Perceptions of ethically ambiguous public relations practices on social media: a view from Zimbabwe

AUTHOR(S)

Anna Klyueva

University of Houston - Clear Lake

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0744-0108

Prisca S. Ngondo

Texas State University

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8339-4751

Abstract

This research explored views on ethically acceptable public relations (PR) practices on social media held by Zimbabwean PR practitioners. There are several distinct findings that provide insight into PR practice and inform future studies on the role of social media in PR in the region. First, Zimbabwean practitioners were not unanimous in their assessment of whether examples of social media practices can be considered ethically acceptable, suggesting that many ethically ambiguous practices are perceived as a norm. Second, Zimbabwean PR practitioners overwhelmingly stressed the need for social media training and organisational policy to engage on social media ethically. Finally, practitioners believed that social media promoted the role and status of PR within organisations and afforded increased control over the reach and impact of organisational messages.

Keywords

Africa, ethical ambiguity, ethically acceptable PR practices, social media, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media use in public relations (PR) heightened not only traditional ethical dilemmas in PR, but also engendered new moral challenges (Jensen, 2011). As organisations rely increasingly more on social media and the internet to engage their publics and build relationships, PR practitioners around the world often disagree on which social media practices are considered ethically acceptable. For example, negative comments on social media (McCorkindale, 2014), undisclosed organisational ghost blogging (Gallicano, Brett & Hopp, 2013), transparency and social responsibility (Curtin, Gallicano & Matthews, 2011), and sponsored content (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully & Ekdale, 2020), are among the most discussed ethical challenges as practitioners around the world exhibit various levels of support for such practices, thus opening up avenues for debating what is or is not acceptable.

Only a handful of studies examined PR practitioners' attitudes toward various morally ambiguous yet common PR practices on social media (Toledano & Avidar, 2016; Toledano & Wolland, 2011; Sebastiao, Zulato & Trindade, 2017). The findings from these studies demonstrate practitioners' lack of appreciation or care for issues related to organisational transparency, truthfulness, and disclosure, leading to Bachmann's

(2019) assertion that the use of social media in public relations in the contest for the attention of publics gives rise to "moral indifference and moral blindness" (pp. 327-328). Thus, studying perceptions of PR practices as ethically acceptable may provide insight into the way PR practitioners generate collective knowledge of the profession and what they consider morally appropriate use of social media. This study was set to investigate the perspectives of PR practitioners in Zimbabwe – an understudied and underrepresented region in PR scholarship – toward various PR practices on social media as they navigate the profession's changing landscape upended by the advances in digital media.

Public relations in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, a former British colony, is a landlocked country in Southern Africa with a population of over 14 million people who speak at least one of 16 official languages, including English (Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, n.d.). Its capital city is Harare, and the economy is predominantly anchored by mining and agriculture. Multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Chevron, Price Waterhouse, Barclays Bank, and British American Tobacco, among others, have offices in Zimbabwe, thus presenting an undeniable opportunity for the PR industry. Zimbabwe is a member of the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

PR practice in Zimbabwe is long established. For example, in 1966, the professional organisation, The Rhodesia Public Relations Institute, was founded (Oksiutycz & Nhedzi, 2018). It was subsequently named the Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations (ZIPR) after Zimbabwe's 1980 independence from Great Britain. More recently, the Institute for Public Relations and Communication (IPRCZ) was established in 2018, and it is the only accrediting body in the country. The organisation offers PR training and awards professional honours to its more than 500 members.

Although the practice of PR in Zimbabwe goes back to its colonial times, Zimbabwe's debut in the PR scholarly agenda is relatively recent. The few studies exploring PR in Zimbabwe investigated corporate social responsibility (Kakava, Mbizi Y Manyeruke, 2013; Masuku & Moyo, 2013), employee engagement (Sibanda, Muchena & Ncube, 2014), PR practice and journalism (Muchena, 2017; 2018), the communication industry (Oksiutycz & Nhedzi, 2018), practitioners' digital media use (Ngondo, 2019), and PR roles (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020), among others.

While Zimbabwe has PR practitioners working in various fields, its standalone PR degree programmes are still in development (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). This is reflected by the workforce that consists of PR professionals from assorted educational backgrounds, such as journalism and marketing (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020), which introduces a set of diverse ethical considerations.

Ethics in PR and social media

Social media ethics have been discussed under the umbrella of traditional PR ethics, which the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2006) defined as "a set of a priori principles, beliefs and values that should be followed by all who engage in public relations practice." Most organisations provide ethical guidelines and values as part of their operating procedures. For example, in North America, PR ethics have been defined by the U.S.-based professional organisation Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which put forth its first Code of Ethics guidelines in 1950 (PRSA, n.d.), later complemented by the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) ethics and social media position paper (PRSA, n.d.). The six professional values include honesty, expertise, loyalty, fairness, independence and advocacy. Although not enforceable, a PRSA member would be violating the code of ethics if they lied by omission, used front groups, failed to correct inaccurate information or spread malicious rumours, for example. BEPS' overall approach to ethical social media practices states:

> Public relations professionals understand that trust is the ultimate currency of social media. In order to enhance trust, build positive relationships, and support a free and informed democratic society, the specific portions of the PRSA Code of Ethics as cited here are clearly understood and embraced in the use of all digital and social media (PRSA, n.d.).

Conversely, the Institute of Public Relations and Communication Zimbabwe (IPRCZ) does not provide a code or definition of ethics, but rather lists ethics as part of its values which include integrity, respect, diversity and inclusion, and transparency and honesty (IPRCZ, n.d.). More broadly, The Global Alliance, headquartered in Switzerland with hubs in Kenya, the U.S., Indonesia, Portugal, and Brazil, offers a more prescriptive code of ethics via Global Principles of Ethical Practice in Public Relations and Communications. These principles encompass advocacy, disclosure, honesty, integrity, expertise, and loyalty (Global Alliance, n. d.).

Different approaches to defining standards of ethical professional PR practice make it difficult to agree on what can be considered ethical behaviour on social media. Verwey, Benecke and Muir (2017), suggested that instead of focusing on professional codes of ethics, practitioners need to focus on personal moral accountability by developing knowledge and awareness of socio-cultural values around them and sharpening their ability to reason within those values. To explicate Zimbabwean PR practitioners' implicit stance on personal moral accountability in relation to various practices on social media, this study is set to explore their views and opinions regarding different debatable social media practices. There is a scarcity of research on how PR practitioners interact with new media in Zimbabwe, and this exploratory research strives to contribute to our knowledge of how Zimbabwean PR practitioners navigate the challenges of ethical social media communication and understand their responsibility for ethical communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceptions of what is ethically acceptable on social media may differ from practice to practice and country to country (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). Verwey et al. (2017) argued that ethical decision-making in PR is poly-contextual, requiring practitioners to take into consideration multiple perspectives and understand the complex realities of a particular situation. The poly-contextual view of PR practice recognises that "emergent knowing stems from the places people hold, and from where they create meaning and make collective knowledge" (p. 74). This is particularly relevant for PR practice on social media and for contexts and places where PR is in the early stages of professionalisation, such as Zimbabwe. In what follows, we discuss research that addresses the impact of social media on PR, perspectives on what is considered ethically acceptable on social media, and the importance of training for dealing with ethical dilemmas brought on by social media use.

Social media and public relations practice

Social media has revolutionised the communication industry and the way we practice PR, as well as advertising, journalism and politics (Kent & Li, 2020). The use of social media by organisations has grown significantly since 2004, when Facebook first entered our lives, with trends pointing to an ever-changing media environment, an emphasis on visual communication, and an overall increasing dependence of companies on digital media to communicate (Barnes, Lescault & Holmes, 2015). Today, organisations often rely on such popular social media platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, among others (Quesenberry, 2020). These platforms are globally accessible and are utilised by practitioners across various countries and continents. For example, Navarro, Moreno and Zerfass (2017) reported that although Latin American professionals adopt social media at a slower pace than their peers in the Asia Pacific and Europe, they still exhibit significant interest in using major social media platforms. In Africa, social media use by PR practitioners is also on the rise. For example, Duffett (2017) found that social media usage among younger Africans has facilitated the growth of e-commerce and social media marketing, and Ngondo (2019) reported that Zimbabwean communication professionals believed that social media had enhanced their strategies and tactics. The practitioners listed Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube, and Instagram as the platforms utilised most.

The rise of social media affected everything from PR practice to research and scholarship. Edelman (2013, n.p.) argued that social media "fundamentally changed the nature of how we do what we do", suggesting that organisations no longer own the discussions, but rather contribute to them. Social media has created an uninterrupted flow of communication between an organisation and its stakeholders,

enabling two-way communication with a focus on engagement and relationship-building. Social media have provided not only new avenues and tactics for disseminating organisational messages but also posed new moral challenges, introducing new responsibilities and roles for practitioners and requiring new skills and experiences for PR practitioners to be effective (Hagelstein, Einwiller & Zerfass, 2021). DiStaso and Bortree (2014) argued that using social media effectively requires careful ethical consideration, specifically if the goal is to build and maintain relationships between the organisation and its publics.

The constant need to communicate and engage ethically and responsibly elevated PR practitioners' position within organisations, emphasising their skillset. In addition, access to social media improved the spread and impact of organisational messages (Hagelstein et al., 2021). In their research of practitioners in New Zealand and Israel, Toledano and Avidar (2016) found that most practitioners agree that social media offers more control over message distribution as well as boosts PR practitioners' value to the organisation's management, particularly when dealing with ethical dilemmas on social media.

In Zimbabwe, Ngondo (2019) examined Zimbabwean PR practitioners' use of digital and social media and discovered that the development of new media had altered their communication practices, mainly how they handle external and internal communication. Fifty-two percent of the PR professionals reported spending half their time working on blogs and social media. The respondents also felt that as PR practitioners, they should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing all aspects of the organisation's digital communication (Ngondo, 2019). Consequently, exploring Zimbabwean practitioners' views on how social media impacts their PR practice contributes to the growing body of knowledge on industry-defining shifts around the world.

PR in social media spaces: Challenges and ethically acceptable practices

Technological advancements have forced PR practitioners to reimagine their roles as boundary spanners and develop multiple approaches to deal with challenges and tensions that may arise (Verwey, 2015), such as ethical dilemmas on social media. Hagelstein et al. (2021) reported that practitioners today encounter more moral challenges in their day-to-day work than they have before. As PR practitioners' purview continues to expand into digital media, the importance of social media ethics has become even more crucial (Ngondo, 2019; Wright & Hinson, 2012). For example, Neill and Drumright (2012) observed that PR professionals are often tasked with being the company's ethics counsellors. Individually, PR practitioners face having to make professional ethical decisions on behalf of the company while also counselling the organisation on ethical, responsible, and sustainable conduct (Grunig, 2014). To help scholars and practitioners navigate the dynamic media landscape, Bowen (2013) put forth ethical guidelines for social media. Guided by Kant's normative moral theory and vetted by social media scholars, some of these guidelines state: *avoid deception, be transparent, clearly identify and verify sources and data, disclose, and build trust.* These principles resonate and overlap with the PRSA's and IPRCZ's principles, as the standards for ethical practice in social media often come from traditional PR values and include issues of trust, transparency, social responsibility, and symmetric communication.

Previous research on PR in the digital environment examined assorted issues of digital PR ethics. While examining overlapping issues, the findings are quite diverse and divergent, specifically in relation to issues such as ghost blogging, lack of transparency, disclosure of sponsored content, and deception and dissemination of deceptive content through front groups, bots and trolls. As an example of deceptive practice, in South Africa, the British-based PR firm Bell Pottinger breached the UK-based Public Relations and Communications Association's (PRCA) code of conduct while working for its client Oakbay Investments owned by the Gupta family (Segal, 2018). Using more than 100 fake Twitter accounts with roughly 220,000 tweets, hate-filled websites and other media platforms, Bell Pottinger spearheaded the 2016 digital smear campaign with the intent of racially dividing the country to boost President Zuma's and the Gupta family's popularity. The campaign spread "a highly toxic narrative, namely that whites in South Africa had seized resources and wealth while they deprived blacks of education and jobs" (Segal, 2018: para. 5).

Ghost blogging is another ethically questionable PR practice. Gallicano et al. (2013), in their survey

of PR practitioners, discovered that there is a general agreement among practitioners supporting undisclosed organisational ghost blogging. However, Langette (2013) advocated for a dialogic approach to blogger outreach ethics to facilitate dialogic civility after examining the practitioner-blogger relationship discourse. In Zimbabwe, these practices are not sufficiently researched, although according to Ngondo (2019), 94% of PR practitioners engage in blogging activities and are active on social media.

The issues of transparency, honesty and disclosure represent another set of shared concerns of PR practice on social media. Curtin et al. (2011) showed that in the organisation-employee relationship, millennials value transparency, well-defined ethical rules, and companies that practice what they preach in social responsibility. According to McCorkindale (2014), handling negative comments is one of the biggest ethical challenges reported by PR practitioners, such as the dilemma of whether to delete them and how to deal with subsequent reactions to the organisational response. Simultaneously, however, practitioners commonly misuse and abuse Wikipedia as a public source of information for the benefit of their organisations (DiStaso & Messner, 2010).

Sponsored content is another social media practice ridden with ethical dilemmas. For example, New Zealand and Israeli practitioners identified the use of fake identities in comments, payments to bloggers, and payments to social media experts for smear campaigns among the major challenges for PR ethics on social media. However, some practitioners from both countries accepted these practices as part of the current reality of working in PR, and not all practitioners deemed using disclaimers about message sponsors as a universal ethical tool. According to Ikonen, Luomo-Aho and Bowen (2017), the practice of sponsored content, while growing in popularity, still does not have a set of agreed-upon ethical principles to guide the practice, which threatens the strategic benefit of sponsored content for organisations. Wellman et al. (2020) examined social media influencers' use of sponsored content and found that the concept of authenticity is used as an ethical framework premised on being true to one's identity and one's audience.

Toledano and Avidar (2016) argued that despite extensive scholarship on PR ethics and social media, there is still very little written on practitioners' attitudes and perceptions of ethical behaviours from various socio-cultural perspectives. Research demonstrated that perceptions and understanding of ethically acceptable practices may differ from country to country. Tsetsura and Kruckeberg (2017) investigated the issue of media transparency in the context of the PR-journalism relationship and also reported that the perceptions of transparency differ by country. They argued that lack of transparency is among the main ethical challenges of PR, particularly in developing nations such as Zimbabwe.

DiStaso and Bortree (2014: xxvi) stressed that "ulterior motives in social media are easily discovered and organisations have a responsibility to be open with their social media stakeholders." Therefore, social media should be handled with the utmost ethical care, especially when engaging in ghost blogging, handling negative comments, engaging in a practice of sponsored content, handling diverse audiences, and dealing with issues of disclosure, etc., so that the organisation's actions mirror its concern and value for the public and the relationship (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014). It thus follows that the need and desire to understand how these ethical challenges are perceived by Zimbabwean PR practitioners informed our research questions and study design.

Professional education and training for social media

Engaging in ethical practices and recognising unethical ones is often influenced by one's personal, professional and educational experiences. According to the study of Hagelstein et al. (2021), 65.6% (n=1525) of the surveyed European PR practitioners reported either taking outdated ethics courses, having no ethics training or insufficient training. L'Etang (2003) and Bowen (2008) surveyed PR professionals and found that being the organisation's conscience was a part of their self-identity, but only a handful of practitioners reported having the educational background or theoretical tools needed to fulfil this role. Instead, most of the practitioners relied on their personal values and beliefs to identify and tackle moral dilemmas. Hagelstein et al. (2021) suggested that a lack of formal education may drive a PR professional's perception of ethically acceptable or ethically ambiguous PR practices on social media. The researchers

argued that ethics courses were fundamental during and after formal academic training, as they can help practitioners handle ethical challenges more effectively (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

Although professional organisations such as IPRA and the ZIPR have existed since the late 1960s, formal PR education and training in Zimbabwe are still sparse and/or nonexistent. To date, no Zimbabwean university offers PR as a full qualification, and there is only one accrediting body, IPRCZ, that was established in 2018. The PR labour force consists of professionals coming from different fields and with various professional and educational backgrounds, such as marketing and journalism (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). Most PR practitioners in Zimbabwe receive training via on-the-job training, postgraduate diplomas offered by ZIPR (Muchena, 2017), or training programmes offered by South African companies that cover topics such as media relations, speech writing, social media management, and PR management (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). Investigating practitioners' perceptions of the need for social media training will provide valuable insight for professional organisations, as well as a rationale for more research and training development.

Considering the purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of Zimbabwean PR practitioners toward various PR practices on social media, we posed the following research questions:

1. According to Zimbabwean PR practitioners, how does social media impact PR practice?
2. What social media practices are considered ethically acceptable by Zimbabwean PR practitioners?
3. According to Zimbabwean PR practitioners, how does social media facilitate the need for social media training?

METHOD

Data collection

The study surveyed 402 media, communication, and marketing professionals whose duties include practising public relations in Zimbabwe. Participants were recruited in the summer of 2018 to participate in the study through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Those who completed the questionnaire were offered a USD$15 incentive to cover Internet usage costs, which they could claim after being redirected to a separate page. Eligibility for study participation was determined through a screening question that asked, "In your current role, do you practice public relations (PR) or PR-related activities in Zimbabwe?" As a result, 55 surveys were discarded. Of the 347 remaining questionnaires, 245 were found usable for analysis due to their completeness.

Instrument

Questions for the survey were drawn from various PR literature on social media and ethical issues (Ngondo, 2019; Toledano & Avidar, 2016). Specifically, we adapted 13 five-point Likert-type questions developed by Toledano and Avidar (2016) to capture PR practitioners' attitudes to various ethically acceptable or not-acceptable social media practices. Responses were coded so that the higher value indicated support for the statement, meaning that the PR practitioner indeed agreed with the statement (see Table 1 for a complete list of items). The survey also contained a series of questions about social media use by Zimbabwean PR practitioners.

In addition, the survey asked questions about participants' professional, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, the researchers sought information about the participants' gender, age, level of education and major, type of employer, industry, working experience in PR, experience before PR career, and membership in professional organisations. To ensure that the instrument was appropriately localised and contextualised, the researchers consulted with three Zimbabwean PR practitioners to check terminology related to job titles, professional organisations, industry fields, etc.

Data Analysis

The data were processed and analysed using SPSS. Five questions with examples of social media practices were reverse coded so that the higher value indicated agreement with the statement (see Table

1, designated with the letter "R"). For example, a statement that sounded like, "It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without identifying their real identity," was re-coded to mean, "It is NOT ok."

To answer the posed research questions, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were run to calculate the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. We used Cohen's (1988) guidelines to interpret the magnitude of a correlation as well as power, where r < 0.29 indicated a small correlation (small effect), r <0.49 a medium correlation (medium effect), and r >0.50 a strong correlation (strong effect). Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumption of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. The results of the analyses are reported in the next section.

RESULTS

To examine PR practitioners' perceptions of ethically acceptable practices on social media, we first looked at the types of social media platforms they accessed most frequently for work-related reasons. For the purpose of this study, we focused on five top public-facing (excluding private, messenger-based platforms) social media platforms by the number of users (Statista, 2019). The majority of respondents reported accessing the five social media platforms on a regular basis. Specifically, 85.4% (*n*=200) of respondents reported accessing Facebook frequently or very frequently, while only 8.1% (*n*=19) reported doing so infrequently or very infrequently. About 6.4% (*n*=15) of individuals accessed it occasionally. A similar breakdown of responses was observed for Twitter and YouTube, another two platforms accessed either frequently or very frequently by Zimbabwean PR practitioners (72.6%, *n*=164, and 76.6%, *n*=173, respectively; see Figure 1). A noteworthy observation can be made about practitioners' use of Instagram, a platform that reportedly was accessed less regularly than Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. About 27.7% (*n*=66) of respondents said they accessed Instagram either very infrequently or infrequently, the highest reported percentage when compared to Facebook (8.1%; *n*=19), YouTube (11.9%; *n*=27), Twitter (19.5%; *n*=44), and LinkedIn (20.6%; *n*=47).
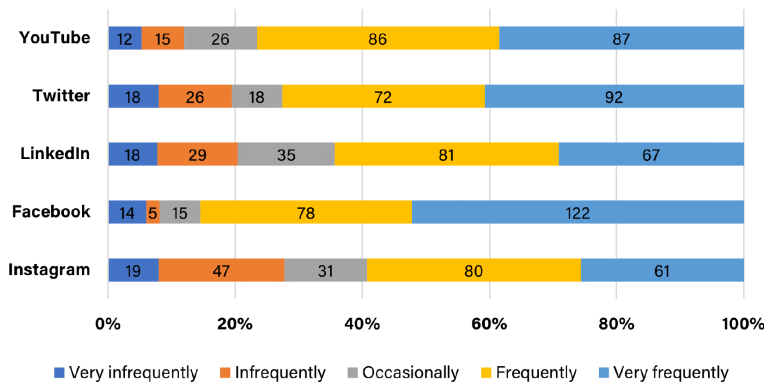

Figure 1: Frequency of access to social media platforms reported by practitioners.

Social media and public relations in Zimbabwe

PR practitioners overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed (85.1%, *n*=206) that social media promoted a status elevation of the PR function in organisations and inspired more socially responsible and ethical decisions. Similarly, the majority of respondents (76.5%, *n*=186) reported agreement with the statement that social media had improved their control over message distribution (see Figure 2).

Further, the access by PR practitioners to one of the major social media platforms was highly correlated with their accessing all other platforms (see Table 2). In addition, practitioners' use of Instagram (*r*=.196, *n*=238, p<.01), Twitter (*r*=.163, *n*=230, p<.05), and LinkedIn (*r*=.168, *n*=226, p<.05) was associated with their perception of improved control over the distribution of organizational messages. Interestingly,

Facebook and YouTube were not correlated with increased control.

Furthermore, practitioners' perception that social media elevated the status of PR within organisations was positively correlated with their use of all major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube, see Table 2), suggesting that their work with social media as part of their job duties prompted them to believe that the status of the PR function was becoming more important thanks to social media.

Table 1: Perceptions of practitioners on ethically acceptable SM practices, adapted from Toledano and Avidar (2016)

	N	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
A PR practitioner who knows about corruption in the organisation should act as a whistle-blower and put the public interest first.	243	14 (5.8%)	42 (17.3%)	56 (23%)	81 (33.3%)	50 (20.6%)
I find it difficult to write blogs on behalf of CEOs because social media requires authentic voices.	242	14 (5.8%)	47 (19.4%)	68 (28.1%)	82 (33.9%)	31 (12.8%)
Best practice requires a disclaimer by all bloggers and PR practitioners if they are paid or rewarded by an organisation for delivering a specific message.	244	14 (5.7%)	27 (11.1%)	64 (26.2%)	114 (46.7%)	25 (10.2%)
It is NOT ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without identifying their real identity. (R)	243	21 (8.6%)	83 (34.2%)	41 (16.9%)	81 (33.3%)	17 (7%)
It is NOT ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it. (R)	243	13 (5.3%)	57 (23.5%)	49 (20.2%)	99 (40.7%)	25 (10.3%)
It is NOT ok to pay to bloggers to deliver the organisation's or client's message just because everybody is doing it. (R)	240	9 (3.8%)	57 (23.8%)	58 (24.2%)	82 (34.2%)	34 (14.2%)
It is NOT ok to pay social media experts for distributing rumors and negative messages about organisations that compete with my employer or client. (R)	242	3 (1.2%)	16 (6.6%)	22 (9.1%)	72 (29.8%)	129 (53.3%)
I would NOT create an activist group to support my employer or client's interests and pay them to post our side of the story on social media. (R)	243	10 (4.1%)	54 (22.2%)	37 (15.2%)	100 (41.2%)	42 (17.3%)
Social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organisations they serve	243	7 (2.9%)	23 (9.5%)	27 (11.1%)	124 (51%)	62 (25.5%)
Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organisation and inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions.	242	3 (1.2%)	4 (1.7%)	29 (12%)	132 (54.5%)	74 (30.6%)
I am well trained to deal with ethical issues relating to organisational communication on social media.	243	5 (2.1%)	21 (8.6%)	30 (12.3%)	134 (55.1%)	53 (21.8%)
PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organisation's ethical conduct on social media: train and guide employees and management.	244	3 (1.2%)	5 (2%)	11 (4.5%)	118 (48.4%)	107 (43.9%)
Each organisation should publish a policy to instruct employees on their communication on social media.	245	5 (2%)	19 (7.8%)	27 (11%)	108 (44.1%)	86 (35.1%)

Table 2: Social media platforms and PR impact

|		n	M	SD	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A	Social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organisations they serve.	243	3.87	.995	1						
B	Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organisation and inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions.	242	4.12	.770	.389**	1					
C	Facebook	234	4.24	1.08	.098	154*	1				
D	Instagram	238	3.49	1.28	.196**	.241**	.309**	1			
E	LinkedIn	230	3.65	1.24	.163*	.192**	.397**	.337**	1		
F	Twitter	226	3.86	1.28	.168*	.246**	.512**	.293**	.422**	1	
G	YouTube	226	3.98	1.12	.104	.240**	.459**	.354**	.366**	.466**	1

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$
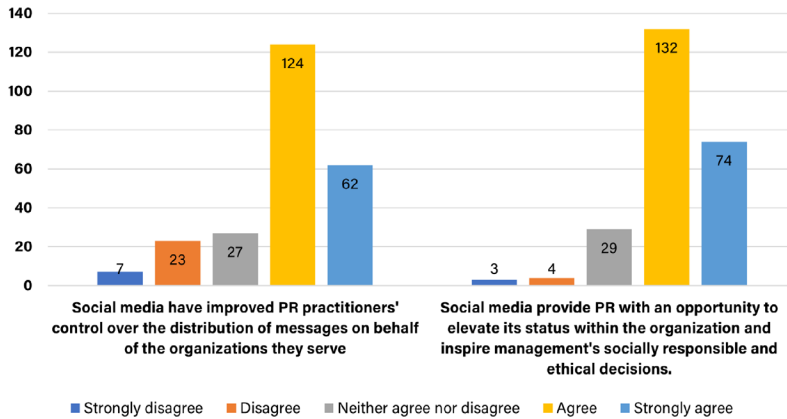
Figure 2: Social Media's Impact on Public Relations

Ethically acceptable and ethically ambiguous social media practices

Zimbabwean PR practitioners' opinions on ethically acceptable and not-acceptable practices varied greatly, with some practices receiving more support as ethically acceptable. In contrast, others were largely placed in a grey area, rendering them ethically ambiguous as none of the examples of social media practices was rejected unequivocally (see Figure 3).

When asked about their perceptions of various activities on social media, Zimbabwean communication professionals reported strong disagreement with several social media practices as ethically acceptable. For example, PR practitioners overwhelmingly indicated that paying social media experts to spread rumours and negative messages about peer organisations or competitors was not OK. About 83.1% (n=201) of respondents showed support for the statement, with only 7.9% (n=16) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and 9% (n=22) showing ambivalence. Similarly, the majority of PR practitioners (58.2%, n=142) reported that they agreed that the practice of creating an activist group and paying them to post messages in support of the client's interests was ethically not acceptable. However, about 26.3% (n=64) disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting such a practice was ethically ambiguous and could be considered acceptable by some.

As illustrated by Figure 3, other statements representing ethically questionable practices (Toledano & Avidar, 2016) generated a more dispersed range of responses. For example, more respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (42.8%, n=104) with the statement that it was not OK for PR practitioners to comment on social media without identifying their real identity than those who agreed or strongly agreed (40.3%, n=98). Further, while 57% (n=139) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with a statement that best practice required them to provide a disclaimer on a message when the message was being paid for, 43% (n=105) showed ambivalence or disagreement with the statement. Practitioners were also not unanimous on whether it was challenging to write ghost blogs for CEOs due to authenticity concerns. In this case, the majority of respondents (53.3%, n=129) expressed their disagreement or hesitation toward the statement, while 46.7% (n=113) agreed or strongly agreed with it. Similarly, almost half of the practitioners disagreed or were uncertain (46.1%, n=112) about the statement that a PR practitioner must put the public interest first and act as a whistle-blower when they know about corruption in the organisation. Still, 53.9% (n=129) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.
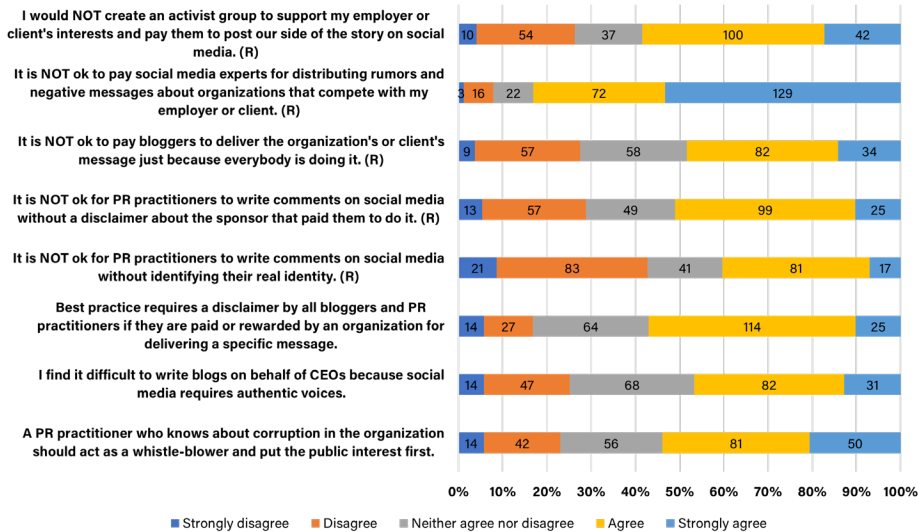
Figure 3: Statements describing ethically acceptable and not-acceptable practices

A similar divide was observed in relation to the statement asking whether it is not OK for practitioners to comment on social media without providing a disclaimer about their sponsor. Expressly, 51% (*n*=124) agreed and strongly agreed, while 49% (*n*=119) disagreed, strongly disagreed, or were uncertain about such practices. Practitioners were also not united in their agreement about whether it was unacceptable to pay bloggers to deliver the organisation's message. While more respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (48.3%, *n*=116) than those who disagreed or strongly disagreed (27.5%, *n*=66), there was a considerable number of respondents (24.2%, *n*=58) that were indecisive.

Social Media Training

We also investigated the relationship between the use of social media platforms and the need for social media training. Zimbabwean PR practitioners clearly indicated a need for social media training and policy.

For example, there was strong support for the statement that PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organisation's ethical conduct on social media and, therefore, train and guide employees and management. Specifically, 92.3% (*n*=225) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while only 3.2% (*n*=8) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, practitioners agreed and strongly agreed (79.2%, *n*=196) that organisations should have a policy instructing employees on how to communicate on social media. At the same time, 9.8% (*n*=24) disagreed and strongly disagreed, while 11% (*n*=27) were uncertain. Importantly, the majority of respondents (76.9%, *n*=187) also indicated that they were well-trained to deal with ethical issues relating to organisational communication on social media, agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. However, a considerable number of practitioners indicated ambivalence (12.3%, *n*=30) or disagreed and strongly disagreed (10.7%, *n*=26).

We observed a moderate correlation between practitioners suggesting that they were well-trained to deal with ethical issues on social media and the need to train and guide employees to engage in ethical conduct on social media, *r*=.326, *n*=244, p<.001. In other words, individuals who believed they were better trained, also believed in the need for more training. Similarly, practitioners who supported having a policy on social media conduct for employees also supported more social media training, *r*=.284, *n*=245, p<.001.

Further, we observed a set of positive small to moderate correlations (see Table 5) between the frequency of access to such social media platforms as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube and Zimbabwean practitioners' assertion that they were well-trained to deal with ethical issues on social media, their belief in the need for social media training and the need for social media policy. The

association between the use of LinkedIn and support for a policy to guide employees on social media was the highest (*r*=.340, *n*=230, p<.001). Interestingly, YouTube was the only platform that showed no correlation between the need for social media policy and practitioners' frequency of access to it.
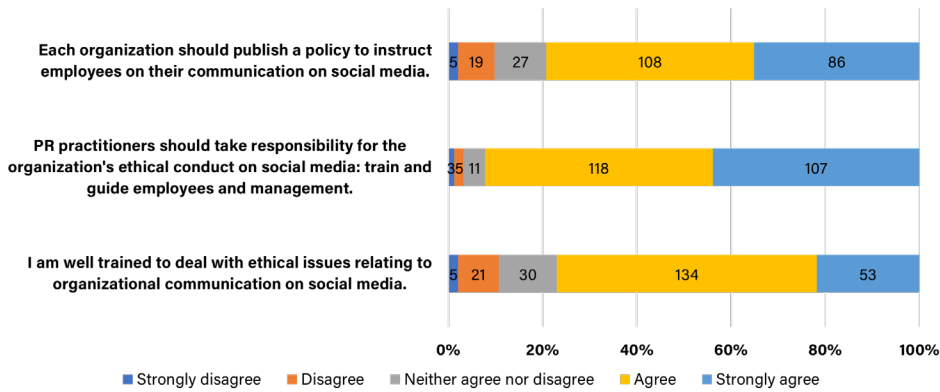

Figure 4: Social media platforms and training

Table 3: Social media platforms and social media training

		n	M	SD	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
A	I am well trained to deal with ethical issues relating to organisational communication on social media	243	3.86	.925	1							
B	PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organisation's ethical conduct on social media: train and guide employees and management	244	4.32	.761	.326**	1						
C	Each organisation should publish a policy to instruct employees on their communication on social media	245	4.02	.979	.119	.284**	1					
D	Facebook	234	4.24	1.08	.162*	.226**	.200**	1				
E	Instagram	238	3.49	1.28	.178**	.199**	.194**	.309**	1			
F	LinkedIn	230	3.65	1.24	.278**	.228**	.340**	.397**	.337**	1		
G	Twitter	226	3.86	1.28	.185**	.245**	.229**	.512**	.293**	.446**	1	
H	YouTube	226	3.98	1.12	.133*	.167*	.123	.459**	.354**	.366**	.446**	1

* p< .05   **p<.01

DISCUSSION

Through our research of PR in Zimbabwe, we addressed three main areas. First, we investigated the role of social media in changing the PR function within organisations. Second, we explored perceptions of ethically ambiguous practices on social media held by Zimbabwean PR practitioners (based on research by Toledano and Avidar (2016)). Third, we looked at how PR practitioners' reliance on social media called for more training.

There are several distinct findings that could inform PR practice and future studies on the role of social media in PR. The main observation from the study was that practitioners were not unanimous in their assessment of whether examples of social media practices can be considered ethically acceptable, suggesting that many ethically ambiguous practices were the norm. However, Zimbabwean PR practitioners overwhelmingly stressed the need for social media training and organisational policy to

engage in transparent social media practices. Finally, practitioners' use of all major social media platforms corresponded to their perception that social media promoted the role of PR within organisations.

Social media and public relations in Zimbabwe

In a 2018 Voice of America Zimbabwe poll, 52% of Zimbabweans said they get their news from social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook, and 32.5% found social media to be a reliable news source (as cited by Sengere, 2018). With more Zimbabweans making use of the real-time interaction of social media, it had become a fundamental tool for professional communicators.

Due to its potential to influence public discourse and opinions, social media offers organisations and their publics opportunities to engage in meaningful ways. Our findings supported previous research that argued that access to social media improved the spread and impact of organisational messages (Hagelstein et al., 2021). We found that Zimbabwean practitioners mostly agreed with such an assertion. Practitioners who specifically used Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn tended to believe that social media improved their control over message distribution. Interestingly, the use of Facebook and YouTube did not indicate such a relationship. This finding showed that the nature and capabilities of a social media platform affect practitioners' perception of control. Future studies should explore further how various platforms afford various levels of control to PR practitioners.

Previous research also demonstrated that social media had expanded opportunities for organisational messages' impact and spread, as a result introducing new roles, duties and skills for PR practitioners (Hagelstein et al., 2021). The findings of this study revealed that Zimbabwean PR practitioners believe that social media helps advance the position of PR within the organisation, supporting similar findings from New Zealand and Israel (Toledano & Avidar, 2016) and cementing the argument that social media had fundamentally altered not only how practitioners practice PR today, but also the newfound value of PR to organisations all over the world. PR practitioners are becoming the go-to professionals under pressure of the constant need to communicate and engage ethically and responsibly on social media. Such an observation provides future directions for scholars to explore.

Ethically Acceptable and Ethically Ambiguous Social Media Practices

Given PR's elevated role in organisations, how do PR practitioners navigate the ethical dilemmas associated with the use of social media? We explored whether Zimbabwean PR practitioners perceived various commonplace PR practices on social media as ethically acceptable or ethically ambiguous. Consistent with previous research by Toledano and Avidar (2016), practitioners' perceptions of practices varied greatly, as evidenced by the dispersed range of answers, indicating that practices that brought forward issues such as lack of transparency, disclosure of sponsored content, and dissemination of deceptive content remained ethically ambiguous. In other words, what is considered ethically acceptable and vice versa on social media is not black or white. For example, we observed varying perceptions of social media practices related to the issue of transparency. While PR practitioners exhibited some support for providing a disclaimer for a paid message or comments on social media, they were ambivalent about whether it was unethical to leave anonymous comments on behalf of their clients, pay bloggers to deliver the organisation's messages or pay social media experts to disseminate deceptive content such as rumours or negative messages about their competitors. At the same time, more practitioners than not demonstrated support for the statement that suggested that practitioners should act as whistle-blowers and put the public interest first. Similarly, a majority of practitioners agreed that ghost blogging on behalf of CEOs was difficult because it requires authentic voices, supporting the earlier findings of Wellman et al. (2020) that authenticity is used as a value to guide ethical decision-making.

The lack of agreement on what is acceptable on social media for PR practitioners presents a unique challenge. The academic and professional PR community needs additional insight to dissect ethical approaches to PR practices on social media. Diverse and dispersed reactions to statements from practitioners, largely indicating ambivalence, point to the normalisation of ethical ambiguity of many PR practices on social media. It appears that ethical ambiguity is normalised through practitioners' lack of

commitment to reject certain practices that may violate principles of transparency, disclosure, and/or are deceptive. Social media audiences expect consistent, accurate, and engaging communication, forcing practitioners to reassess traditional professional values and question what practices are considered ethically acceptable. Our findings suggest that social media use by PR practitioners normalised ethical ambiguity as practitioners fight for the attention of the online publics, echoing Bachman's (2019) concern that it may breed "moral indifference" or "moral blindness" (pp. 327-328). The variability of responses in our study of Zimbabwe, but also in Toledano and Avidar's (2016) study of New Zealand and Israel, points to practitioners not subscribing strictly to professional values and standards, which are not necessarily qualified as unethical. Certain activities are practised in specific socio-cultural contexts and based on lived experiences (Verwey et al., 2017). Future research needs to investigate further which professional and personal ethical values Zimbabwean PR practitioners apply in practice and how they guide their ethical decision-making.

From a practical standpoint, findings from this study encourage PR practitioners to recognise risks to their own organisations associated with communicating with stakeholders on social media. As Bowen (2013) argued, greater ethical wisdom and careful judgment are now needed to communicate ethically on and through social media. The digital media environment altered our understanding of PR ethics significantly, opening up avenues for different perspectives and encouraging practitioners to embrace values like transparency, trust and authenticity, dignity and respect, and shared interest in accuracy. Further, the ability of anyone to communicate easily with millions of people via social media has forced the responsibility for ethical communication to the level of the individual communicator (Bowen, 2013). Thus, ethical ambiguity is practised at the level of individual communicators and reflects the individual communicator's stance on personal moral accountability, which could potentially be mitigated through more training and education.

The need for social media training and policy

The need for dedicated PR training in Zimbabwe continues to be an issue and was reinforced by the respondents. Zimbabwean PR practitioners clearly indicated a need for social media training and policy. Interestingly, individuals who believed they were rather well-trained also believed in the need for more training. Practitioners who reported some level of training and their readiness to deal with social media-related challenges were more likely to state the need for more training. Similarly, practitioners who supported having a policy on social media conduct for employees also supported more social media training. These findings resonate with previous research that suggested that professional education and training are linked to improved ethical PR practices on social media (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

Importantly, Zimbabwean PR practitioners seem to recognise the importance of ongoing professional development in the context of an ever-changing social media landscape. The IPRCZ and ZIPR should take heed and include social media ethics in their coursework offerings if they are not doing so already. Moreover, universities across the country may want to consider establishing standalone PR degrees, which will lay the groundwork for best practice for practitioners. Professional institutes such as IPRCZ may consider partnering with universities across Zimbabwe so they can train and prepare students before they enter the PR industry. This could be instrumental in avoiding a downfall in social media ethics that could damage the organisation's and the practitioner's reputation, as Bowen (2013) warned.

CONCLUSION

Discussions of PR ethics are often framed in relation to how people do their jobs. PR practitioners engaging in ethically ambiguous practices on social media that violate professional values unavoidably normalise them. However, one of the main applied takeaways from this study is that Zimbabwean PR practitioners want more professional training that may help offset the trend. As Bowen (2013: 1) argued, "the ethics and values of individual practitioners are not enough to serve the public interest in a responsible way; the field of public relations must support idealistic values such as contributing to informed debate, developing mutual understanding, and using collaboration to work for societal good". The results from this study may

inform not only best practice, but also provide a foundation for developing a social media code of ethics to assist professionals and scholars in navigating this ever-evolving, unregulated space, thus improving our understanding of the morphing standards of PR ethics on social media around the globe.

Limitations

While this study has limitations, these limitations may inform directions for future research. First, while quantitative survey methodology provides broad insights to understand general patterns of PR practice in Zimbabwe, qualitative approaches in future studies may provide richer data to understand the phenomenon of normalised ethical ambiguity in relation to PR practices on social media. Second, the survey instrument was borrowed from a previously published study, with some questions formulated as double-barrelled. Despite this flow, the obtained results were consistent with results from Toledano and Avidar's study (2016), lending a certain level of reliability to the survey instrument. Third, the data was collected before the rise of Artificial Intelligence and TikTok, which are not addressed in this study. Fourth, it is important to stress that the reseachers relied on snowball sampling to recruit participants; therefore, these results cannot be generalised to all PR professionals in Zimbabwe. Finally, the data is based on respondents' self-reporting, with some possibly misrepresenting their job functions and social media use. Despite these limitations, the study provides a series of valuable insights into whether and to what extent Zimbabwean practitioners perceive commonplace PR practices on social media as ethically acceptable.

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