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Ethical Challenges of Digital Communication: A Comparative Study of Public Relations Practitioners in 52 Countries

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Digitalization is fundamentally changing media ecosystems and posing ethical challenges for media and communication practitioners. One of the professions affected is public relations (PR), which today can analyze target groups based on their digital data traces or spread messages via paid digital channels. Although these practices are effective, they raise ethical concerns. However, it remains unclear whether PR practitioners around the world perceive such practices as morally challenging and whether their perceptions are shaped by individual dispositions or national backgrounds. This study analyzed data collected in 4 cross-national surveys involving 5,970 communication practitioners from 52 countries. Results from multilevel modeling indicate that individual predispositions, that is, personal values and beliefs and age, influence ethical perceptions far more than national context. These findings are interpreted as an indicator of the ongoing globalization of PR ethics, which presumably leads to similar perceptions in different regions.

Keywords: public relations ethics, digitalization, globalization, survey, multilevel modeling

The development of technologies, digital tools, and social media platforms associated with digitalization has important consequences for the field of media ethics and raises a number of new ethical questions. Media ethics researchers have become increasingly concerned with the norms and practices of digital media use. Much of the research to date has focused on applied ethics, for example, how professional journalists and media organizations should use digital media and data traces in ethical ways (e.g., Fairfield & Shtein, 2014; Ward, 2021). More recent studies have questioned the ethics of influencer marketing and communication on social media (e.g., Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). One population on which there is still little research is professional communicators, who are responsible for the ethical use of digital media and technologies in non-media organizations, for example, in corporations, governments, or nonprofits. While journalism has fallen into an economic crisis due to changing media usage habits and declining advertising revenues (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020), the professional field of public relations (PR) or strategic communication has grown over the past two decades (Rodríguez-Salcedo & Watson, 2021). It has been noted that this field is "fraught with ethical dilemmas" (Bowen, 2004, p. 65). Probably the best-known ethical quandary is that of the "spin doctor" who advocates a cause based on one's own or clients' interests and uses questionable techniques such as lying or distorting the news without considering public interest (Neill, 2021). Given that PR practitioners act as sources of information for journalists and may exert a strong influence on public opinion, the study of PR ethics as a component of media ethics deserves more scholarly attention (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016).

Although reflection on ethics has a long history in PR research and almost all textbooks assign a chapter to PR ethics (Bentele, 2015; Lee & Cheng, 2012), current research into the moral challenges of PR in the digital age is sparsely sewn. A bibliometric study of the two most influential PR journals from 2000 to 2015 shows that only 6.5% of the articles analyzed touched on the topic of ethics. If the focus were on articles that dealt specifically with PR ethics in the digital age, the percentage would not even reach a digit (Theodoro & Gonçalves, 2017). Similarly, a recent literature review concludes "that surprisingly, to date, relatively limited scholarly attention has been given to ethical issues regarding SM [social media] in PR journals, raising dilemmas of transparency and accountability" (Roth-Cohen & Avidar, 2022, p. 9). Our

research aims to fill this research gap by investigating PR practitioners' perceptions of moral challenges in today's digital communication environment. In light of previous studies, we assume that such perceptions are shaped by both individual dispositions and contextual factors (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016). However, with only a few exceptions, previous studies examined ethical considerations only in single countries or contexts, typically in the United States, mirroring the general paucity of comparative studies in PR research (Volk, 2017).

To test our assumption, we used a large-scale comparative data set with responses from 5,970 PR practitioners in 52 countries and applied multilevel modeling to analyze which individual- and country-level factors predict the perception of moral challenges. In this way, our study aims to contribute to applied PR ethics research and theorize about which factors shape the moral decision making of PR practitioners. By expanding our study to understudied world regions such as Central and Latin America, Asia, as well as Eastern Europe (Volk, 2017), we further respond to calls for "de-centering" communication research and attempt to counteract the Western bias of empirical evidence (Curran & Park, 2000; Waisbord, 2016).

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Public relations ethics can be subsumed into the overarching field of media ethics, a form of *applied ethics* (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016; Ward, 2021). While ethics is defined as the (scientific) reflection on moral behavior in general, applied ethics is concerned with moral challenges in specific areas of life, for example, economy, medicine, journalism—or PR (Ward, 2020). Applied ethics build on general moral principles and derive concrete normative instructions for dilemma situations in these domains. Research on PR ethics encompasses theoretical and empirical contributions about responsible conduct in the profession of PR, which is confronted with partly similar and partly different moral challenges than journalism: While journalists should aim for objective, critical, and impartial reporting, PR practitioners represent the interests of their clients or organizations and hence should stay loyal to them (Viererbl & Koch, 2021). However, both fields are facing moral challenges, for example, in dealing with digital data, and are discussing the possibility of universal ethical values in an increasingly globalized world.

Moral Challenges in Digital Communication

Conceptual work in PR ethics has typically discussed principles and values of ethical PR, such as truth, honesty and openness, fair-mindedness, respect, and integrity (Bowen, 2007). The digitalization of communication has created new opportunities for PR practitioners around the world to directly reach and address stakeholders (Wright & Hinson, 2017). Some of the newly emerged digital communication practices, however, may raise dilemmas if they defy the abovementioned principles of ethical PR even if they are legal and effective—thus, turning into moral challenges (Bachmann, 2019). The digital age has given rise to two areas of practices that can violate ethical values such as transparency, honesty, and openness, and may be considered more or less acceptable by practitioners: The collection and exploitation of stakeholder's digital data traces and the dissemination of messages through disguised paid channels.

Regarding the exploitation of stakeholder data, PR practitioners may face moral challenges when they collect stakeholders' personal data such as age, gender, location, consumer preferences, or ethnicity

on websites or social media platforms and strategically use these data traces to create individual stakeholder profiles (Buhmann & White, 2022; White & Boatwright, 2020). While these practices of profiling and micro-targeting audiences based on personal data may be legal in certain countries, they beg ethical questions about the lack of data privacy and transparency about commercial exploitation by third parties or unequal access to information (Barbu, 2014; White & Boatwright, 2020; Yang & Kang, 2015). Neighboring fields have addressed these issues in discussions on the ethically acceptable use of algorithms and big data analytics (Crawford, Miltner, & Gray, 2014; Sandvig, Hamilton, Karahalios, & Langbort, 2016) and the emergence of a surveillance culture (Lyon, 2017).

Moreover, communication practitioners may encounter ethical dilemmas when distributing messages via paid digital channels—for example, when they create sponsored content or buy native ads to disguise paid media content as regular content on news sites; when they use social bots to increase fan growth; or when they pay social media influencers to communicate positively about the organization (Duhé, 2015; Golan, Joo, Sweetser, & Hochman, 2016; Klyueva & Ngondo, 2023; Taylor, 2017). These practices raise concerns about lack of honesty, accuracy, sender transparency, and full disclosure to the point of manipulation and deception or digital ad fraud. Particularly problematic is the fact that media users often do not recognize paid or sponsored content as such (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Schauster & Neill, 2017; Silva, Rossi, & Trindade, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Woolley & Howard, 2016).

Since only a few studies have researched such moral gray areas in the digital age, little is known about whether PR practitioners perceive these practices as reprehensible, if at all, and whether differences in perceptions exist.

PR Ethics Between Universalism and Relativism

The question of the influence of cultural contexts on ethical perceptions and behavior has often been discussed in PR ethics—just as in the field of media ethics or journalism ethics (Rao & Lee, 2005; Ward, 2021)—under the heading of “universalism” versus “relativism” (Kim & Ki, 2014). Taking a universalist standpoint, some PR scholars put forward the argument that ethical standards are universal and thus run across or transcend cultures (Kim, 2005; Kruckeberg, 1998). Others in turn argue from a realist viewpoint that there are no ethical absolutes and ethical values are instead influenced by societal or cultural contexts (Sanders, Mark, Maria, & Aranda, 2008; Wakefield, 2010). Some also explicitly warn against using Western-imposed ethical values as a benchmark for global PR ethics (Gower, 2003).

The discussion about universal versus localized ethical values is often not conducted on the basis of comparative survey evidence but rather conceptually or on the basis of content analyses of PR ethics codes from different countries. Such codes have been developed by national PR associations (such as the Public Relations Society of America) or supranational associations (such as the International Communications Consultancy Organisation [ICCO] or the Global Alliance) to provide practitioners with a set of guiding principles and ethical values, some with a claim to global applicability. Especially recently, professional associations have created several guides to supplement existing ethics codes specifically for subareas of digital communication. For example, ICCO published guidelines for “Ethics in Digital Communication” building partly on the resources developed by the Austrian PR Ethics Council: An “Influencer

Guide” and a “Code of Conduct for Ethics in Content Marketing.” In other countries, advertising associations have put forward similar resources such as the “Digital Influencer Advertising Guidelines” by the National Council for Advertising Self-Regulation in Brazil. However, most empirical research to date has focused on the analysis of generic ethics codes that are not specific to digital communication. Nevertheless, these studies yield interesting findings: The largest study by Kim and Ki (2014) analyzed 45 codes of ethics by PR associations from different countries and identified universal values such as honesty, accuracy, truth, safeguarding confidences, and integrity, which were present in the majority of the codes. Differences among national codes were less pronounced and concerned, for example, differing guidelines on handling conflicts of interest when working for competing clients. Relativistic values that were only mentioned in a few countries include the free flow of information or acceptance of fees and gifts. A previous study by Ki and Kim (2010) comparing the codes of ethics of PR firms in the United States and South Korea also found common ethical values, such as respect for clients. A similar observation was made in an earlier study on the codes of ethics of PR associations from the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, which revealed common ethical values such as truthful behavior or endorsement of public welfare (Walle, 2003). To the best of our knowledge, only one study has so far examined ethics codes specific to digital communication in a comparative setting: An analysis of 40 codes of ethics from firms and associations located in the United States and Finland, covering the fields of PR, marketing, advertising and journalism, showed that the issue of sponsored content and native ads are tackled differently, for example, with codes from the United States providing more guidance on transparency than the Finnish codes (Ikonen, Luoma-aho, & Bowen, 2017).

While the evidence is arguably sparse, the few studies provide indications of a globally similar codification of PR ethics, presumably driven by internationally operating professional associations. Whether similarly codified ethical values are then reflected in actual practices of PR is, of course, left to empirical investigation.

Factors Influencing Perceptions of Moral Challenges in PR

It is plausible to assume that PR practitioners differ in their perception of the moral challenges in digital communication. While some practitioners might find practices such as paying social media influencers to endorse an organization highly problematic from an ethical viewpoint, others may find it acceptable (e.g., Klyueva & Ngondo, 2023). According to a conceptual framework for understanding global ethics by Tsetsura and Valentini (2016), a practitioner’s value system is influenced by personal factors at the micro level and country-specific factors at the macro level. Following this conceptualization, the perception of morally challenging practices is driven by gender, education, experience, and professional background on the one hand; on the other, surrounding economic, political, and sociocultural systems impact moral assessments because practitioners “adapt through assimilation and accommodation to the information and norms they explicitly and implicitly receive from their environment” (Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016, p. 577). Since no study has yet examined these factors in a combined study design, we currently do not know whether perceptions of moral challenges are more strongly influenced by individual or national factors. In the following, we review previous research to examine which factors play a role in ethical perceptions, decision making, or conduct. We thereby follow the differentiation between individual-/micro-level factors and national-/macro-level factors put forward by Tsetsura and Valentini (2016).

Individual Factors

At the individual level, previous research has identified several factors that may influence practitioners' perceptions of morally challenging practices of PR even if most evidence has not been accumulated in the context of digital communication. Participation in ethics training has been shown to influence practitioners' responses to changing, emerging, and blurring practices in communication (Klyueva & Ngondo, 2023) and their enactment of the "corporate conscience" (Schauster & Neill, 2017). Conversely, the lack of ethics training has been identified as a cause of neglect in taking an active role in ethical decision making (Bowen, 2008). In addition, guidelines appear relevant when making ethically complex decisions, and three types of resources can be distinguished (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012). First, practitioners may consult codes of ethics developed by professional associations to find guidance on ethical practices (Kim & Ki, 2014). However, in a fast-changing digital landscape, such guidelines often cannot keep pace with new technological opportunities and practices (Bowen, 2004). Indeed, practitioners have lamented that such policies do not sufficiently address well-known gray areas such as native advertising or payment of bloggers (Benjamin, 2015). Second, practitioners may refer to guidelines or codes of conduct developed by their own organizations to make moral judgments (Kim & Ki, 2014; Klyueva & Ngondo, 2023). Third, practitioners may rely on personal beliefs and values when facing morally challenging situations (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Tilley, 2005; Tsetsura & Valentini, 2016). Finally, studies found that self-reported ethical knowledge or moral development increased with professional work experience (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill & Weaver, 2017; Place, 2019). Comparative survey data among European PR practitioners also point in a similar direction although ethical concerns were not explicitly captured here: They show that general attitudes toward big data analyses differ across age groups and hierarchy levels, with older practitioners and those with a leadership position paying more attention to debates about such new technologies (Wiesenberg, Zerfass, & Moreno, 2017). Overall, these findings show that the perception of moral challenges could be influenced by gender, age, professional experience (including the experience of moral challenges), hierarchical position, participation in ethics training, and recourse to individual, organizational, or professional resources. Thus, our empirical design takes account of these micro-level factors.

National Factors

At the macro level, ethical perceptions and decisions may be shaped by differing national backgrounds in which practitioners are embedded. In one of the only large-scale survey studies among PR practitioners about their moral perceptions of digital communication practices, Wiesenberg and Tench (2020) observed cross-national differences among communicators from 49 European countries in their moral attitudes toward using social bots for automation: While practitioners from Central and Western Europe and Scandinavia perceived the use of bots as morally challenging, their peers from Southern and Eastern Europe were less skeptical. Toledano and Avidar (2016) put forward the assumption that ethical perceptions and conduct may be specifically influenced by differential levels of corruption and press freedom in different countries and that practitioners would be more likely to find unethical practices unacceptable in freer and less corrupt environments. Likewise, Altay (2023) argued that the absence of press freedom and strong corruption might offer "fertile ground" (p. 5) for immoral communication like conspiracy theories and state propaganda. However, in their comparative survey in New Zealand and Israel, Toledano and Avidar (2016) found no significant differences: Practitioners from New Zealand were not less willing to accept unethical practices despite a higher level of freedom and a lower level of corruption than their peers in Israel. In light of these sparse and mixed results, further investigation on the

macro-level influence on perceptions of moral challenges across different national contexts is needed. Building on these considerations and following previous research, we include practitioners' country of residence and their respective levels of corruption and press freedom, a common indicator in comparative communication research (Volk, 2021), in our research design.

Research Questions

Given that existing studies on ethical perceptions remain limited to specific (often non-digital) communication practices or regions (mostly, Europe or the United States), we refrain from formulating hypotheses on the influence of specific predictors. However, in view of the possible emergence of *universal* ethical values propagated by PR associations, we expect that differences across countries might not be the strongest predictors of ethical perceptions. To test this assumption and arrive at a better understanding of the relationships between macro- and micro-level factors influencing the ethical perceptions among PR practitioners, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do individual factors influence the perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication?

RQ2: How do national factors influence the perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication?

Method

This research employs data collected through four cross-national quantitative online surveys of PR practitioners in four regions of the world, that is, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Central and Latin America, and North America conducted between January and November 2020 (Álvarez-Nobell et al., 2021; Macnamara, Lwin, Hung-Baesecke, & Zerfass, 2021; Meng, Reber, Berger, Gower, & Zerfass, 2021; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Verčič, 2020). The four data sets were collected in collaboration with an international consortium of PR scholars from these four continents, following the so-called committee approach (Volk, 2021; Wirth & Kolb, 2012). The four surveys used identical instruments, which were developed by the consortium to ensure contextual sensitivity of the questionnaire items in all world regions. The questionnaire was developed in English and then translated by bilingual research team members into Chinese and Spanish for the Asia-Pacific and Central and Latin American world regions, respectively, and checked for linguistic equivalence. The instrument was pretested among a sample of 58 experts, including scholars and practitioners across Europe. For the analyses presented here, all four individual data sets were merged. Data analyses were conducted using *R* (R Core Team, 2020).

Sampling

Public relations practitioners usually do not acquire an official license to pursue their profession (Tench & Waddington, 2021). Consequently, there is no official register for PR practitioners in most countries around the globe, and their total number and distribution are unknown, making them a hard-to-reach population. Study participants were recruited through a variety of channels, including e-mail databases built

by the research teams, invitation mailings from national professional associations in each region (e.g., Asia-Pacific Association of Communication Directors, European Association of Communication Directors), social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter/X), and a professional survey research platform. Administrative equivalence was strived for by using similar invitation mailings and procedures in different countries (Wirth & Kolb, 2012). Gender, age, professional experience, and hierarchical position of the final sample's respondents were then compared with the demographics of practitioners surveyed in similar academic and professional studies. No claim can be made to representativeness; however, the respondents can be considered comparable in that they work full-time in the field of PR and communication.

A total of 5,970 respondents from 52 countries were included in the data analysis (see Table 1).² The case selection can be described as a most different systems design that aims at maximizing variation in national contexts, similar to studies in the neighboring field of journalism research (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, & Lauerer, 2016).

Table 1. Regions and Countries Represented in the Sample (N = 5,970).

Asia-Pacific		Europe		Central and Latin America		North America	
	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>
Australia	35	Austria	144	Argentina	178	Canada	268
China (Mainland)	210	Belgium	108	Brazil	439	The United States of America	778
Hong Kong	114	Bulgaria	43	Chile	127		
Indonesia	62	Croatia	85	Colombia	128		
Korea (Republic of)	126	Czech Republic	50	Costa Rica	161		
Malaysia	109	Denmark	33	Dominican Republic	35		
New Zealand	49	Finland	80	Ecuador	34		
Philippines	102	France	40	El Salvador	58		
Singapore	94	Germany	182	Mexico	126		
Taiwan	115	Greece	43	Panama	43		
Vietnam	103	Ireland	34	Peru	81		
		Italy	134	Puerto Rico	63		
		The Netherlands	117	Uruguay	86		
		Norway	90	Venezuela	79		
		Poland	66				
		Portugal	92				
		Romania	182				

² The full data set contained 6,208 respondents from 82 countries. Professionals from countries with fewer than 30 participants were excluded in the analyses. It should be noted that the fact that no respondents from Africa and the Arab region were interviewed was not a conscious decision but was due to the difficulties of finding collaborators in this part of the Global South—which is not unique to PR research but a general structural problem of the communication discipline (Demeter, 2018; Volk, 2021).

Russia	59
Serbia	92
Slovenia	71
Spain	100
Sweden	84
Switzerland	96
Turkey	42
The United Kingdom	100

Measures

Independent Variables at the Micro Level: Individual Factors

Independent variables measured at the micro level included gender, age, professional experience, and hierarchical position of the respondents, as well as their personal experience of moral challenges in the past 12 months, the perceived importance of various ethical guidelines, and the source and timing of their training in communication ethics (if applicable). All measures were derived from the literature (see section above). Table 2 presents the operationalization of each measure.

Independent Variables at the Macro Level: National Factors

At the macro level, respondents' countries of residence were surveyed, and additional secondary data for each country were gathered: Level of corruption, as indicated by the Corruption Perceptions Index 2021 (hereafter: CPI; Transparency International, 2022), ranging from 0 ("Very corrupt") to 100 ("Very upright"; $M = 58.20$, $SD = 17.99$); and degree of press freedom, as indicated by the World Press Freedom Index 2021 (hereafter: WPMI; Reporters Without Borders, 2021b), with a range from 0 ("Best") to 100 ("Worst"; $M = 28.27$, $SD = 16.42$).

The CPI and WPMI rankings are conducted annually by the nongovernmental organizations Transparency International and Reporters Without Borders, respectively. The 2021 editions of both rankings include 180 countries. The CPI ranking is based on data on perceptions of corruption from three to 13 different sources per country that are standardized and combined into the final score. In 2021, the average CPI score was 43, with two-thirds of all included countries scoring below 50 (Transparency International, 2022). The WPMI ranking uses survey data from expert interviews that assess factors like pluralism, independence, and censorship of media, and combines them with statistics of abuses and violence against journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2021a). Although both rankings are not without criticism,³ they are often used in comparative research.

³ For example, Donchev and Ujhelyi (2014) criticize the methodology behind the CPI ranking as it builds on perceptions of corruption instead of actual experiences. More recent studies, on the other hand, have proven the validity of the instrument (Charron, 2016). Pearson and Fernandez (2015) raise criticism against the WPMI ranking for applying "quantitative mathematical rigour to a process that is largely qualitative" (p. 49).

Dependent Variable: Perception of Morally Challenging Practices in Digital Communication

To assess respondents' perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication, we focused on practices that are increasingly common, some of which have been codified in guidelines and presumably touch on moral gray areas. Based on the multilingual literature review presented above, we developed five items that comprise practices of exploiting digital data traces and disseminating messages through paid content. While developing and pretesting the questionnaire as described above, the multicultural research team paid particular attention that the items were conceptually equivalent and applicable in different contexts. Participants rated each of the following items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 ("Ethically not challenging at all") to 5 ("Ethically extremely challenging"): "Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media" ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.37$); "exploiting audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses" ($M = 3.47, SD = 1.31$); "paying social media influencers to communicate favorably" ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.36$); "using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites that look like regular content" ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.36$); and "profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests" ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.36$). Taken together, these items indicate the respondents' general perception of morally challenging practices in digital PR.

A factor analysis was used to confirm the presumed structure of the instrument. Both Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(10) = 5229.66, p < .001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy ($KMO = .78$) indicated the factorability of the items. As assumed, parallel analysis suggested a single-factor solution. Principal component analysis with oblique rotation technique indicated one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.38 and strong loadings from all five items, accounting for 47.6% of the variance. After an additional reliability check yielded satisfying results (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$), the sum score of all five items was calculated ($M = 3.21, SD = .95$). Its distribution per country ranged from 2.60 in Costa Rica to 3.73 in Ireland (see Online Appendix). The index served as the dependent variable in subsequent data modeling.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 2 depicts the sample characteristics. Of the participants, 61.4% were women and 38.4% were men. Their mean age was 41.1 years ($SD = 11.2$ years). The distribution of gender, age, professional experience, and hierarchical position was consistent with samples used in comparable international studies of the PR profession (e.g., Bahrt, Böhm, Eiermann, Wolf, & Rossi, 2020; Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2022; USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2022).

Asked about the experience of moral challenges in daily work during the past 12 months, 20.1% reported a single incident, while 36.6% even claimed several issues; 35.5% had not been confronted with any moral challenges, and another 7.8% were not able to remember.

Moreover, they point out that a country's positioning in the ranking is dependent on the scoring of other nations. Despite these points of criticism, however, they highlight the strong reputation of the WPFI in politics and academia; it is, as Pearson (2012) résumés, "taken seriously in international circles" (p. 177).

Table 2. Description of the Sample (N = 5,970).

Variable	Operationalization	Descriptive Statistics	
		Share of Respondents	<i>n</i>
Gender (<i>single-choice item</i>)	0 = Male	38.4%	2,292
	1 = Female	61.4%	3,663
Professional experience (<i>single-choice item</i>)	1 = Low (< 5 years)	22.6%	1,350
	2 = Medium (6–10 years)	20.6%	1,232
	3 = Strong (>10 years)	56.8%	3,388
Hierarchical position (<i>single-choice item</i>)	1 = Low (team member/consultant)	26.9%	1,603
	2 = Mid (team/unit leader)	29.4%	1,754
	3 = High (head of communication/agency chief executive officer)	26.1%	1,557
Experience of moral challenges (<i>single-choice item</i>)	0 = None	35.5%	2,119
	1 = Once	20.1%	1,199
	2 = Several times	36.6%	2,185
Ethics training (source count; <i>single-choice item</i>)	1 = One source (professional associations, organization, or during studies)	56.7%	3,387
	2 = Two sources	10.8%	644
	3 = Three sources	2.6%	157
Ethics training (currency; ⁴ <i>single choice item</i>)	1 = Very long ago (> 3 years ago)	25.6%	1,530
	2 = Long ago (1–3 years ago)	20.1%	1,202
	3 = Recently (within the last year)	21.7%	1,298
		<i>M (SD)</i>	
Age (<i>open numeric field</i>)		41.1 (11.2)	
Importance of resources (<i>see Note</i>)	Importance of ethical codices of practice of professional associations	3.92 (1.21)	
	Importance of organizational guidelines	4.28 (.97)	
	Importance of personal values and beliefs	4.42 (.91)	

Note. The importance of resources was measured with 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = "Not important" to 5 = "Very important."

Data Modeling

The research questions asked about the impact of individual- and country-level factors on respondents' perceptions of moral challenges. Since individual participants were nested in different countries, we adopted a multilevel modeling approach to analyze the hierarchically structured data (Hox, 2002). Before model estimation, all metric independent variables were grand mean centered.

⁴ Missing values indicate those who had not participated in any ethics training or were not able to report source/time.

For the second-order level of influence, a null model was estimated to assess its respective variance component. Inspection of the empty model revealed that the national context explains a rather small share (5.9%) of the total variance. In line with our general assumption, ethical perceptions were mainly shaped by individual factors, whereas national factors only played a minor part. Despite the marginal influence of level-2 predictors observed in our data set, a multilevel model with random intercepts and fixed slopes was estimated, as multilevel modeling is recommended for any kind of nested data (Nezlek, 2008; see Table 3).

Table 3. Individual and National Influences on Perception of Morally Challenging Practices in Digital Communication.

Predictors	Perception of Morally Challenging Practices in Digital Communication	
	Null Model <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Random-Intercept Model <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Individual level (L1)		
Gender		-.020 (.039)
Age		.011*** (.002)
Professional experience		-.011 (.031)
Hierarchical position		-.028 (.026)
Experience of moral challenges		-.002 (.040)
Importance of ethical codices of practice of professional associations		.088*** (.018)
Importance of organizational guidelines		.053* (.022)
Importance of personal values and beliefs		.102*** (.021)
Ethics training (source count)		.025 (.033)
Ethics training (currency)		-.019 (.022)
Country level (L2)		
Level of corruption		.005* (.002)
Degree of press freedom		.001 (.003)
Intercept	3.249*** (.035)	3.472*** (.119)
	Variance component	Variance component
Random effects		
Individual level	.850	.705
Country level	.054	.036

Note. Multilevel regression using restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimation with random intercepts. Unstandardized coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. All predictors are grand mean centered. Null model: $n_{L1} = 5,936$, $n_{L2} = 52$; random-intercept model: $n_{L1} = 2,043$, $n_{L2} = 50$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (Satterthwaite approximation).

On the individual level, we found a significant correlation between ethical resources and perception of communication practices. Our model indicated that the perceived importance of personal values and beliefs ($B = .102$, $p < .001$), followed by professional associations' ethics codes ($B = .088$, $p < .001$) and organizational guidelines ($B = .053$, $p < .05$) have positive effects on the dependent variable: The higher

respondents rank the importance of these resources, the stronger is their tendency to perceive certain digital communication practices as morally challenging. Moreover, a positive effect occurred regarding participants' age ($B = .011, p < .001$), with older respondents being more concerned than their younger colleagues. These findings suggest that professional, organizational, and personal resources may indeed help to identify and problematize certain practices in digital communication from an ethical viewpoint.

On the country level, we obtained a positive effect of the corruption level on moral perceptions ($B = .005, p < .05$): Contrary to Toledano and Avidar's (2016) speculation and against our own assumption, respondents working in countries that suffer from high levels of corruption are more likely to problematize questionable communication practices.

All other individual- and national-level predictors were insignificant: Neither individuals' gender, professional experience, hierarchical position, experience of ethical challenges, source and count of ethics training nor the country's degree of press freedom influence the perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to understand how micro- and macro-level factors influence the perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication. It draws on one of the largest data sets in PR research collected to date, with nearly 6,000 responses from communication professionals in more than 50 countries around the world—including countries in Central and Latin America as well as the Asia Pacific that remain much under-researched in comparative PR and communication studies until this day (Curran & Park, 2000; Volk, 2017). Results from multilevel modeling reveal that individual predispositions of PR practitioners influence perceptions more strongly than their respective national backgrounds. Although mean values suggest substantial differences among countries, our findings show that these differences are caused by diverging individual dispositions: The perceived importance of ethical guidelines by associations and their own organization, professionals' own morals, and age are significant predictors. These findings are in line with earlier studies exploring individual-level factors, which reported stronger moral concerns among senior professionals (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill & Weaver, 2017; Place, 2019; Toledano & Avidar, 2016).

Against our assumptions, the model does not reveal significant effects for other sociodemographic factors (i.e., gender, work experience, position), experience of moral challenges, or ethics training. Moreover, a considerable share of variance in the data remains unexplained by our model. Thus, we expect substantial influences by other predictors on the individual level that may be related to values and beliefs or age (e.g., life experience). These could, for example, include integrity, sense of justice, or general moral awareness. A similar observation was made in an interview study with PR practitioners by Lee and Cheng (2010), who found that ethical leadership is grounded mostly in personal values.

While it may be surprising at first glance that respondents from countries with higher levels of corruption are more likely to problematize certain practices, it seems plausible: After all, practitioners living and working in these countries might be more sensitized toward unethical practices because they can observe such behavior more often in their daily lives and professional environments. One possible

explanation as to why press freedom had no influence could be that most of the digital practices we surveyed, except for using sponsored content, enabled PR practitioners to bypass traditional journalistic gatekeepers.

Theoretical Contribution and Implications for PR Research

The overall weak influence of the national context might indicate an ongoing globalization of PR ethics—presumably largely driven by influential Western associations and their promotion of ethics codes—which could lead to similar perceptions across different countries, at least among our respondents (e.g., Kim & Ki, 2014). Our study adds new evidence to the universalism-relativism debate and suggests that digital communication practices related to the exploitation of stakeholders' data traces and message dissemination through paid channels are perceived as morally challenging in a similar way across countries. This finding also holds implications for theory building in PR ethics research. Given the strong influence of micro-level factors identified in our analysis, we suggest reconsidering the differential influence of individual versus national factors on moral perceptions as put forward in the framework by Tsetsura and Valentini (2016). Interestingly, comparable observations were also made in journalism research. For example, a comparative study of 18 countries by Hanitzsch et al. (2011) found that most journalists obey universal principles of ethics and avoid questionable methods of reporting. Similarly, a study by Higgins Joyce, Saldaña, Schmitz Weiss, and Alves (2017) found little evidence of the influence of different levels of press freedom on the ethical perspectives of journalists in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Practical Contribution and Implications for Applied PR Ethics

As many new possibilities come up with digital technologies, further awareness of ethics should be built at the individual, organizational, and professional levels. At the individual level, moral boundaries are critical so that PR practitioners do not succumb to the power relations of economic dependence on their employer or client particularly in ethical dilemma situations (Suárez Monsalve & Álvarez-Nobell, 2022). For example, there is a pressing need to advance PR practitioners' critical literacy on native ads (An, Kang, & Koo, 2018) and the impacts of algorithms and artificial intelligence (White & Boatwright, 2020). Given the identified importance of guidelines, existing national codes of ethics as well as organization-specific codes of conduct should be expanded to include guidelines for digital communication. Although education and training programs were no significant predictors, previous research has shown that trainings are key for shaping and defining ethical values (Ki, Lee, & Choi, 2012), and arguably, trainings specifically adapted to digital communication ethics might enable practitioners to keep pace with and navigate emerging moral challenges. Organizations can offer in-house training in the workplace (Place, 2019), while professional associations can provide platforms for exchange (e.g., during ICCO's "Ethics Month") and building of good practices using up-to-date and relevant examples.

Limitations and Future Research

While we believe that our study makes an important contribution to comparative PR ethics research, it does not come without limitations. Although we aimed for a diverse sample with a broad variety of individual, professional, and national backgrounds, our data could be biased to represent a "global PR

practitioner” who is well-versed in ethics and, with exceptions of Latin America and China, the English language—perhaps through membership in a professional association, training in a Western setting, or due to academic textbooks that propagate Western ethical values (cf. Hanitzsch, 2019). Thus, the observed similarities across different countries may partly be attributed to the structure of our sample. Future studies should strive to sample communication practitioners who are not able to answer questionnaires in the English language and are thus often underrepresented in global survey studies.

Another limitation concerns our measurement of the perception of morally challenging practices in digital communication. Perhaps due to the global discourse around ethical PR, some of the respondents did not deem our items as morally challenging because they were so obviously wrong—that is, although these items were ethically problematic, respondents did not indicate that they were challenging because they would never consider engaging in these practices in the first place. Future measures could include a more diverse range of morally questionable practices: For example, using artificial intelligence without disclosing it, deleting negative user comments, buying positive reviews, ghost blogging or using fake identities to comment, or practicing “dark public relations” that aim to defame or slander other organizations on digital platforms (Chen, Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020; Klyueva & Ngondo, 2023).

Lastly, our model was restricted to individual- and country-level predictors. The organizational context, however, could also play an important role (Bowen, 2004), and factors such as industry, size of the organization, or leadership culture may have a bearing on moral decisions and employees’ ethical conduct (Bowen, 2004; Schauster, 2015).

Against this backdrop, further conceptual and empirical research is needed that examines which factors influence how applied PR ethics is evolving, particularly in the context of artificial intelligence, and that draws on comparative perspectives to test whether these developments also apply to regions that have hardly been studied to date.

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