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Public relations, ethics, and social media: A cross-national study of PR practitioners



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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to expand the public relations body of knowledge on two levels: firstly, it presents findings from empirical studies on PR practitioners' attitudes to ethical and unethical practices on social media. Secondly, it compares practitioners' attitudes to specific ethical issues in social media in two different socio-cultural environments—New Zealand and Israel. Its major goal is to identify practitioners' current attitudes toward ethics in societies that are ranked differently on international lists comparing levels of democracy in different countries. The findings from online surveys conducted in both countries imply that PR ethics is linked to the culture and social environment in which practitioners function. The article identifies practical ethical challenges in public relations practitioners' use of social media.

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1. Introduction

As no study has so far examined public relations ethics beyond the borders of a specific socio-cultural environment, key questions remain unanswered. Social media is indeed a global tool of communication but are practitioner experiences with social media ethics universal, or do they depend on the values of the local market in which they function? Can arguments about the use of social media by public relations practitioners relate to the global industry while based on findings from the US or the UK? Is PR ethics independent from the local business community's ethical values?

Sriramesh (2009) advocated "cross-national studies of public relations using the same research protocol... to assess similarities and differences in public relations practice, further enhancing the body of knowledge" (pp. 920–921) and cautioned that: "Such projects would also be appropriate for scholar educators of different countries to collaborate" (p. 921). In this article, we take such a cross-national and collaborative approach to learn about practitioner views on professional ethics, especially via social media platforms, in New Zealand (NZ) and in Israel.

Our evaluation of cultural dimensions in public relations research follows criteria suggested by The Global Public Relations Handbooks (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, 2009). They advocated the use of societal factors such as the political, cultural, economic levels and media freedoms of countries to examine how specific public relations professional environments differ from each other and, given the typology of the two cultures under our investigation, we followed this advice. We limited the approach to the concept of nation culture (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) and used comparative indices on the level of specific dimensions of culture (i.e., democracy, freedom, and transparency) in countries around the

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