

Ethical challenges in an evolving digital communication era: coping resources and ethics trainings in corporate communications

Ethical
challenges in
digital
communication

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Abstract

Purpose – This study is motivated to investigate the ethical challenges facing public relations professionals in today's digital communication environment. Specifically, the authors focused the research on the new ethical challenges in digital practice, the resources relied on when encountering ethical challenges and public relations professionals' efforts in seeking trainings on communication ethics.

Design/methodology/approach – An international online survey was designed and conducted in Canada and the USA. The final sample includes 1,046 respondents working full time in the profession of public relations and communication. In addition, the authors prespecified several demographic quotas in sampling design in order to recruit a more representative sample.

Findings – The research found nearly 60% of surveyed professionals reported that they faced ethical challenges in their day-to-day work, and there is a wide range of ethical challenges in digital practices. Results also revealed that professionals use various resources to deal with ethical issues. Those resources include ethical codes of practice of professional associations, ethical guidelines of their organizations and their personal values and beliefs. As common as experiencing ethical challenges, over 85% of surveyed professionals reported that they have participated in communication ethics training. However, only 30% of participants indicated that their ethics training took place in the past year.

Originality/value – The research provides solid evidence that the digital communication environment generates more ethical challenges, while it creates new ways of delivering content in corporate communications. Professional associations and organizations shall dedicate efforts in providing timely ethics training to PR professionals at all levels of leadership within and beyond corporate communications.

Keywords Ethics, Digital communication, Coping, Ethics training, Public relations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Given the fact that many recent scandals happened in corporate America and the political realm, human beings have been concerned with the ethics of leaders and their moral development. Under the combined influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial unrest,



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the need and the interest in exploring the multifaceted ethics viewpoints have continued to grow with an emphasis on the notions of care and respect for others through proactive social engagement. On the academic front, there has been a strong interest in communication management in exploring how ethical leadership and practice could be used to achieve professional duty and build a more caring and just society. Previous research indicates that organizational leaders are one of the key sources of ethical guidance for employees (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Schauster, 2014). It is critical for organizational leaders to demonstrate principled ethical behaviors through personal actions, communication and interpersonal relationships in order to reinforce the importance of ethical conduct to followers (Brown and Trevino, 2006).

Research on ethics in communication and public relations has urged both industry leaders and scholars in public relations to advocate for the important ethical role public relations professionals demonstrate and set to guide ethical decision-making and actions (e.g. Bowen, 2008; Neill, 2016). Public relations scholars stress that public relations professionals are the active agents to carry a critical role to provide ethics counseling to senior organizational leaders in their organizations, which is a role sometimes referred to as an “ethical conscience” (e.g. Bowen, 2008, 2009; Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, 2001; Neill and Drumwright, 2012). This stream of ethics research in public relations has developed the strong argument that in the workplace public relations, professionals should be a central source of ethical conduct and guidance. Furthermore, communication leaders’ ethical behaviors reinforce followers’ confidence in providing ethical counseling when facing ethical challenges (Meng and Neill, 2022). Research has suggested that public relations professionals’ role in demonstrating ethical leadership and proving ethics counsel shall encompass both the concerns of various stakeholders and communication about values (Bowen, 2008; Neill and Drumwright, 2012; Neill, 2016).

Although the issues related to ethical conduct and practice are discussed often in public relations and communication management, these discussions have not been fully incorporated into programs in training and development designed to cope with emerging ethical challenges for communication professionals and organizations in today’s digital communication environment. It is obvious that the industry has experienced a rapid change and accelerated evolvment as digital technology continues transforming our way of living. This fast-paced transformation is further deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic when our daily life is packed with various social media platforms, digital tools and services. Since ethical perspectives change quickly under the influence of digital technology, empirical ethics research in public relations has struggled to be up-to-date and relevant. Therefore, our research is motivated to investigate the ethical challenges facing public relations professionals in today’s rapidly evolving digital communication environment. By conducting an international survey of communication professionals in Canada and the USA, we investigated several key topics related to ethical challenges, including the new ethical challenges in an evolving digital communication era, the resources to get support when encountering ethical challenges, and their efforts in seeking trainings on communication ethics. Findings of our research provide more discussion on ethical practice in a digital communication environment for communication and public relations professionals. We hope our research will help professionals and organizations better understand the intertwined relationships between digital communication and ethical challenges and strengthen their ethical practice.

Literature review

Ethical theories in public relations research

Ethics is one of the key components of public relations that garners significant attention, interest and continued discussion on ethics in research, practice and education (Leeper, 1996).

For the purpose of studying ethics and public relations, several theories have been applied, including theories of attorney adversary, enlightened self-interest, community/social responsibility, Sullivan's (1965) partisan values vs mutual values and two-way symmetrical model (Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, 2001).

To understand the foundation of different approaches, Fawkes (2012) categorized public relations theories into excellence, advocacy, relationship management and critical theory and discussed how ethics was studied in public relations in each perspective. For excellence theory (Grunig *et al.*, 1992), public relations is ethical when the structure of communication is two-way symmetric between organizations and their publics. For advocacy models (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006; Heath, 2007), equal access to structures and debates is deemed crucial for ethical public relations. For relationship management (Ledingham and Bruning, 2001), dialogue or dialogic communication is considered as essential for ethical public relations. From the critical theory perspectives (Curtin and Gaither, 2005, 2007; L'Etang, 2005), scholars used a variety of postmodern and feminist approaches to discuss public relations ethics.

However, some scholars (Bowen, 2008) argued that ethics in public relations needs more support and interests from not only organizations but also communication professionals. Whereas ethics is organizations' responsiveness and responsibilities to stakeholders (Bowen, 2008; Dando and Swift, 2003), many public relations professionals do not "enact the role of ethics counselor themselves or to push for its adoption" (Bowen, 2008, p. 290). The reasons for this neglect included the complexity of this role, lack of ethics training experience, lack of access to decision-making and other job responsibilities (Bowen, 2008). Despite these challenges that professionals experience, Bowen (2008) predicted that ethics will play an important role in public relations because the public will demand higher levels of ethical behaviors, transparent communication and accountability from organizations.

The diverse theoretical frameworks on ethics in public relations yet the lack of academic consensus on how to approach professional ethics reflect the complexity of the topic (Tilley, 2005). Public relations scholars continue to study how to understand, analyze and manage ethical challenges (Bowen, 2007). According to Frankena (1973) as cited in Smudde (2005), moral philosophizing follows three paths: (1) descriptive empirical inquiry, (2) judgment and (3) analytical and critical thinking. In public relations, this moral philosophizing process is relevant to professionals' day-to-day work (Smudde, 2005).

To respond to moral challenges that professionals face, trade associations such as the Public Relations Society of America and the International Public Relations Association developed codes of ethics and encourage ethical practices (Ki *et al.*, 2012). Some organizations develop their own to complement the lack of enforcement and effectiveness of those codes of ethics developed by professional associations (Ki *et al.*, 2012). Often, public relations ethics also relies on personal ethics or good character in professionals (Tilley, 2005), which reinforces the role of communication professionals as ethical counselors and corporate consciences.

The integration of digital and social media and ethical challenges in today's communication

The role of digital communication and social media has tremendously reshaped public relations practice since the emergence of various digital tools and platforms. Scholars have increasingly focused on this digitization and the use of social and "new" media in public relations practice in recent decades (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021). Social media became the "number one use of the Internet," and this has brought many changes to day-to-day public relations practice (Wright and Hinson, 2009, p. 2). Professionals deal with a series of digital tools and practices such as sponsored content, social media influencer communication, public wikis, social bots and big data (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021). Byrum (2017) argued that it is crucial to understand the intersection between public relations ethics and practice in light of the digital

age because dialogue in the online environment can be considered as a virtual marketplace of ideas.

Studies and industry reports revealed that new technologies and emerging media impacted public relations practice in many ways (Wright and Hinson, 2015). For example, new communication technologies changed the business of relationship management (Argenti and Barnes, 2009) and roles and functions of communication leaders (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007). Studies also revealed that corporations and other organizations use social networking sites, Wikis and websites for investor relations, advocacy and stakeholder management (Wright and Hinson, 2015). Furthermore, studies discussed how organizations use social media during crises and campaigns (Wright and Hinson, 2015).

In today's "changing and emerging practices of persuasive communication," there are rising ethical concerns "including native advertising, blurring of paid strategies with earned media, consumer privacy, and digital ad fraud" (Schauster and Neill, 2017, p. 48). For instance, Internet and social media platforms collect a substantial amount of user information and public relations professionals use this information to communicate with their organizations' stakeholders (White and Boatwright, 2020). These rising concerns were present among European communication professionals; they reported that they experience more ethical challenges today than eight years ago (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021). Interestingly, a third of those indicated that social media is the primary cause for ethical challenges (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021). In a different study conducted in Europe in 2016 although only 14% of communication professionals in Europe reported ethical concerns as one of the top three challenges (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2017), almost three-quarters of them (74.5%) reported that "social bots present ethical challenges for them" (Wiesenberg and Tench, 2020, p. 6). These studies in Europe provided valuable insights into perceptions about ethical challenges and resources to tackle them, but they also addressed the importance of the replication of the study at a global level because perceptions can vary based on various factors (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the wide use of new media, however, scholars (Duhé, 2015; Verčič *et al.*, 2014; White and Boatwright, 2020) found that there is a lack of discussion on new media ethics in public relations scholarship. Whereas professionals encounter ethical challenges, little research is conducted on professionals' perceptions and assessments of those challenges and resources to tackle them (Duhé, 2015; Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021). Schauster and Neill (2017) argued that situational ethics training and ethical leadership are key to respond to changing, emerging and blurring practices. In the same study, they also addressed the need for conducting a survey about ethical challenges with a bigger sample of strategic communication executives for the purpose of generalization. In addition, research suggested that more studies on the topic are needed to provide insights of reliable resources when tackling ethical challenges (Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021).

Although there are increasing scholarly efforts to examine ethical issues unique to today's digital practices, we must acknowledge that new ethical issues arise in a rapidly transforming environment (Stoeckle, 2018; Schauster and Neill, 2017). It is important to explore and further contribute to providing a better understanding of new ethical challenges and recommendations to tackle those concerns for organizations and professionals as they navigate this evolving territory. Therefore, we proposed the following research questions to guide this study.

- RQ1. How frequently do public relations professionals experience ethical challenges in their day-to-day work?
- RQ2. What types of ethical challenges do public relations professionals feel concerned about in today's digital communication environment?

- RQ3. What are the most and the least relied upon resources for public relations professionals when encountering ethical challenges in their day-to-day work?
- RQ4. What kind of ethics trainings have public relations professionals participated in and what is the frequency of the ethics training?

Research method

Survey design and recruitment procedure

To best capture public relations professionals' answers to the above-proposed research questions, we designed a series of questions related to ethical practice and embedded them in a comprehensive online questionnaire addressing a number of topics related to today's communication practice. The method of an online survey by using Qualtrics, a leading online survey research firm, and its audience database was used to program the questionnaire and recruit targeted participants. As part of the research design, we specified the targeted sample to be full-time public relations professionals working in Canada and the USA. In addition, we designed a series of filter and qualification questions at the beginning of the online survey to ensure the quality and diversity of our sample. Participants who did not meet our sampling criteria were removed from our final sample. A stratified sampling strategy was used to recruit participants based on three prespecified demographic parameters (i.e. geographic location, gender and years of experience) to enhance the quality of the final sample.

The online survey was active for about three months, from mid-August to late November in 2020. Over the period of sample recruitment, we had recorded a total of 12,738 valid clicks from the audience panels at Qualtrics based on the survey invitations. As mentioned earlier, unqualified respondents were excluded if they failed to pass our screening questions or did not meet our sampling criteria. In total, 1,046 respondents completed the questionnaire and met our sampling requirements. Therefore, our data analysis was based on the final sample of 1,046 full-time public relations professionals in Canada and the USA.

Demographics

The key demographic variables in the survey include geographic location, gender, age, years of experience, type of organization, hierarchical reporting level and ethnicity. The sample consisted of 778 respondents in the USA (74.4%) and 268 in Canada (25.6%). The sample had 545 women (52.1%) and 499 men (47.7%). The descriptive analysis indicated that the average age of respondents is 41.2 years (SD = 11.33). Respondents in our sample work for different types of organizations, including private companies ($n = 427$; 40.8%), public companies ($n = 234$; 22.4%), PR/communication agencies ($n = 166$; 15.9%), governmental organizations ($n = 136$; 13.0%) and nonprofit organizations ($n = 83$; 7.9%).

The sample had 447 respondents (42.7%) confirming they have more than 10 years of professional experience, followed by 340 respondents having 6–10 years of experience (32.5%) and 259 having up to five years of experience in communication (24.8%). Related to years of professional experience, descriptive analysis confirmed that we had 323 respondents indicating they are head of their communication department or agency CEO ($n = 323$; 30.9%). For the rest of the sample, we had 47.2% of respondents ($n = 494$), indicating they are at the level of team leader or unit leader and 21.9% indicating they are team member ($n = 229$).

As for ethnicity, a vast majority of respondents ($n = 753$, 72.0%) are white. Other ethnic groups included Black/African American ($n = 95$; 9.1%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 94$; 9.0%), Hispanic ($n = 57$; 5.4%) and other minorities ($n = 47$; 4.5%). While we admitted that the racial representation in our sample remains skewed, we would argue that the ethnic makeup of our sample reflects the PR industry in the USA (Chitkara, 2018). Other demographic profile analyses found respondents in our sample have various affiliations and

membership with professional associations. Almost half of them ($n = 495$; 47.3%) joined one professional association. While 34.8% of them ($n = 364$) currently do not have membership with any professional associations, 17.9% ($n = 187$) indicated they joined more than one.

To answer the proposed research questions, we used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 27) for data analysis. Some specific tests that have been applied in this study included frequency distribution and analysis, Pearson's chi-square test, the independent t -test and the analysis of variance (ANOVA) test in a general linear model to compare means. Detailed results of statistical analyses are presented in the following paragraphs.

Results

The frequency of experiencing ethical challenges

Our RQ1 aims at exploring how frequently public relations professionals experience ethical challenges in their day-to-day work. The measurement for this question was adapted from Bentele's (2015) research on public relations ethics. On the one hand, results found more than half of professionals ($n = 622$; 59.4%) indicated they have experienced ethical challenges over the past 12 months with 32.0% ($n = 335$) encountered multiple times of ethical issues and 27.4% experienced such issues once. On the other hand, 384 respondents (36.7%) reported having no ethical incidents within the past 12 months. When comparing the answers between professionals in Canada and the USA, we found a significantly high percentage among the US professionals reporting two or more ethical issues (34.8 vs 23.9%, $\chi^2 = 14.97$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.01$). Gender comparisons also found a significant difference at the statistical level: More men ($n = 181$; 36.3%) reported encountering two or more ethical challenges, if compared to their female colleagues ($n = 153$; 28.1%) ($\chi^2 = 10.60$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.01$).

Ethical issues present a challenge especially for professionals in two age groups (i.e. 30–39 and 40–49). Professionals in both age brackets (i.e. 33.9% for those in the range of 30–39 and 36.3% for those between 40 and 49) reported a significantly higher level of possibility to encounter ethical issues, if compared to younger (i.e. 29 or younger) and older (i.e. 50–59 and 60 or older) professionals ($\chi^2 = 68.53$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, responsibilities along the leadership line played a significant role in experiencing ethical challenges. Our results confirmed that PR professionals who take a leadership role, no matter at the team level or the organizational level, reported the highest possibility of encountering two or more ethical issues ($\chi^2 = 10.20$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$) (see Table 1 for detailed comparative results).

Table 1.
Number of ethical
challenges experienced
by PR professionals in
their day-to-day work
along the
leadership line

	Head of corporate comm./ agency CEO	Team leader/unit leader	Team member/ consultant	Overall
Several ethical challenges	106 (34.3%)	167 (34.4%)	62 (29.4%)	335 (33.3%)
One ethical challenge	96 (31.1%)	142 (29.2%)	49 (23.2%)	287 (28.5%)
No ethical challenge	107 (34.6%)	177 (36.4%)	100 (47.4%)	384 (38.2%)

Note(s): $N = 1,006$. Case frequencies were included in parentheses. Respondents were asked to evaluate how frequently they have experienced ethical challenges in their daily practice over the past 12 months. Respondents who selected “do not know or do not remember” were excluded from this specific analysis. Pearson Chi-square value is 10.20 ($df = 4$), $p < 0.05$

Types of ethical challenges concerning PR professionals in today's digital communication

Our RQ2 explores the specific ethical challenges PR professionals have encountered in today's 24/7 digital communication environment. The measurement of this question was adapted from some recent research on ethics (Schauster *et al.*, 2016), digital advertising (Glasser *et al.*, 2019) and big data (Wiesenberg *et al.*, 2017). Based on previous research on digital tools, the use of social media, and other forms of digital communication in today's public relations practice (e.g. Hagelstein *et al.*, 2021), the research team generated a list of potential digital communication practice as new ways of communicating with stakeholders and asked our respondents to evaluate to what extent such practice presents ethical challenges in their daily work. The rating is based on a five-point Likert scale.

The rating results indicated that paying social media influencers to communicate favorably presents the biggest ethical challenge ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.28$), followed by using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.33$) and mining audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.24$). PR professionals also feel concerned about using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.28$) and motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.30$). They are least concerned about editing entries about their organization on public wikis ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.31$) and profiling audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job or interests ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.32$).

When comparing respondents' assessment of ethical challenges in digital communication practices by country, we found a consistent pattern that professionals in the USA consider several digital communication practices present a significantly higher challenge for them, if compared to their colleagues in Canada. Those practices include: (1) paying social media influencers to communicate favorably (3.31 vs 3.01, t -value = 3.21, $df = 1,004$, $p = 0.001$); (2) mining audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses (3.23 vs 2.98, t -value = 2.72, $df = 1,004$, $p = 0.007$); (3) using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media (3.28 vs 3.02, t -value = 2.72, $df = 1,004$, $p = 0.007$) and (4) motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts (3.10 vs 2.88, t -value = 2.43, $df = 1,004$, $p = 0.015$).

Gender comparison also found significant differences between women and men on their assessment of ethical challenges in digital communication practices. Men perceived almost all items presenting a significantly higher level of ethical challenge except for two practices: using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media and paying social media influencers to communicate favorably.

Similarly, we compared PR professionals' assessment of ethical concerns on digital communication practice based on their leadership responsibilities. Significant differences were confirmed based on one-way ANOVA analyses. Communication leaders expressed the highest concerns about all digital communication tools and practices, followed by team members. It is interesting to find that professionals taking the leadership role at the team or unit level are least concerned about listed digital communication practice. Please see Table 2 for details.

The most and least relied-upon resources to manage ethical challenges

After exploring types of digital communication practices that present ethical challenges to PR professionals, we further investigated the resources professionals actually used to manage ethical issues at three levels: the macro (i.e. the profession), the meso (i.e. the organization) and the micro (i.e. the individual) levels. The measurement of this question was also adapted from Wiesenberg and associates' research on big data in 2017. Despite the various ethical challenges PR professionals have encountered in their daily work, results indicated the ethical guidelines

Table 2.
Assessment of ethical
challenges in digital
communication
practices: mean
comparisons along the
leadership line

	Head of corporate comm./agency CEO (<i>n</i> = 309)	Team leader/ unit leader (<i>n</i> = 486)	Team member/ consultant (<i>n</i> = 211)	<i>F</i> -value
Mining audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses	3.31	3.05	3.23	4.44**
Profiling and targeting audiences based on their demographics	3.05	2.91	2.93	1.22
Using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites	3.26	2.94	3.08	5.83**
Motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts	3.15	2.99	3.02	1.54
Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media	3.34	3.12	3.22	2.70
Editing entries about the organization on public wikis	3.23	2.91	2.99	7.74**
Paying social media influencers to communicate favorably	3.40	3.14	3.19	3.94*
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 1,006. Respondents were asked to evaluate the above-listed digital communication practice by applying the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "ethically not challenging at all" to 5 = "ethically extremely challenging". * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01				

of their organization were the most relevant resource for them to manage ethical issues. We had 88.0% of respondents found the resources at the meso level (i.e. the ethical guidelines of their organization) important or very important when dealing with ethical challenges (*M* = 4.24, *SD* = 0.99). A substantial percentage of respondents (76.5%) also found the ethical codes of conduct advocated by the professional associations (i.e. the macro level) the second relevant resource for them to use (*M* = 4.24, *SD* = 1.02). Finally, personal values and beliefs based on family tradition, education and religion were least relevant (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.01).

For resources at all three levels, country comparison did not reveal significant differences even though Canadian professionals valued ethical codes of conduct of professional associations more. Meanwhile, gender comparison confirmed some significant differences at the macro and the meso levels. Men considered the ethical code of conduct of professional associations significantly more important than women did (4.38 vs 4.09, *t*-value = 3.54, *df* = 619, *p* < 0.01). Men also considered the ethical guidelines of their organization significantly more relevant (4.33 vs 4.15, *t*-value = 2.25, *df* = 619, *p* < 0.05). Both men and women held similar perceptions of personal values and beliefs (4.27 vs 4.16, *t*-value = 1.45, *df* = 619, *p* = 0.15).

Consistently, a significant difference on this assessment is confirmed across the various hierarchical levels of our surveyed respondents. Communication leaders relied on resources at all three levels to manage ethical issues, with the ethical codes of conduct of professional associations being the most relevant one while the personal values and beliefs the least relevant one. Table 3 displays the results based on ANOVA analyses.

Types and frequency of communication ethics training

Our last research question investigated the types of ethics training in which PR professionals have participated, as well as the frequency of the training. Of the participants, 42.2% indicated they have participated in communication ethics training(s) offered by a professional association (*n* = 441). The second largest category is ethics training(s) offered by their

organization ($n = 401$; 38.3%). Less than 30% of respondents indicated they took a communication ethics class during their studies ($n = 275$; 26.3%). However, we still had 13.2% reporting they never had any type of ethics training ($n = 138$) and 4.0% indicating they do not remember ($n = 42$).

When analyzing the types of ethics training by hierarchical level, we found that PR professionals holding a leadership role, either as a top communication leader or as a team leader, are more likely to participate in ethics training offered by a professional association, if compared to team members at a lower hierarchical level. The findings also revealed that the vast majority of professionals who participated in ethics training offered by the organization are team leaders ($n = 233$; 58.1%). On the other hand, general team members received less ethics training at both macro and meso levels. Of the team members, 25.1% reported they took a communication ethics course during their studies (please see Table 4 for details).

When asked to recall the last time they participated in communication ethics training, 30.3% had their ethics training over the past year ($n = 317$) and 32.3% within up to three years ($n = 338$). Of the participants, 20.9% indicated that their ethics training took place more than three years ago. Overall, 83.6% of surveyed professionals confirmed having ethics training in the past.

We found the frequency of ethics training varied between PR professionals in Canada and their colleagues in the USA. A significantly higher percentage of US professionals (38.4%) received ethics training within the past year, if compared to Canadian professionals (29.7%).

	Head of corporate comm./agency CEO ($n = 202$)	Team leader/ unit leader ($n = 309$)	Team member/ consultant ($n = 111$)	<i>F</i> -value
Ethical codes of conduct of professional associations	4.46	4.17	4.03	7.78**
Ethical guidelines of their organization	4.44	4.17	4.05	6.69**
Personal values and beliefs based on family tradition, education and religion	4.37	4.13	4.18	3.39*

Note(s): $N = 622$. Respondents were asked to evaluate the above-listed digital communication practice by applying the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “ethically not challenging at all” to 5 = “ethically extremely challenging.” Respondents who selected “I do not know at all” were excluded from this specific analysis. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3.
The most and the least
used resources to
manage ethical
challenges: mean
comparisons along the
leadership line

	Head of corporate comm./agency CEO	Team leader/ unit leader	Team member/ consultant	Total
<i>Macro level</i> (i.e. participated in ethics training by a professional association)	189 (42.9%)	189 (42.9%)	63 (14.3%)	441 (100.0%)
<i>Meso level</i> (i.e. participated in ethics training by organization)	88 (21.9%)	233 (58.1%)	80 (18.1%)	401 (100.0%)
<i>Micro level</i> (i.e. took a communication ethics course during studies)	79 (28.7%)	127 (46.2%)	69 (25.1%)	275 (100.0%)

Note(s): $N = 1,046$. Respondents were asked to recall whether they have participated in trainings on communication ethics

Table 4.
Types of ethics
training, sources and
leadership line

On the other hand, 31.6% of the Canadian professionals reported having ethics training more than three years ago, which is 8.6% higher compared to the results reported by their US colleagues (23.0%) ($\chi^2 = 8.10, df = 2, p < 0.05$).

It is important to find that membership with a professional association presents a strong and significant correlation with frequency of communication ethics training ($\chi^2 = 9.35, df = 4, p < 0.05$). We found those PR professionals who joined one professional association are more likely to have some fresh ethics training, e.g. in less than one year or up to three years ago. While those who do not have membership in any professional association have stretched their ethics training over a longer period of time (see [Table 5](#)).

Discussion and implications

Data from this survey of public relations professionals in the USA and Canada provide some findings that may affect professional practice. More than half of the respondents reported encountering ethical challenges within the past 12 months. Of those, nearly one-third encountered ethical challenges more than once during that year. US respondents and male respondents reported significantly more ethical challenges than their demographic counterparts (i.e. Canadian professionals and women). Mid-career professionals and those in positions of leadership also reported significantly more ethical challenges than did those earlier or later in their careers or lower in the organizational hierarchy.

Ethical challenges are a reality in public relations practice. Most respondents reported dealing with ethical challenges within the past year. The above suggests the profile of the respondent in most need of ethical resources is a mid-career male leader in the USA. Is this profile of most-challenged-professional an artifact of gender? According to our data, most professionals reported receiving ethics training from professional organizations. However, 70% of the membership of professional organizations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) are women. Where are the men receiving their ethics training? The first implication of our findings is that ethics training specifically targeted at men is needed. The most effective place for this to occur, since men are disproportionately absent from the rolls of professional organizations, is in the workplace. In-house PR departments and PR agencies should engage external ethics trainers to conduct mandatory ethics education on at least an annual basis.

Digitally related ethics challenges were also important. Respondents reported digital ethical challenges as being: (1) paying social media influencers to communicate favorably, (2) using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media and (3) mining audiences' personal data via big data analyses. Respondents also noted concerns about using sponsored social media posts, sponsored articles on news websites and employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts. PR professionals are

Table 5.
Membership with
a professional
association and
frequency of ethics
training

	Frequency of communication ethics training			Total
	Less than 1 year ago	1–3 years ago	More than 3 years ago	
Yes, I joined one professional association	170 (37.2%)	186 (40.7%)	101 (22.1%)	457 (100.0%)
Yes, I joined more than one professional association	67 (39.4%)	64 (37.6%)	39 (22.9%)	170 (100.0%)
No, I do not have membership with any professional association	80 (32.4%)	88 (35.6%)	79 (32.0%)	247 (100.0%)
Total	317 (36.3%)	338 (38.7%)	219 (25.1%)	874 (100.0%)
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 874. Pearson's chi-square value is 9.35 (<i>df</i> = 4, <i>p</i> < 0.05). Respondents were asked to recall the last time they participated in communication ethics training				

uniquely affected by the ethical challenges related to these media because of the need to embrace these media as valuable tools in the PR toolbox. This is an area in need of more research. How can these challenges be addressed? Is there a need to profession-wide guidelines on some of these sources of ethical quandaries? We need to know more in order to develop best practices guidelines.

The resources that respondents most commonly tapped to manage ethical issues were organizational guidelines, followed by membership groups' codes of ethics and personal values. No differences were found in the use of ethics resources between countries, but men reported the importance of professional codes of ethical conduct and ethical guidelines of their organization significantly more than did women. Communication leaders relied on resources at all three levels to manage ethical issues with significantly more frequency compared to respondents in lower levels of organizational hierarchy. These findings reinforce the initial implications mentioned earlier that ethics training needs to happen at the organizational level (Ki *et al.*, 2012). If the organization is the first place respondents in this survey turned for ethical resources and guidance, it needs to step up to the challenge of embracing ethics training.

Despite the recommendations of the Commission on Public Relations Education's recommendation that ethics be a required part of every public relations curriculum and the required professional values and competencies of the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), ethics education seems to be sparse. For accredited public relations programs, ACEJMC requires that graduates "demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity". Renewed emphasis on this competency should be communicated to those in charge of public relations curricula at the college level.

Training programs are essential in conveying ethical expectations (Ki *et al.*, 2012) with up-to-date and relevant content and cases. Nearly one-third of respondents reported receiving ethics training within the past year. Even more reported training within the past three years. One in five said they had ethics training more than three years ago. More than four of five professionals surveyed reported having ethics training at some time. A significantly higher percentage of US professionals reported having ethics training within the past year when compared to the percentage of Canadian practitioners. Organizations like PRSA require accredited members keep up with continuing education. However, accreditation is not required and only a fraction of members are accredited. This may, once again, put the onus on employers to ensure that regular opportunities for ethics training are available in-house and that participation is incentivized.

PR professionals who reported membership in at least one professional organization were more likely to have recent ethics training, compared to respondents who were not members of a membership group. This provides an opportunity for employers beyond in-house training as well as for professionals to discuss their ethical concerns particularly when their organizations have its own issues (Place, 2019). Membership in professional organizations may be encouraged through a dues reimbursement or group membership program (Boynton, 2006). Knowing that there is a strong correlation between professional organization membership and more frequent ethics training provides an opportunity for employers to efficiently encourage ethics training off-site.

Understanding that ethics in public relations is complex, the present study provides the importance and development of ethics at the individual, organizational and professional levels. Place (2019) suggested that moral development can progress with time and experience in the workplace. Through education and professional trainings and experience can help practitioners navigate often nuanced moral gray areas (Coleman and Wilkins, 2009; Place, 2019). With emerging ethical issues due to integration of social and digital media in public relations and communication practice, providing resources to guide professionals at multiple levels is critical to the conscientious advancement of the profession and the industry.

Limitations and future research

As with all research, limitations were present in this paper. The primary concerns relate to respondent demographics. Survey respondents were both underrepresented by ethnic group (i.e. Caucasians were overrepresented) and by seniority (i.e. employees with fewer than 10 years' experience were dominant). While we do not believe these weaknesses affected findings in any substantial way, we do acknowledge them as a weakness.

Some recommendations for future research were noted in the discussion section of this paper. First, it is necessary to do a deeper dive into understanding why certain digital and social media tactics are identified as ethically dubious by many respondents. This may require a return to qualitative research such as focus groups or depth interviews to understand why editing wikis, for example, is ethically fraught. Second, review of public relations college curricula would be beneficial. Where do discussions of ethics take place? Is the subject related to a unit within a course, an entire course or sprinkled throughout the curriculum?

In addition, we found significantly more Canadians reported taking training more than three years ago, compared to US respondents. More research needs to be conducted to determine why ethics training is less frequent among Canadian practitioners. A survey of Canadian practitioners focusing on time and type of ethics training would be valuable to identify different needs of ethics training.

Finally, as addressed at the beginning of our research, ethical perspectives can change quickly in this evolving digital communication environment. Thus, it will be critical for the profession and the organizations to be up-to-date not only in digital technology but also in relevant ethical practice. Future research can explore the specific types of ethical training that communication professionals are looking for and how the profession and the organization can support such a need by providing relevant trainings and courses.

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