders play a major role in defining popular issues and in influencing individual opinions regarding them.
* Opinion leadership is not confined to prominent figures in public life.
An opinion leader can be any person to whom others look for guidance on a certain subject
CHARACTERISTICS OF AN OPINION LEADER

1. The opinion leader must be highly interested in the subject/issue at hand
2. He/she must be better informed than the average person
3. He/she must be conversant with the mass media
4. He/she must be innovative in ideas

5. He/she must be good organizers who can get other people to take action
THANK YOU