

**Ethical challenges of digital communication in public relations:  
A comparative study of individual, organizational, and national factors in 52 countries**

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“ONE WORLD, ONE NETWORK?”

PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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## **Ethical challenges of digital communication in public relations:**

### **A comparative study of individual, organizational, and national factors in 52 countries**

#### **Structured abstract**

**Purpose of research and research gap:** Digital communication enables PR professionals to analyze audiences using their personal data, or to distribute messages via various channels including paid media. Although effective, these practices are often assessed critically from an ethical perspective. Previous studies have highlighted how individual dispositions like gender and age, but also organizational and national backgrounds shape ethical perceptions and decisions of PR practitioners. However, a combined investigation of these micro, meso, and macro level determinants on moral assessment of the aforementioned communication practices covering a broad variety of professionals, organizations, and countries is still lacking.

**Theoretical approach and background:** Individual characteristics of PR professionals, their organizational environments and their national backgrounds shape value systems that drive their decision-making processes. Existing research in public relations confirms that all three levels impact ethical assessments. For example, several studies observed differences in moral attitudes towards big data and social bots among various age groups and countries, or revealed how issues of sponsored content and transparency are tackled differently in codes of ethics across various countries. However, these studies remained limited to specific communication practices, determinants, or regions.

**Research question:** How do individual, organizational and national factors determine the perception of ethical challenges of digital communication in public relations?

**Methods:** The research deploys a secondary analysis of merged data collected in four quantitative cross-national online surveys among PR professionals, overall comprising 5,970 respondents in five different types of organizations from 52 countries. For analyses, multilevel models will be used with regard to the hierarchical structure of the data (individuals nested within organizations and countries).

**Key findings:** Research still in progress.

**Practical or social implications:** Research still in progress.

**Originality and innovation:** Building on one of the largest datasets collected in public relations research so far, the study will reveal whether individual dispositions, organizational environments or national/cultural backgrounds determine if respondents find using personal data of audiences and distributing messages via paid channels challenging from an ethical perspective. The multilevel modelling approach distinguishes the study from similar work in the field that ignores the nested structure of data by applying less advanced analyzing methods.

## **Purpose of research and research gap**

In recent years, media consumption patterns have changed dramatically around the world, and social media and other forms of digital communication are being increasingly used (Newman et al., 2020). The changes in the digital information environment have important implications for the field of public relations, as they bring both opportunities and challenges and raise a number of ethical, normative, and legal questions (Duhé, 2015; Wright & Hinson, 2017). Digital communication enables PR professionals to analyze audiences using their personal data, and to distribute messages through paid channels. Such practices are often evaluated critically from an ethical or moral perspective, because they are tangential to principles of honesty, accuracy, or full disclosure (Bowen, 2013; Macnamara, 2021). Empirical research on the ethical challenges of digital communication encountered by PR practitioners remains scarce though. A few studies have shown that individual dispositions such as gender and age, as well as organizational and national factors influence ethical perceptions and decisions of PR practitioners. However, a combined investigation of these determinants at the micro, meso, and macro levels for the moral assessment of ethically questionable communication practices has yet to be conducted. Our study aims to fill this research gap by reporting the results of a comparative survey of 5,970 PR practitioners in 52 countries.

## **Literature review and theoretical background**

Investigations into questions of ethics, morality, or specifically ethically questionable practices have a long tradition in PR research (Place, 2019). For the purpose of our empirical study, we follow previous understandings of ethics as “values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication” (Bowen, 2007, p. 1). In today’s digital communication environment, PR practitioners worldwide are increasingly confronted with questions about morally acceptable practices, as digitalization

and new technologies offer many new ways for strategically reaching target audiences for specific goals – with some raising ethical concern. For example, the digitalization of media landscapes in China has resulted in the extensive practice of “dark public relations”, meaning covert practices with a hidden agenda, aiming to defame or slander specific organizations, business executives, or celebrities, and has brought negative perception on the profession of public relations (Chen et al., 2020).

A literature review of conceptual and empirical works reveals that typical challenges faced by practitioners can be broadly sorted into two dimensions: (a) *using personal data of audiences* (big data analyses, targeting) (Barbu, 2014; Wiesenberg et al., 2017; Yang & Kang, 2015), and (b) *distributing messages via paid channels* (using sponsored content, collaborations with social media influencers, or social bots) (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Ikonen et al., 2017; Schauster et al., 2016; Schauster & Neill, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Such practices are often criticized for lack of transparency, personal data privacy, manipulation, or deception (Barbu, 2014; Macnamara, 2021; Woolley & Howard, 2016; Yang & Kang, 2015), and raise questions of “what ought to be done, not just (...) what legally must be done” (Cunningham, 1999, p. 500).

Perceptions of ethics may be determined by individual characteristics of PR professionals, but also by the organizational or national environments they are embedded in. Taken together, these factors create a value system that drives decision-making processes (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016). At the individual level, professional work experience and attendance of training courses in ethics have been found influential in issuing moral judgements (Bowen, 2006; Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill & Weaver, 2017). Other studies highlight the organizational context as determinants in moral decisions (Bowen, 2004), e.g., through leaders who act as role models in ethical questions (Schauster, 2015). However, these meso level factors might be less influential than individual predispositions (Lee &

Cheng, 2012). Finally, ethical decisions may be shaped by national backgrounds, as practitioners in various countries apply relativistic values specific to their particular region and culture (Kim & Ki, 2010); in addition, levels of corruption or press freedom may affect the perception of moral challenges in the PR profession (Toledano & Avidar, 2016).

Indeed, first empirical results on the aforementioned digital communication practices point to the assumption that all three levels impact their ethical assessments among PR professionals. For example, Zerfass et al. (2016) and Wiesenberg et al. (2020) observed differences in moral attitudes towards big data and social bots among different age groups and countries. Likewise, Ikonen et al. (2017) revealed how issues of sponsored content and transparency are tackled differently in codes of ethics across various countries. However, these studies remain limited to specific communication practices, determinants, or regions (e.g., Europe).

### **Research question**

Given the lack of previous empirical work and synthesizing these different strands of research, we refrained from formulating hypotheses, and asked the following research questions:

RQ1: How do *individual factors* (gender, age, professional experience, hierarchical position, level of education in ethics) determine the perception of ethical challenges of digital communication?

RQ2: How do *organizational factors* (type of organization) determine the perception of ethical challenges of digital communication?

RQ3: How do *national factors* (country, level of corruption, freedom of press) determine the perception of ethical challenges of digital communication?

## Method

This research uses secondary analysis of data collected through four cross-national quantitative online surveys of PR professionals conducted between January and November 2020 (BLINDED). The surveys used identical instruments, but covered different regions of the world (Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and North America). Questionnaires were available in Chinese, English, and Spanish language, depending on the region. As there is no official register for PR practitioners in most countries around the globe, participants had to be recruited through a variety of channels, including e-mail databases built by the research teams, invitation mailings from national professional associations in each region, social media channels, and professional survey research platforms.

### *Sample*

A total of 5,970 respondents from 52 countries, working in five different types of organizations, were included in the secondary data analysis. The case selection followed the most-different systems approach to maximize variation in national contexts, similar to studies in the neighboring field of journalism research (Hanitzsch et al., 2016, p. 7f.). Two to 25 countries were selected from each region (see Table 1). Organization types included joint stock companies (16.1%,  $n = 961$ ), private companies (24.6%,  $n = 1,466$ ), governmental organizations (16.9%,  $n = 1,007$ ), NPOs (8.4%,  $n = 504$ ), and consultancies and agencies (34.0%,  $n = 2,032$ ). At the individual level, 61.4% ( $n = 3,663$ ) of the participants were women and 38.4% ( $n = 2,292$ ) were men. Their mean age was 41.1 years ( $SD = 11.2$  years). 56.8% ( $n = 3,388$ ) had more than 10 years of professional experience in PR, 20.6% ( $n = 1,232$ ) between 6 and 10 years, and 22.6% ( $n = 1,350$ ) less than 5 years. The majority of the survey participants were in a leadership position, either as head of communication or agency CEO (26.1%,  $n = 1,557$ ) or as leader of a team or unit (29.4%,  $n = 1,754$ ). Another 26.9% ( $n = 1,603$ ) worked as team member or consultant.

**Table 1.** Regions and countries represented in the sample ( $N = 5,970$ ).

<b>Asia-Pacific</b>	<i>n</i>	<b>Europe</b>	<i>n</i>	<b>Latin America</b>	<i>n</i>	<b>North America</b>	<i>n</i>
Australia	35	Austria	144	Argentina	178	Canada	268
China (Mainland)	210	Belgium	108	Brazil	439	United States	778
Hong Kong (SAR)	114	Bulgaria	43	Chile	127		
Indonesia	62	Croatia	85	Colombia	128		
Korea (Republic of)	126	Czech Republic	50	Costa Rica	161		
Malaysia	109	Denmark	33	Dominican Republic	35		
New Zealand	49	Finland	80	Ecuador	34		
Philippines	102	France	40	El Salvador	58		
Singapore	94	Germany	182	Mexico	126		
Taiwan	115	Greece	43	Panama	43		
Vietnam	103	Ireland	34	Peru	81		
		Italy	134	Puerto Rico	63		
		Netherlands	117	Uruguay	86		
		Norway	90	Venezuela	79		
		Poland	66				
		Portugal	92				
		Romania	182				
		Russia	59				
		Serbia	92				
		Slovenia	71				
		Spain	100				
		Sweden	84				
		Switzerland	96				
		Turkey	42				
		United Kingdom	100				

### *Measurements*

Ethical challenges of digital communication in public relations were assessed using two dimensions. The *use of personal data of audiences* was measured with two items: “Exploiting audiences’ personal data by applying big data analyses”; “Profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests”. *Dissemination of messages through paid channels* was rated on three items: “Using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites that look like regular content”; “Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media”; “Paying social media influencers to communicate

favorably”. The items were developed on the basis of the literature review and pretested among a sample of 58 practitioners. Participants rated each of these items on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (“Ethically not challenging at all”) to 5 (“Ethically extremely challenging”). Two indices are formed that serve as dependent variables in the analyses. A confirmatory factor analysis is currently being conducted to validate the assumed loading of factors and examine construct validity.

Independent variables measured at the micro level include gender, age, work experience (in years), and hierarchical position of the respondents, as well as the source and timing of their training in communication ethics (if applicable). Predictors at the meso level include type of organization (e.g., joint stock company). At the macro level, respondents’ countries of residence were surveyed and additional data from existing secondary databases for each country were included as predictors: level of corruption, as indicated by the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2020), and degree of press freedom, as indicated by the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

### **Analyses and expected results**

First descriptive analyses for sample description and overview results have already been conducted. Since individual participants are nested in different types of organizations and different countries, we will adopt a multilevel modelling approach in winter 2021/22 to analyze the hierarchically structured, cross-classified data (Hox, 2002). Data analyses will be conducted in *R* using the “lme4” package (Bates et al., 2015). Results are expected no later than early spring 2022. In case of acceptance, a full paper including all models, findings, and discussion of their implications will be submitted until April 19, 2022, and presented at the ICA conference in Paris.

## **Originality and innovation**

Our study will provide comprehensive insights into the micro, meso, and macro factors that influence the assessment of ethically questionable practices in digital communication. More specifically, the research will reveal whether individual dispositions, organizational environments, or national backgrounds determine whether respondents find the use of audiences' personal data and the dissemination of messages via paid channels challenging from an ethical viewpoint. The study draws on one of the largest datasets in academic PR research collected to date, with nearly 6,000 responses from communication professionals in more than 50 countries around the world. Despite the limitation of a non-random sample, the size and diversity of our dataset allow for sophisticated and robust statistical multilevel models. This distinguishes this study from others that use less advanced analyzing methods (e.g., linear regression modelling) and thereby ignore the nested structure of the data.

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