Exploring the Factors Affecting the Ethical Values of Public Relations Practice in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The environment of public relations practice in Nigeria features dynamics that do not exist under the scholarship radar yet and need to be explored to enhance the profession. This study investigated how the employer, client, colleague, society, and professional association influenced the professional values of public relations practice among practitioners in Lagos State, Nigeria. Based on a survey design, it turned out that these factors collectively influenced the values, thereby eliciting new responsibilities on how the environment shapes public relations. It also indicated the need for the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations and other relevant bodies to escalate their training of both the members and staff to keep up with the new responsibilities.

Keywords: Public relations practice, professional value, professionalism, ethical public relations, and quality education

Introduction: Ethics in Public Relations

Public relations professionals in Nigeria have some issues of concern. Prominent of these are poor management and weak or non-enforcement of practice codes. It appears this inefficiency is undermining the country's rating internationally. Reasons for poor management have been associated

with environmental, political, and socio-economic problems ravaging the nations over the years. However, the focus is now more on ethical issues. The belief is that if the profession rests on a solid ethical foundation, most of the problems and issues facing practitioners currently will be resolved.

Ethics regulate the standards, thus enhancing professionalism. Ethics and laws are vital instruments for controlling performances and behaviors among clients, colleagues, employers, and professional bodies. Krohe (1997) and Ferrell and Fraedrich (1997) aver that ethics have more acceptability as an instrument of control than law in striving for professionalism in public relations practice. Thus, ethics form the core of the current discourse (Kohlberg & Candee 1984) in Nigeria's public relations practice.

Ethics revolve around standards of acceptance and are concerned primarily with the ultimate rules or notions of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behavior for our society. This acceptable or unacceptable behavior could be from the individual, social or business-oriented (profession) and are concerned with human duties and obligations (Guy, 1990, Amodu et al, 2019).

Ethics are vital in public relations, as they assist practitioners in making decisions when faced with essential conflicts resolving situations. These conflicts exist in the relationships between the practitioners, and numerous publics, depending on the degree of divergence of interests (Bateman & Snell 1999; Omojola, 2008a; Omojola, 2008b)). Ethical values ensure that individual practitioners' interests or desires vis-à-vis the practice and the public are not satisfied to the detriment of the public. This understanding enhances the acceptance of the practice and the striving for professionalism (Farnham 1993). Ethics regulate the pricing of public relations services, quality of service, personnel input, and channel choices, among other factors. It also ensures that the satisfaction of the target public's desires serves as a focus and guide.

There is a gap between ethical decision-making among public relations professionals and professionalism in Nigeria. The honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and open communication (Haque & Ahmad, 2017) fall short of the standard. Ethics is the value system by which a person determines right or wrong, fair or unfair, or just or unjust. The law does not guarantee the ethical practice of any profession (Yungwook, 2003).

Every profession has its values. In many ways, members of the general public evaluate the profession to know if the practitioners adhere firmly to these values. In the case of Nigeria, these values exist in the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations Code. This case brings up the issue of the factors that make or do make the code works. This work explored these values zeroing in on Lagos State, Nigeria, regarded as the hub of public relations practice. Kruckeberg (1998) said that public relations, as a profession or occupation, have its own set of professional values and other factors that shape it

Professional Values

Wong (2011) has said that professional values play an integral role in maintaining the viability of a profession. This assertion highlights the significance of values to a profession. Subscription to values allows professionals to convey their societal contributions to the public and appropriately conceptualize their work. Grunig (2000) stated that professional values in public relations could be considered the center of ethical decision-making. The ethics of public relations include the application of professional and personal values of individuals besides the values of the public and clients or organizations.

Nearly all national public relations organizations claim they subscribe to their code of ethics. Most of these organizations emphasize educating their members about professional standards. They have the right to blame or expel practitioners who violate their professional ethics or who have been convicted of a crime in a court of law (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Schank and Weis (2001) and Adeyeye et al. (2020) aver that

the development of professional values occurs through a series of connected practices, beginning during the years of practice and experience of professional education. This development is considered an essential part of practitioners' socialization in the workplace. In Nigeria, public relations practitioners have good skills, education or fundamental knowledge, and experience in the public relations field (Ahmad, 2010).

Specifically, Parsons (2008) define values in terms of five pillars of ethics as follows: beneficence - or to do well, confidentiality - or to respect privacy, non-maleficence or to do no harm, fairness- to be fair and socially responsible, and veracity - or to tell the truth. The standpoint of Allen and Davis (1993) is slightly different. Theirs are professional development, freedom of client choice, professional autonomy, upbeat nature of change, scientific inquiry, adaptability or flexibility, and creativity or innovation.

The point of view of Amujo and Melewar (2011), Nnolim, Nwaizugbo and Oko (2014), Kang (2010), Ki and Kim (2010), and Ubwa (2014) suggest five professional values which are *trustworthiness and altruism, accountability, impartiality, and credibility*: They all claim that these values require that practitioners should take into account and maintain impartiality at work. Organizations should ensure the impartiality and credibility of their practitioners before and during their employment (Yartey et al., 2021).

Having these in place, societal harmony, based on personal inequalities, is pursued, and individual interests can be sacrificed for the benefit of society. It is also essential that public interest be the utmost part of the public relations program at all costs. This situation should be maintained to forestall peaceful coexistence among all the stakeholders in public relations.

Practitioners would require restructuring to manage the challenges facing them effectively. One way in this regard is to let those who study the relevant courses (mass communication, public relations, among a few others) be the ones to practice the profession.

In contrast to popular opinion, there are indications that not all practitioners have the requisite training. Also, Parkinson (2021) has submitted that public relations codes in different climes lack a sufficient professional basis – a view supported by Eyun-Junk and Soo-Yeon (2010). This study explored the factors that came to play, resulting in low visibility of ethically sound professional practice in Nigeria. This thesis expatiates below.

The Problem Statement
Nigeria's public relations practice has been contending with internal and external environmental forces to professionalize. In the view of Oko (2002), the vital aspect is the environmental forces. Inquiry in this direction wants to know how many Nigerians, including public relations practitioners, whose natural consciences are living. The deadness of conscience accounts for the high level of unethical practices among public relations practitioners in Nigeria. The practice is rife with unethical practices in the profession. The practitioners are more concerned with fulfilling the desires of their employers, their clients, and their self-interest rather than doing what their profession requires of them.

Unimpressively, however, research on the influence that such factors as the employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body exert on the ethical value of public relations practice has low visibility in scholarship in Nigeria. The need, therefore, existed to conduct a study on ethics in public relations relative to these factors in the country. The Nigerian environment's effectiveness and enforcement of the code of ethics are insufficient, notwithstanding the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) role (Udomisor & Osademe, 2013). What is not known yet is how these factors have influenced the situation.

The activities of quacks are also damaging as they epitomize neglect of the rules as driven by the NIPR. This damage has elicited the call for intervention to assist the practitioners in Nigeria. This assistance is why this study focused on the combined moderating effects of those factors on public relations ethics in the Lagos State of Nigeria.

Study Objective
This investigation was undertaken to determine the combined moderating effects of determining factors - employer, client, and colleague, society, and professional body on ethical values of public relations practice in the Lagos State of Nigeria

Hypothesis
There is a significant combined effect of determinant factors - employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Significance of the Study
This study is essential to the researcher. It sets out a trajectory for studying the profession's environmental factors, especially in Nigeria. This attempt will obviate the dearth of literature visible in this area by providing reference materials. Moreover, the findings will help organizations maintain the highest level of professionalism with their employers, colleagues, professionals, and society and apply ethical considerations to their various publics. More importantly, Nigeria's NIPR ethical code, when penciled in for a review, will need some citations from this work.

Literature and Empirical Review
Amujo and Melewar (2011) examined the contemporary challenges impacting the practice of public relations in Nigeria (1990-2011). The analysis was based on an archival review of academic and professional literature and supported with data collected from the experts. The study also explored conceptual models underpinning the practice of public relations in Nigeria. The paper contended that, despite changes including conferment of chartered status on the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations by the federal government, the institute's enactment of a code of conduct and establishment of professional public relations still faced some critical challenges in Nigeria. This situation emerged because quacks find themselves practicing the profession, consequently misrepresenting it. The study recommended that compliance with a code of conduct and knowledge of public relations law

be pursued as prerequisites for gaining public respect and professionalization.

Likewise, Ki, Lee, and Choi (2012) examined factors affecting the ethical practice of public relations professionals within public relations firms. Organizational ethics factors such as an ethics code, top management support for ethical practice, ethical climate, and perception of the association between career success and ethical practice were examined. The survey method and questionnaire as an instrument of data collection was adopted with public relations professionals in public relations firms in Korea as respondents. Findings revealed that the presence of an ethical code along with top management support and a non-egoistic ethical climate within public relations firms significantly influenced public relations professionals' ethical practices.

Igbekele's (2012) work was on the *Evaluation of Public Relations Practice in Public Tertiary Institutions in South-Western Nigeria*. The study appraised the public perceptions towards public relations practice in public tertiary institutions in the South-West geo-political zone of Nigeria. It highlighted its current activities, structure, and effectiveness in creating a conducive academic environment in the institutions and between the institutions and their publics. The findings show that public relations practice in the study area has succeeded in harmonizing various publics to create mutual relations between them and their respective educational institutions.

The result demonstrated further that the public perceptions of the public relations practice in the study area were favorable, contrary to other studies in this area. The results further revealed that practitioners in these institutions were not trained and ethically deficient. The study concludes that public relations maintain a proactive measure, which can be employed when a situation seems problematic and cumbersome and serenity in an organization.

Idid and Arandas (2016) investigated public relations practitioners' professional values, ethics, and professionalism. The study explored the influence of education, length of service, professionalism, and ethics on the

professional values of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. The study found that professionalism and ethics on professional values influenced public relations practitioners. The study further examined whether education and experience influence professional values through professionalism and code of ethics. The results fully supported the hypotheses indicating that professionalism and ethics influenced the professional values of public relations practitioners. The results also showed that education influenced professionalism and ethics, and length of service influenced professionalism and ethical practice.

Further, Neill (2016) examined accredited vs. non-accredited, with particular focus on how accreditation impacts perceptions and readiness to provide ethics counsel. The study proved that most practitioners and educators believe this is the responsibility of public relations. The results also showed that accredited public relations practitioners were more likely to say they feel prepared to do so and to offer ethics counsel

than unaccredited practitioners. The study recommended that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel and debated the degree to which practitioners accept the role of an ethical conscience.

Haque and Ahmad (2017) addressed ethics in public relations within the advocacy theory. They opined that the proper application of the responsible advocacy theory could help practitioners establish the universal principles and moral values needed in public relations. The study submitted that priority should be given to human dignity over all other materialistic gains and benefits. Proper treatment of every individual involved in this process is necessary for successful public relations. Finally, justice should be maintained so that everyone benefits from public relations.

Jackson and Moloney's work (2019), *Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown: A qualitative study of ethical PR practice in the United Kingdom*, showed how the public relations profession partly drives the dynamics of ethical actions. The study revealed a relationship between ethical practice, social

obligations, truth-telling, and professional bodies in public relations. Findings also show a wide variety of ethical standards within public relations platforms. Many public relations practitioners aspire to be "PR Ethics" consultants, but they cannot solve problems.

It is essential to state that most of the journals found for review purposes were mainly foreign, which necessitated the need to domesticate PR practice. Publishing articles locally is a vital attempt of this domestication. This work epitomizes this attempt.

Theoretical Framework

Deontological Theory

This study's anchor is the deontological theory, associated with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This theory holds that judging an action right or wrong should be based on the intention behind the action rather than the consequences of said action. An action is justified if the person's intention who performed it is good, regardless of the consequences such action may produce, whether good or bad. The theory posits that those who follow duty-based ethics should do the right thing, even if the outcome produces more harm than doing the wrong thing. This theory is concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions. The theory is absolutist in orientation. There are no exceptions to the rules due to their complete emphasis on rules and commitment to duty. To Kant, the idea of duty or obligation is fundamental. Therefore, people have to do the right thing, even if it produces terrible results. Moreover, this theory against approves of using foul means to achieve positive results.

In essence, specific actions can be right without undermining good consequences. The rightness of such actions consists of their instantiating certain norms (here, of permission and not of obligation). Such actions are permitted, not just in the weak sense that there is no obligation not to do them, but also in the strong sense that one is permitted to do them even though they are productive of more minor good consequences than their

alternatives (Moore 2008). Such strongly permitted actions include actions one is obligated to do, but (notably) also included are actions one is not obligated to do.

In a nutshell, this deontological theory leaves space for agents to give particular concern to their families, friends, and projects. Deontological morality, therefore, avoids the overly demanding and alienating aspects of consequentialism and accords more to the conventional notions of our moral duties. Similarly, deontological moralities leave space for the supererogatory. Deontological theory possesses the substantial advantage of accounting for strong, widely shared moral intuitions about our duties.

The deontological system makes the public relations practitioners duty-bound. It means that the public relations practitioner is duty-bound to the profession, colleagues, clients, professional body and thus should do all they can to ethically and actively pursue the requisite standards in the profession

Methodology
The study adopted a cross-sectional survey in its research design for this study. The study was carried out through a structured close-ended questionnaire as the instrument for data collection as part of the research design. The population comprised the registered members of NIPR in Lagos state, Southwest Nigeria. The total is 547 across both private and non-private organizations in Lagos State. This figure is the entire population of all registered public relations practitioners in the Lagos State branch of NIPR. Lagos is one of Nigeria's political subdivisions and the country's economic nerve center, with a population estimated at nearly 20 million people. Several companies – local and foreign – are found there, and most of these companies each have a department designated as public relations. The technique involved a sample random sampling procedure. A total of 240 responded and returned completed copies of the questionnaire. All ethical research issues were addressed, including seeking permission before the

questionnaire was distributed. The items listed in the questionnaire were based on the study's objective.

Analysis

The pre-set level of significance for this study is 0.05. The hypotheses presume a significant relationship between the variables under consideration. If the p-value indicates the significance or the probability value exceeded the pre-set level of significance (P >0.05), the hypothesis stated in the alternate form was rejected. However, the hypothesis was accepted when the P-value was less than or equal to 0.05 (P ≤0.05).

Research hypothesis: There is a significant combined moderating influence/effect of employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Table:1 combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical public relations practice on the professional value

Model Summary						
R	R^2	MSE	F	df1	df2	*p*
0.6108	0.3730	23.9853	202.6872	3.0000	1022.0000	.0000
Model						
Coeff .	**SE**	**T**	**P**	**Pi**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Constant	4.8218	*2.4401*	2.4315	1.1428	10.7210	
Ethical PR Practice	0.2204	*0.05473*	3.6748	**0.0002**	0.1059	0.3348
Professional Values	0.5120	0.2302	2.2240	**0.0243**	0.0603	0.9637
Int_1	0.0052	0.0051	0.0139	-0.0048	0.0152	
R2-Chng						
	F	**df1**	**df2**	***p***	***Beta***	
X*W (Int_1	0.0006	1.0279	1.0000	1022.0000	0.3109	

Source: **Field Survey 2021**

NOTE: **Int_1 = Interaction 1; Int_1 = Ethical PR * Professional Value (X*W) Key: SE= standard error; T= t-Test: LLCI=lower level of the 95% confidence interval; ULCI= upper level of the 95% confidence interval F=. df1 = degree of freedom 1; df2= degree of freedom 2; p**= p-value **Beta= Standardised path coefficient**; **Pi= Percentile** .

The table shows that both ethical public relations practice of employer, client, colleague, society and professional body (B= 0.22, $t(1023)$ =3.78, p<0.001) and public relations practice (B= 0.51, t(1023) =2.22, p<0.001) each significantly influenced professional value. However, the interaction effect of ethical public relations practice of employer, client, colleague, society and professional body and public relations practice on professional value were not significant (B= 0.005, $t(1023)$ =1.01,R^2 change = 0.0006, p>0.05).

This is confirmed with the confidence interval value ranging from -0.0048 to 0.0152 and the R-square change (0.0006), attributable to the interaction below 1 percent. This implies that ethical public relations practice could influence Professional value without the interaction of employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body. Therefore, public relations practice does not moderate the effect/influence determinant factors of ethical public relations practices and professional value. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 2: Combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical public relations practice on the professional value

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	5.533	0.975		5.677	0.000
Employer	0.615	0.102	0.177	6.052	**0.000**
Client	0.557	0.105	0.155	5.306	**0.000**
Colleagues	0.199	0.091	0.059	2.191	**0.029**
Society	0.357	0.109	0.099	3.286	**0.001**
Professional body	0.550	0.110	0.150	5.010	**0.000**
a. Dependent Variable: **Professional values**					

Source: Field Survey 2021

Tables 1 and 2 show the ANOVA and model summary computation and multiple regression analysis. This is about the significance of the combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical public relations practice on professional value. Results indicated that combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical public relations practice on professional value $F_{(8, 1017)} = 56.132$, $p < 0.05$) towards the professional value.

From the relative perspective, employer ($B = 0.615$, $t = 6.052$, $p<0.05$), client ($B = 0.557$, $t = 5.306$, $p<0.05$), Colleagues ($B = 0.199$, $t = 2.191$, $p<0.05$), perceived Society ($B = 0.357$, $t = 3.286$, $p<0.05$), Professional body ($B = 0.550$, $t = 5.010$, $p<0.05$) significantly influence professional value. This is because the model explains 3.01% of variance combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical public relations practice on professional value ($R^2 = 0.301$). This analysis implies that effective management of combined moderating effects/influence of determinants factors of ethical

public relations practice on the professional value.

Findings
The data obtained for the study adequately provided an answer to the research hypothesis. The study's objective was to determine the combined moderating influence/effect of employer, client, colleague, society professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners in the Lagos State of Nigeria. The accompanying is the hypothesis: *There is a significant combined moderating influence/effect of employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners in the Lagos State of Nigeria.*

Therefore, findings showed that all the determinant factors of ethical public relations practice and professional body significantly influenced the professional value. However, all the interaction effects of all the determinant factors of ethical public relations practice were not significant on

professional value. This is confirmed with the confidence interval value, which could be attributed to the interaction below 1 percent. This implies that ethical public relations practice could influence Professional value with the interaction of employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body. Therefore, the combined determinant factors of ethical public relations practice moderately influenced the professional values.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study about Nigeria align with previous outcomes of the combined moderating influence/effect of employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners. Ki, Lee, and Choi (2012) had examined factors affecting the ethical practice of public relations professionals within public relations firms in South Korea. Organizational ethics factors such as the code of ethics, top management support for ethical practice, a prevailing ethical climate, and the association of career success with the ethical

practice were examined. Data collected and analyzed revealed that the presence of an ethical code along with top management support and a non-egoistic ethical climate within public relations firms significantly influenced public relations professionals' ethical practices.

Idid and Arandas (2016) investigated the professional values, ethics, and professionalism of public relations practitioners. The study explored the influence of education, length of service, professionalism, and ethics on the professional values of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. It found out that professionalism and ethics on professional values influenced public relations practitioners. The study also examined whether education and experience influenced professional values through professionalism and code of ethics. Results from this study corroborate this.

Conclusion
and Recommendations

The results of this study about Nigeria are in tandem with findings from the external contexts on the combined moderating effect of the

employer, client, colleague, society, and professional body of ethical public relations practice on professional values among public relations practitioners in the country. These outcomes imply that NIPR begins to educate its members about these outcomes. NIPR and other relevant bodies should escalate the training of their members and employees on both their professional and organizational ethics.

It is on this note that the study recommends the following:

1. The findings of this study indicate the reconceptualize ethical issues in the field of public relations concerning the environment of practice.
2. The profession must be client-oriented, but the pledge is public and is owned by the public. The desired public should be based upon a commitment to the pledge.
3. There should be a constant review of the NIPR code of conduct to meet the socio-economic dynamics.

4. NIPR should consider imposing sanctions on ethical defaulters.

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