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

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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world. By deploying these indicators, the research was able to undertake a comparative study of the expected level of respect for ethical conduct among practitioners in two national cultures: New Zealand and Israel. We contend that the use of international comparative scales that measure democracy as a research tool for evaluating the function of public relations makes an original contribution and opens pathways for further research along similar lines.

The Fraser Institute Index of Human Freedom 2012/13 ranks 123 countries around the world based on the measurement of components of security and safety, of freedom of movement, of freedom of expression (including press freedom), and of freedom of relationships (Vásquez & Štumberger, 2012, p. 58). This index placed New Zealand as number one, or effectively the freest society on the globe. On the same index Israel was ranked closer to the bottom of the list as number 105 ().

The 2014 World Press Freedom Index, published by the Reporters Without Borders organization, ranked New Zealand as 9th out of its 180 countries and Israel around the middle as 96th:

> The 2014 World Press Freedom Index spotlights the negative impact of conflicts on freedom of information and its protagonists. The ranking of some countries has also been affected by a tendency to interpret national security needs in an overly broad and abusive manner to the detriment of the right to inform and be informed. This trend constitutes a growing threat worldwide and is even endangering freedom of information in countries regarded as democracies. (World Press Freedom 2014)

This comment provides an explanation for the gap between Israel and New Zealand as the former is consistently involved in violent conflict and the latter has long been essentially peaceful.

A similar gap between New Zealand and Israel is evident on another of the rankings, that of Transparency International, whose Corruption Perceptions Index measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption in 175 countries and territories. In the Corruption Perceptions Index, New Zealand ranked second in the world in perceptions of transparency in the public sector and Israel 37th out of the 175 countries on the list (Transparency International, 2014).

Drawing from the results of such credible international organizations, this comparative study considers the consistent gap between New Zealand and Israel with respect to their level of democracy, the range of their freedoms, and perceptions of corruption. While both countries are democratic and economically developed, the consistent gap between New Zealand and Israel on indices relevant to professional ethics is significant. We built on this difference in the development of the article's hypothesis. As New Zealand consistently rated higher in holding respectful norms toward human freedoms and organizational transparency, we hypothesized that New Zealand public relations practitioners would express stronger reservations about deviations from what was considered by the industry's code of ethics and professional norms as ethical and fair. On the other hand, we theorized that Israeli practitioners, in a context of lower norms, might feel more ready to compromise, or be cynical, on ethics.

To explore this further, we used the indices as specific measures of culture to develop our research questions around the hypothesis that, in a more democratic and less corrupt environment, practitioners would be more aware of the ethical norms and would be more likely to identify unethical practices and find them unacceptable. It is important to note that we did not try to measure all relevant cultural dimensions of each nation, since a comprehensive analysis of a national culture would require substantially more research (see e.g., L'Etang, 2004; Toledano & McKie, 2013). Neither did we attempt to measure actual unethical practices. Clearly such practices are not reported openly and would be difficult to trace in social media posts. Nevertheless, we contend that our investigation's focus – on practitioner perceptions around what they might consider ethical practice in social media – provides significant and useful insights into current challenges for the industry and demonstrates the link between national environment and practitioners' professional values.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations and culture

According to Sriramesh (2010), the idea that public relations is culturally relative started to inspire scholarly research only recently: "studies have attempted to link public relations with culture only in the past 15 years" (p. 698). This late development is surprising since the relationship between public relations and culture is evident in a number of ways including the major one that "culture (both societal and corporate) can be viewed as an 'environmental variable' that influences public relations practice" (p. 698). Nevertheless, research since 2000 contested previous assumptions that certain "generic principles" – drawn almost exclusively from the U.S.-based Excellence studies – could simply be augmented with "specific applications" (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 538) from other countries. Research on the ways public relations is practiced in different cultures, beyond the ethnocentric views of American scholars, has been published in two edited volumes of The Global Public Relations Handbook (Sriramesh & Verčič 2003, 2009), in an edited collection of chapters on Public Relations and Communication Management In Europe (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2004), in a book on Public Relations in Asia (Sriramesh 2004), in a history book on Public Relations in Britain (L'Etang, 2004), in a study of Israeli public relations (Toledano & McKie, 2013), in International Public Relations (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), and in Global Public Relations (Freitag & Quesinberry Stokes, 2009).

Clearly, the impact of globalization and the need of public relations practitioners to communicate organizational message around the world stimulated interest in researching the specific features of public relations in different cultures. But questions remain: for example, should a public relations practitioner working in Asia "follow local norms and help the organization

cover up wrongdoing even though doing so transgresses Western public relations professional norms?" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 237). This is one of a number of large and important questions that are beyond the scope of our study. Instead of engaging with this kind of ethical challenge in the global arena, we focused on identifying differences in practitioners' reflections on their ethical practice in two specific and different socio-cultural environments in the form of two national cultures.

While equating culture with nation makes research feasible in terms of scope, we acknowledge that this equation has obvious limitations. Many nations are multicultural and any generalization about the specific features cannot do justice to their complex realities. Nevertheless, scholarly support for the culture-nation equation has continued since Hofstede's (1980) "landmark study, Culture's Consequences" (p. 3) became "the dominant culture paradigm in business studies" (Nakata, 2009, pp. 3–4). Accordingly, in the continued absence of agreement – see, for example, Ailon's (2008) insightful reservations – we broadly follow the Hofstedean approach of categorizing "nations according to their supposed cultural similarities and differences" (Wakefield, 2010, p. 661). However, we depart from applying conventional Hofstedean classifications for nation culture in this study, and opt instead for a more ethics-oriented international ranking systems that focus on the nations' level of commitment to democratic values.

2.2. Public relations ethics and social media

Public relations ethics is often seen as an oxymoron (Berger & Reber, 2006; Parsons, 2008) since the industry is notorious for manipulative, deceptive, and irresponsible tactics to achieve the goals of the organizations it serves. Yet PR scholars argue that ethical practice is a core challenge for the profession "because of the weighty responsibilities of the function within an organization and its ability to wield influence in public policy" (Bowen, 2013b, p. 304). While Lieber (2005) complained that despite "the currency of this topic, there is surprising dearth of research on public relations ethics" (p. 289), scholarly debates on public relations ethics have been published in journals and text books since early attempts to define the profession in the 1920s. Holtzhausen (2012) relates to public relations' "obsession with ethics" (p. 31) and cites Hallahan's web list of "more than 60 articles on ethics published in research journals since 1989" (p. 32). The issues under this article's investigation were inspired by different approaches to the topic of public relations ethics.

One factor is how the shift to online and social media communication has impacted the practice of PR. Academic interest in the way practitioners were using the new tools of communication resulted in many research papers and books advising public relations practitioners about the proper use of social media for communication on behalf of organizations. Significantly, most of the guidance books did not include a chapter on ethics (e.g., Breakenridge & DeLougry, 2003; Breakenridge, 2008; Brown, 2009; Duhé, 2012; Gillin, 2007; Kelleher, 2007; Levine, 2001; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

However, a few books did address ethical issues specific to social media. Phillips and Young (2009) included a chapter entitled "What is right and wrong?" to argue that the principles of ethical behavior have not actually changed but that "the new PR brings a host of new issues and ethical conflicts" (p. 222). They identify issues around "transparency, porosity, agency, richness, and reach" (p. 222). Under the heading of transparency they relate to such issues as the need for a disclaimer about sponsors; the problem of cyber-astroturfing (i.e., organizing online front groups); and the bypassing of media gatekeepers. Identifying these as key contemporary issues, our study related to them in the survey's attitude statements. Phillips and Young (2009) use the term porosity to describe the loss of practitioner control over the message and the distribution process. Employees, for example, make their views known on social media in their own time and the practitioner ability to orchestrate the show on social media is limited because people take:

> matters into their own hands through their blogs and online networks and user-generated content. They are organizing political campaigns and building coalitions based around common interests. They are spreading news and information to one another on a scale never before thought possible. They are the masters now. (Brown, 2009, p. 20)

Demetrious (2011) echoed concerns about the "lack of control" (p. 119) of business over social media. This old-new issue of PR practitioners' control over the public discourse attracted scholarly criticism of the profession and social media might have limited this control (Toledano & Wolland, 2011). Another emerging issue included in our study was highlighted in Meerman Scott's (2007) short chapter on blogging ethics. He suggested a list of issues that should serve as starting point for practitioners to think about ethics: transparency, privacy, disclosure, truthfulness, credit (p. 205). In line with many others, Meerman Scott (2007) relates to organizations' internal policies that should guide employees about right and wrong in their work and private communication online.

Blogging ethics is also the topic of a chapter in an edited book on the ethics of emerging media (Jensen, 2011). Although not specific to public relations, Jensen's observations in his chapter, "Blogala, sponsored posts, and the ethics of blogging" (p. 213), is very relevant to the industry in addressing the consequences of business payments to bloggers: "The main problem is that many people who blog are no longer being transparent in their writing and are not divulging the extent to which their expressed opinions may have been unduly influenced by the payments and gifts bequeathed by sponsors" (p. 214). Payment to bloggers is an unethical, though tempting, tactic for public relations practitioners and so many cases in the last decade exposed and condemned the tactic that we also related to it in our survey.

Kent (2010) expressed other concerns about the way public relations practitioners were using social media "for organizational marketing initiative and exploiting publics" (p. 650) when stating that public relations scholars have not directed enough attention to ethical issues on social media (p. 651). In addition, Kent (2010) directed attention to more positive

possibilities in using social media for engagement and dialogue with the organization's publics. This is not to claim that the possibilities are always enacted ethically. Demetrious (2011) comments on how organizations use Facebook to become friendly with publics so that their "'authenticity' becomes nothing more than a clever persuasive strategy in the PR arsenal" (p. 124).

DiStaso and Bortree (2014a) recently edited a pioneering book on Ethical Practices of Social Media in Public Relations. In it they stated that "Social media should be managed with the ethics of care in mind to ensure that actions reflect a concern for others and value for the relationships" (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014b, p. xxvi). The book includes 15 chapters covering issues of transparency and online identities, corporate responsibility, ethical frameworks for communication, and social media policies. Practices such as deleting comments, controlling the conversation, ghost blogging, ghost commentating, social media monitoring and more are discussed and analysed. Authors of individual chapters used relevant qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as case studies to evaluate the way companies, non-profit, and their public relations executives dealt with current challenges on social media. Bowen and Stack's (2014) chapter provides a list of 15 ethical guidelines for using social media (p. 225). Those guidelines were actually inspired by Bowen's (2013a) paper that "distilled" ethical conduct guidelines from two well-known case studies of unethical public relations practice. Despite this, the guidelines were rather general – for example, "be prudent, if it is deceptive, don't do it" – and were not always specific to social media.

It is almost impossible to identify empirical studies that either measure practitioners' attitudes to ethical practices specific to social media, or that evaluate the impact of different socio-cultural environments on practitioner concepts of ethical behavior in social media. Our research takes into consideration the actual practices that pose ethical challenges to their attitudes toward specific challenging situations. This enables a comparative evaluation of practitioners' ethical values in two different cultures.

Research questions:

1. What PR practices are considered by practitioners as ethically acceptable or not-acceptable, mainly in the environment of social media?
2. Do practitioners' attitudes to ethical issues on social media differ according to the socio-cultural environment in which they function? Would an environment that demonstrates more respect to human freedoms and transparency inspire more ethical attitudes toward PR professional challenges?

3. Method

The cross-national collaborative approach of this project attempts to identify differences and similarities in the professional values of public relations practitioners in different national cultures. The survey questions were drawn from public relations literature and two previous studies: one based on New Zealand focus groups that were conducted in February 2010 (Toledano & Wolland, 2011) and unpublished research using focus groups in Israel conducted in December 2012. The same guidelines were used in both countries' focus groups to allow practitioners to identify the issues they found challenging ethically when using social media on behalf of organizations.

The ethical challenges identified in both sets of focus groups (two groups in each country in 2010 in NZ and in 2012 in Israel) contributed to our development of a survey questionnaire with thirteen informed attitude statements (see Table 1) and six demographic questions. The questionnaire was distributed online in both countries in February 2015 – in English in New Zealand and in Hebrew in Israel – through the respective professional associations: the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) and the Israeli Public Relations Association (ISPRA). A link to the questionnaire was included in the PRINZ e-newsletter, blog, and Facebook page while the ISPRA President sent emails with the link to the questionnaire to members of the Israeli association and used Facebook to remind them about it. In addition, links to the questionnaire were sent to conveniently selected practitioners in both countries along with an invitation to participate.

3.1. The survey and sample

The response rate in both countries was disappointing: 52 practitioners responded in New Zealand (NZ) and 47 in Israel. We do not consider the sample as representative of the whole industry in both countries because of this low response rate. The sample was not only small but probably also not fully representative of the industry's level of ethical training and organizational membership. 71.15% of the New Zealanders said they were members of PRINZ and 28.85% were not members. In Israel 53.2% were not members of ISPRA and 46.8% were members. It is hard to know the exact number of practitioners in each country but we doubt that these numbers reflect the situation in the industry. Almost 79% of the respondents in NZ and 85.1% of the Israelis said that they had either academic or industry qualification in communication, PR, marketing or related fields. It seems that the small sample consisted of a relatively high number of well-educated or trained practitioners who felt confident in answering questions on ethics.

However, we believe that the small sample is still indicative of a specific segment of the industry's position toward ethical issues and that preliminary lessons can still be drawn from the findings. Ethics is a very sensitive topic and practitioners are often reluctant to share experiences or answer questions about ethical concepts that might be based on their conduct. Accordingly, the respondents who participated provided valuable data and allowed for tentative conclusions.

This research considered the social desirability bias as respondents to all surveys try to report "good" behavior rather than "bad" and impress the researchers. This tendency would be stronger in questions on ethics. Because the respondents seem to represent a specific segment of the industry we might assume that the level of ethical knowledge and commitment to ethical behavior in the PR industry might be different from what we found in this survey. Nevertheless, the findings do provide insight that answers the research questions based on the response of a specific group of better trained practitioners. In spite of the small size of the sample the findings showed significant difference between the two national groups in specific attitude questions and the difference was consistent, thus worth drawing conclusions from and indicative about the link between cultural environment and perceptions of ethics in social media PR.

4. Findings

4.1. Findings: social media and PR role in society

4.1.1. Loss of control

Almost half (46.15%) of NZ respondents agreed with the statement that "social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organizations they serve" (Q3). About 27% disagreed and 26.92% were not decided about this statement. Israelis felt more in control via social media—59.6% agreed with the statement, 19.1% disagreed and 19.1% were neutral about it. An independent samples t-test revealed that this difference was significant [$t(85) = -2.6, p < 0.01$].

Table 1
A comparison among NZ and Israeli PR practitioners: an independent samples t-test.

Question	New Zealand			Israel			t
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD	
1. I'm well trained to deal with ethical issues relating to organizational communication on social media	52	2.46	0.851	45	3.16	1.242	$t(76) = 3.16, p < 0.01$
2. PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organization's ethical conduct on social media: train and guide employees and management	52	1.77	0.645	46	1.89	1.140	$t(69) = 0.64, p > 0.05$
3. Social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organizations they serve	52	2.77	0.96	46	2.17	1.235	$t(85) = -2.6, p < 0.01$
4. Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organization and inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions	51	2.45	0.986	46	2.28	1.241	$t(85) = -0.73, p > 0.05$
5. A PR practitioner who knows about corruption in the organization should act as 'whistle-blower' and put the public interest first	52	2.54	1.056	47	2.89	1.323	$t(97) = 1.48, p > 0.05$
6. I find it difficult to write blogs on behalf of CEOs because social media requires authentic voices	51	3.06	1.047	47	3.55	1.380	$t(85) = 1.98, p = 0.05$
7. It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without identifying their real identity	51	3.53	1.206	47	3.32	1.446	$t(89) = -0.77, p > 0.05$
8. It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it	52	4.08	0.882	46	3.57	1.455	$t(72) = -2.07, p < 0.05$
9. It is ok to pay to bloggers to deliver the organization or client's message as everybody is doing it anyway	51	3.78	1.026	47	3.13	1.454	$t(82) = -2.56, p < 0.05$
10. It is ok to pay social media experts for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with my employer or client	51	4.75	0.523	47	4.21	1.062	$t(65) = -3.10, p < 0.01$
11. Best practice requires a disclaimer by all bloggers and PR practitioners if they are paid or rewarded by an organization for delivering a specific message	52	2.13	1.10	47	2.04	1.334	$t(89) = -0.37, p > 0.05$
12. I would 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	52	4.27	0.795	46	3.54	1.425	$t(68) = -3.05, p < 0.01$
13. Each organization should publish a policy to instruct employees on their communication on social media	52	1.54	0.727	47	1.68	1.235	$t(72) = 0.69, p > 0.05$

The issue of "loss of control" was discussed in public relations literature as an expression of professional anxiety around social media (Brown, 2009; Demetrious, 2011; Phillips & Young, 2009). It seems that, in recent years, practitioners gained more confidence in the usage of social media and felt more in "control". However, the idea of "control" implies unethical conduct and might include attempts to marginalize or to silence competing messages and criticism.

4.1.2. Social media as an opportunity

Bowen et al.'s (2006) report mentioned that social media presents opportunities to improve the organization's commitment to ethical decisions and the PR profession's ethical behavior. It reported that practitioners were struggling to influence management to take more ethical decisions and saw social media as an opportunity to gain more influence. The rationale was that because the organization became more exposed more quickly to public scrutiny in the anonymous and immediate environment of social media comments, management needed more help from communication experts.

Accordingly, our survey included this idea through the statement that: "Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organization and inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions" (Q4). In both countries most of the respondents agreed with this statement. In New Zealand 58.83% agreed, 27.45% had no position, and only 13.72% disagreed. The Israeli participants responded in a similar way—57.5% agreed, 21.3% were neutral about it, and 19.1% disagreed. An independent samples t-test did not reveal a significant difference between practitioner attitudes in the two countries.

4.2. Findings: the practice and responsibilities of PR

4.2.1. The whistle-blower

Serving as a whistle-blower can be considered as a strong indicator of commitment to the public interest. Not only does it demonstrate a responsible and ethical approach to the practice of public relations (Holtzhausen, 2000), but it often does so while involving personal risks (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Indeed, practitioners might need to pay for it with their job, and other costs to their family, and social life.

Almost half of the respondents in NZ (46.85%) agreed with the challenging statement: "A PR practitioner who knows about corruption in the organization should act as 'whistle-blower' and put the public interest first" (Q5). Only 15.39% of NZ respondents thought it was not the role of public relations to serve as whistle-blower. However, a significant number, 38.46%, had no opinion and avoided responding to this statement. In Israel 40.4% agreed with this statement, 29.8% disagreed and 29.8% were neutral. Although more practitioners in NZ than in Israel agreed with the idea of the whistle-blower as part of their role as PR practitioners and more Israelis than New Zealanders (NZers) disagreed with this idea, an independent samples t-test again did not reveal a significant difference between the two countries.

4.2.2. Blogging on behalf of others

In the 2010 study (Toledano & Wolland, 2011), focus groups participants in NZ expressed strong reservations about being asked to write blogs on behalf of employers and felt that it would be inappropriate in the unofficial open environment of social media. They did not like pretending that they were somebody else when they posted content on social media. Public relations literature on social media ethics also emphasized the importance of authenticity (Lieber, 2005; Demetrious, 2011).

Our survey statement around this issue stated: "I find it difficult to write blogs on behalf of CEOs because social media requires authentic voices" (Q6). An independent samples t-test did not reveal a significant difference between the two countries, and only about a third of those in NZ (29.41%) and 21.3% of the Israelis agreed with the statement. 37.23% in NZ and 55.3% in Israel disagreed with this statement. A third (33.33%) of those in NZ and 23.45% of the Israelis had no opinion on it. The figures suggest that blogging on behalf of others might have become common practice and that Israelis accept it more than New Zealanders.

4.2.3. Transparency

The issue of transparency is a major concern often discussed in the literature (Meerman Scott, 2007; DiStaso & Bortree, 2014a). Participants in the Israeli focus groups mentioned companies that provided "fake" comments in campaigns as part of their services and one of them said: "Let's not be innocents"—thus indicating acceptance of this practice.

The survey statement relating to this issue stated: "It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without identifying their real identity" (Q7). 60.78% of the NZers and 48.9% of the Israelis disagreed with this unethical conduct. 11.76% of NZers and 19.1% of Israelis expressed a neutral position about this statement. 27.45% of NZers compared to 31.9% of Israelis agreed with this unethical practice. This response identifies either lack of knowledge of ethical norms of transparency or lack of care about it in both countries. While no significant differences were found between the two, there was a tendency toward a more compromising attitude among Israelis than NZers.

4.2.4. A disclaimer—negative statement

The responses to a statement about a disclaimer, which is considered a basic ethical tool (Phillips & Young, 2009), illustrated a significant gap between NZers and Israelis [$t(72) = -2.07$, $p < 0.05$]. The statement said: "it is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it." Only 5.77% of NZ respon-
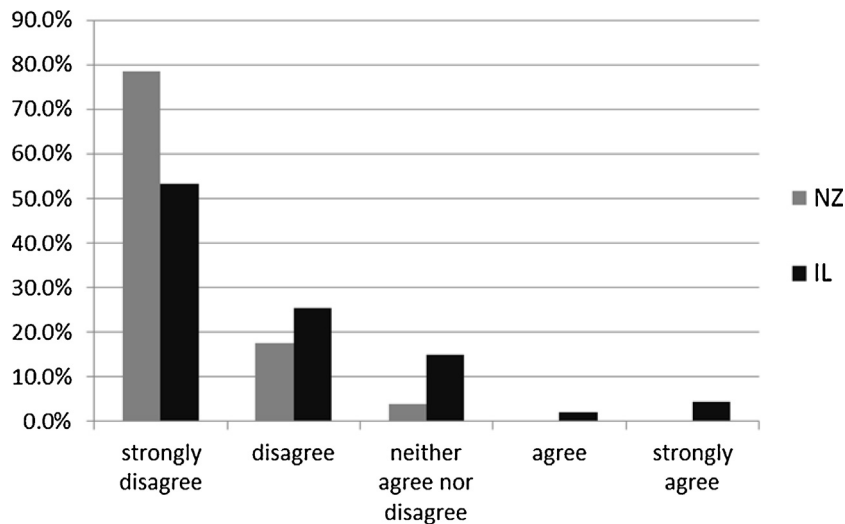
Fig. 1. "It is ok to pay social media experts for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with my employer or client" (Q10).

dents agreed with the unethical proposal and 17.31% of them did not have an opinion about it. In Israel 29.7% agreed with it and 10.6% were neutral. 76.92% of the NZers and 57.4% of the Israelis disagreed with this unethical practice.

4.2.5. A disclaimer—positive statement

The majority in both countries, 76.92% in NZ and 68.1% in Israel, agreed with the statement "Best practice requires a disclaimer by all bloggers and PR practitioners if they are paid or rewarded by an organization for delivering a specific message" (Q11). In NZ 13.46% disagreed and 9.62% were neutral about it and in Israel 19.2% disagreed and 12.8% were neutral. This response does not align with the response to statement eight that presented the use of disclaimer in a negative way. We acknowledge that this may be due to social desirability in response to positive statements compared to negative statements.

4.2.6. Payment to bloggers

Another statement about the unethical practice of payment to bloggers (Jensen, 2011) revealed a similar gap: 15.69% of NZers compared to 34% of Israelis agreed with the unethical proposal: "It is ok to pay to bloggers to deliver the organization or client's message as everybody is doing it anyway" (Q9). An independent samples t-test did reveal a significant difference among the two countries [$t(82) = -2.56$, $p = 0.01$], while 66.67% of the NZers disagreed with this statement compared to only 40.4% of Israelis. 17.65% in NZ and 25.5% in Israel did not have an opinion on it.

4.2.7. Paying for negative messages

A similar gap was identified in another unethical practice stated as "It is ok to pay social media experts for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with my employer or client" (Q10) (Fig. 1). In NZ an overwhelming majority of 96.08% disagreed, including 78.43% that strongly disagreed, while only 3.92% neither agreed nor disagreed. No one in NZ agreed with this statement. The majority of Israelis also disagreed—78.7%, however, 6.4% did agree and 14.9% were neutral about it. An independent samples *t*-test did reveal a significant difference among the two countries [$t(65) = -3.10$, $p < 0.01$].

The next survey statement was tricky and identified a cultural gap: "I would 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" (Q12). While no one in NZ agreed with this unethical practice of creating online front groups, a quarter of the Israeli respondents—25.5% agreed with it. 79% of NZers disagreed (48% strongly disagreed) and 21% were neutral about it. In Israel 51.1% disagreed with this unethical practice and 21.3% were neutral. An independent samples *t*-test did reveal a significant difference among the two countries [$t(68) = -3.05$, $p < 0.01$] (Fig. 2.

4.2.8. Training

A significant difference [$t(76) = 3.16$, $p < 0.01$] was found among NZ and Israeli practitioners regarding the statement: "I'm well trained to deal with ethical issues relating to organizational communication on social media" (Q1). While 53.85% of NZ practitioners agreed with this statement, only 27.7% of Israelis agreed. Similarly, 34.62% of NZ were neutral, and 11.54% disagreed with this statement, while 25.5% of Israelis were neutral, and 42.6% disagreed with this statement. The different level of ethical training in both countries might help explain the difference in practitioners' approaches to the survey statements. It also emphasizes the importance of ethical education.
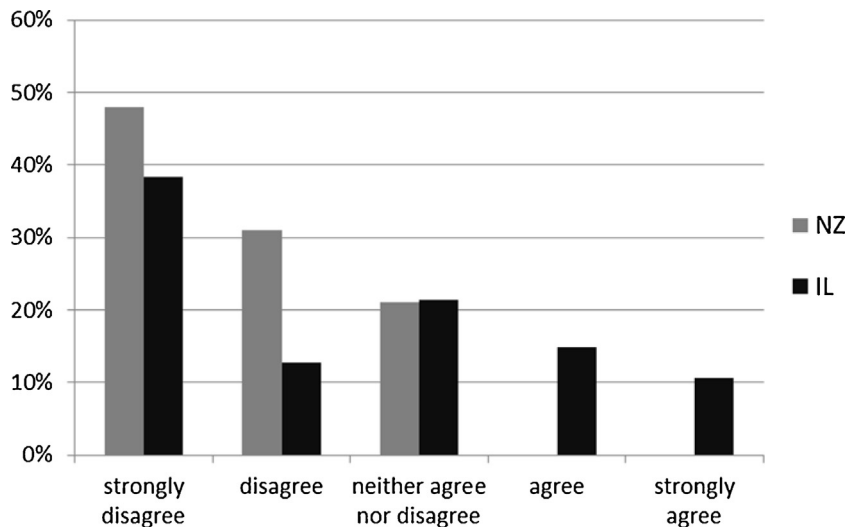
Fig. 2. "I would create an activist group to support my employer or client's interests and pay them to post our side of the story on social media" (Q12).

When asked about another type of training: "PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organization's ethical conduct on social media: train and guide employees and management" (Q2), no significant differences were found among the two countries. 96.15% of NZers agreed with this statement (compared to 74.4% of Israelis). No NZ practitioners were neutral (compared to 12.8% of Israelis), and 3.85% of NZ practitioners did not agree with this statement (compared to 10.7% among Israelis). Though not significant, the Israeli practitioners lagged behind the NZers in their willingness to take responsibility for ethical training within the organization.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The research presented in this article suggests a certain gap between attitudes of public relations practitioners in New Zealand and Israel toward specific ethical practices on social media. The small sample does not allow us to claim this definitively; however, the gap was evident in the way that Israeli practitioners consistently scored below New Zealander practitioners in responses to ethical statements. Further support can be found in the t-test showing significant differences in specific questions. The gap was especially evident in relation to the following: publishing a disclaimer about sponsored messages, negative campaigns on social media, payment to bloggers, and the use of social media for the creation of front groups. Although the gap was not dramatic, Israeli practitioners were consistently lower in their level of knowledge and commitment to ethical practices compared to the New Zealand practitioners. In line with our research assumption, the findings indicate that a specific nation's position on international ranking indexes of democratic values, freedoms, and transparency are compatible with the commitments of specific national public relations practitioners to ethical practices. The findings also point to the utility of using international indices as a tool for distinguishing between different features of different countries and their relevance to public relations research (e.g., for identifying similarities and differences in local practices compare to universal ones).

The findings answered research question one by identifying major challenges for public relations ethics on social media. It identified issues that caused practitioner confusion, or highlighted lack of knowledge, or lack of care, in terms of ethical professional practice. The challenges tend to cluster around transparency: the use of fake identities in comments, the use of payments to bloggers, and the use of payments to social media expert for conducting smear campaigns. In both countries there is a group of practitioners who accept such practices as part of the current reality of the industry. On the other hand, not all practitioners accept the use of disclaimers about sponsors of messages as a universal ethical tool.

The second research question asked if practitioners' attitudes to ethical issues on social media differ according to the environment in which they function. Would an environment that demonstrates more respect to human freedoms and transparency inspire more ethical attitudes toward PR professional challenges?

The findings indicate a relatively higher level of knowledge about, and stronger support for, ethical conduct among NZ practitioners than the Israelis. Though the sample was small and not fully representative, the consistency of the gap between practitioners in both countries is indicative of their different attitudes toward ethics: Israelis responded to more statements with somewhat less ethical knowledge or care compare to the NZers. None of the statement responses were answered more ethically by Israeli practitioners than by NZers.

Unethical public relations practices occur in highly developed and democratic societies as well as in more corrupt and totalitarian societies. This study examined whether, in a society that enjoys more freedoms, practitioners would be more conscious about ethical norms and less willing to accept unethical practices. It suggested a research approach for measuring

perceptions of ethics in different environments. We suggest that the method might help researchers in other countries ranked differently on the international indices of freedom and democracy to conduct similar studies and hope that this study will inspire follow up studies of professional ethics in different environments.

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