# Students' Perception of Public Relations Ethical Practice in Social Media: A Cross-national and Collaborative Approach

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## Abstract

*Ethical practice has always been one of the core foundations and critical issues in public relations profession. Following ethical standards is more critical (difficult) than ever in a digital world where media reaches global, fragmented audiences. Despite the potential advantages offered by social media, public relations scholars have also emphasized the ethical dimension of these new communication tools and practices. In line with this prognosis, this study, through a cross-national and collaborative approach explored public relations students' views on professional ethics, especially via social media platforms, in United Arab Emirates and Egypt. A cross-national online survey was used to collect data from 227 participants made up of 115 students from University of Sharjah and 162 students from Cairo University. The results delineated that students' perception was clear regarding the variables that influence ethical practice of public relations. The most notable variables were the culture of the society and the crises that organizations may face. Nonetheless, participants did not have a clear perception of the organizational content authenticity on social media compared to other dimensions of ethical practice. They strongly expressed the need for academic programs in public relations that will pay more attention to ethical professional practice, especially on digital platforms. These findings offer insight to public relations managers and curricula developers to come up with course content that will bring about ethical standards in the profession, especially in the domain of digital media practice.*

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between social media and ethics has simultaneously arisen in the last decade as more organizations incorporate social media strategies into their communication plans. This has brought about ethical challenges in managing relationships in a virtual context (DiStaso & Bortree, 2018). This may not entirely be a new phenomenon as public relations scholars have argued in the past 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, 2013a, p. 304).

Based on the foregoing it becomes imperative that knowledge areas, such as diversity and inclusion, ethics, and social issues should be incorporated into public relations curriculum. In today's society characterized by increasing calls for social justice – there is

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need to think beyond skills and ensure that public relations students are prepared to lead in these areas. (Meganck et al., 2020). This raises the question of the extent to which public relations students are conscious of the critical effects and moral challenges digital communication, in particular, social media practices may engender.

The shift to online and social media communication has greatly influenced the practice of public relations. Public relations scholars' interest in the way practitioners use the new tools and platforms of communication resulted in a plethora of research papers and books that highlighted the proper use of social media for communication in the industry. Unfortunately, most of the papers, and especially books had negligible information on digital ethics (e.g., Breakenridge & DeLougry, 2003; Breakenridge, 2008; Brown, 2009; Duhé, 2012; Gillin, 2007; Kelleher, 2007; Levine, 2001; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

Based on this, scholars have argued 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, 2014). They further contended that "practices such as deleting comments, controlling the conversation, ghost blogging, ghost commentating, social media monitoring and more are controversial." (p. xxvi). Despite the potential advantages offered by new digital platforms, public relations scholars are worried about the ethical dimension of practice through the platforms, especially the moral challenges they bring. Phillips and Young (2009) and Jensen (2011) were among the first to claim that digitalization and the spread of social media do not only magnify existing moral issues but also generate new conflicts. Likewise, Bachmann (2019) argued that the exploitation of digital technologies in public relations does not foster mutually beneficial relationships among all publics but rather 'breeds moral indifference and moral blindness' in attempts to win over publics.

Since the launch of the internet, public relations scholars have advanced theories, such as dialogue, as a way of guiding ethical online public relations practice (Kent & Li, 2020). Phillips and Young (2009) argued 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 identified the issues as revolving around "transparency, porosity, agency, richness, and reach". Under transparency they brought to the fore 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.

The rapidly evolving data economy based on surveillance capitalism as witnessed in the digital era, raises new issues of ethics and social responsibility for public relations practice and scholarship. (White & Boatwright (2020). There is disruption of values of ethics, as it were, in regard to "systematic analysis, the distinguishing of right from wrong, and determining the nature of what should be valued" (Bowen, 2007, p. 1). Because public relations professionals serve public interest and advocate responsibly for those they represent, they are obligated to do so ethically. (Place, 2018, p.422).

Conversely, social media represent an interactive space rather than a monologic, broadcasting, space of powerful communicators and opinion leaders. Companies, celebrities, entertainers, politicians, influencers, etc. should not disguise a lack of interest behind a facade of artificial concern and conversational voice. Activities that are designed to build para-social identification for purposes of appearing to care should also not be undertaken. Such activities are not consistent with public relations codes of ethics and general ethical communication principles going back hundreds of years. (Li & Kent, 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

The use of social media for public relations has been extensively studied; a database search using the terms 'public relations' and 'social media' resulted in almost 12,000

articles published in peer reviewed journals, most of which are about how organizations use social media as fast and economical channels to communicate directly with constituents in a variety of contexts. (White & Boatwright, 2020). The extant public relations research about social media is largely organization-centric, consisting of "how-to" articles that look at the organizations' benefits of using social media platforms as communication tools (how to organize messages, manage dialogue, increase engagement, use analytics, communicate in a crisis, etc.). The focus has been on efficiency rather than consequences and implications for users. The much smaller, sub-stream of social media research focuses on the ethical practice of public relations through social media (White & Boatwright, 2020). In her review of communication technology research in six journals primarily dedicated to public relations, Duhé (2015) identified only four articles out of 321 that raised moral concerns. There is, therefore, a huge literature lacuna in the area of PR ethics. This lack of research on moral issues is problematic especially as digital technologies, and specifically social media, have come to pose huge risks that can damage the social relationship between an organization and its stakeholders (Valentini, 2015). Elgueta-Ruiz & Martínez-Ortiz (2022) stated that ethics has not increased significantly as a subject of scientific study in public relations despite its importance as a criterion of professional standards. A failure that must be assumed and addressed by integrating it as a central element, not only of professional practice but also as a subject of academic research, with greater presence and importance in future studies.

## 2.1. Ethical Practice of Public Relations in Social Media

Kent (2010) has expressed concerns about the way public relations practitioners use social media "for organizational marketing initiative and exploiting publics" (p. 650). He contended that public relations scholars have not directed enough attention to ethical issues on social media (p. 651). Past studies have found that organizations use Facebook to become friendly with publics so that their 'authenticity' becomes nothing more than a clever persuasive strategy in the public relations arsenal (Demetrious, 2011 p. 124). While it has been suggested that public relations practitioners serve as ethical counsel (Bowen, 2008) to the organizations that they serve, or that they function as an "ethical guardian" (L'Etang, 2003), the role of the public relations professional must undergo greater scrutiny in the online dialogic environment. Critiques highlight the fact that dialogic ethical integrity only holds up when considering the deontological framework of two-way communication under a means-based approach in contrast to an ends-based utilitarian approach where flaws are revealed. (Browning, 2015).

The recent and rapid rise of social media influencers raises questions about their use by public relations practitioners and their 'fit' with the field's dominant normative frameworks championing ethical dialogue (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). From a public relations perspective, social media influencers serve as gatekeepers in a vanguard position to decide which information flows within network systems, acting both as co-producers and as intermediaries of messages (Heath et al., 2018). If they do so, social media influencers perform a function that is similar to that of journalists, even though they largely lack specific training routes, editorial quality standards, and professional ethics. Davies & Hobbs (2020) argue that the affordances provided by the emergence of social media influencers are predisposing practitioners to persuasive strategies and covert activities that lack transparency and are inconsistent with ethical ideals of best practice for organizational public relations.

## 2.2. Social Media Ethics and Standards of the Profession

Following ethical standards is more critical than ever in a digital world where media reaches global, fragmented audiences (Auman et al., 2020). Thanks to social media and the Internet, an organization's strategic focus and ethical standards can be easily revealed and become immediately accessible to publics all over the world, which in turn may engender even greater public scrutiny (Tao & Kim, 2017).

Using social media cases to derive ethical standards for digital engagement, Bowen (2013b), developed guidelines that are not substantively different from ethical guidelines for any other type of public relations communication or stakeholder engagement. The results stressed that the rapidly changing digital communication environment 'only heighten[s] the ethical imperative for accuracy, honesty, and full disclosure' (p. 131). Congruently, Distaso & Bortree (2014) highlighted standards like openness, transparency, message accuracy, truthfulness, and respectfulness of messages for online public relations practice, all of which apply equally to ethical communication in traditional media. Such studies to date have emphasized the ethics of the public relations practitioners and/or organizations, without enough consideration of public relations students' perceptions about social media ethics.

Sebastiao et al. (2017) contend that in public relations practice, ethical behavior includes right to privacy, confidentiality agreements, informed consent, credibility and veracity of information. Many ethical social media platforms honor the privacy of personal data and have policies and firewalls to protect customers. While much personal data such as medical, financial, or market data collected by private companies is protected and may even require informed consent about its use, data collected on social media sites is haphazard, invisible, and the user has granted the social media corporation unrestricted use by agreeing to the privacy policy (Schwartz & Solove, 2014). The ethical imperative is therefore to inform people about how their data will be used.

The mutual relationship between an organization and its publics is another area of interest in PR morality. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations as mutually beneficial relationships and the alignment of organizational policies and procedures with the public interest, and its code of ethics specifically addresses the public interest in two of its six professional values. With consent of users who agreed to social media policies, those platforms sell access to their users to other entities (called "advertisers" as a euphemism) that use micro targeting made possible by algorithms to take advantage of an array of psychological vulnerabilities. Consequences include ideological polarization, radicalization, and threats to democratic elections that affect the public interest in countries around the world (Osnos, 2018).

Public relations practitioners face more moral challenges in their daily work than they did in the past. Regarding digital communication tools and practices, they report moral concerns especially related to using bots, exploiting personal data for big-data analyses, paying social media influencers, and using sponsored content. Personal values and beliefs are the most important resources for dealing with moral issues—either because only a minority of practitioners have participated in any formal ethics training within the past three years, or because existing ethical guidelines are outdated. Based on this, public relations scholars have called for the development of ethical guidelines that can provide explicit advice in the area of digital communication. Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the need for structured training programs and ethics courses in graduate programs to enhance practitioners' ethical knowledge (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

Scholars are also worried that existing codes of ethics in public relations have failed to address online-sponsored content sufficiently (Ikonen et al., 2017), giving rise, for example, to Facebook's questionable monetization of data. Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms that monetizes data by profiling users and selling their information to advertisers including all entities that pay for sponsored content on the company's platform (Tufekci, 2018). Sponsored content appears on users' News Feeds based on algorithms that can infer personality traits, political views, mental health status and more (Naughton, 2020).

2.3. Practitioners' Perception of Digital Public Relations Ethics

Public relations professionals who are responsible for ethical communication on behalf of their clients or organizations need to understand that the possibilities of social media have

just as much "potential" as we move forward, as past practices did (Li & Kent, 2021). When professionals are engaged in internet-related public relations activities, they are responsible for social media content and should assess the nature of organizations' social media practices in order to provide ethical advice and training to the organizations they serve (Valentini, 2015).

Ethically, public relations practitioners have the professional responsibility, just like many other public communicators, to shun and discredit fake news. They also have a responsibility to their clients and employers to monitor and address any moral transgressions that could be damaging to their organization's reputation as part of their responsibility to manage issues (Jahng et al., 2020).

The proliferation of social media technologies has seen public relations practitioners adapt their practices for the emergent digital media ecologies, with the growing phenomenon of social media influencers presenting new opportunities and challenges for the industry. Indeed, the profession's rapid adoption of influencers as part of their campaigns raises questions regarding the ethics of their use and the extent to which they fit with normative models of public relations practice that promote genuine dialogue and responsible advocacy (Davies & Hobbs, 2020).

Neill & Weaver (2017) postulated that millennial public relations practitioners did not feel prepared to offer ethics counsel and did not expect to face ethical dilemmas at work. Through survey research with more than 200 young professionals, statistically significant differences were found regarding perceptions of readiness to offer ethics counsel based on the availability of a mentor, ethics training in college, and ethics training at work. Through the lens of social identity theory, significant differences were found based on familiarity and likelihood to use ethics resources provided by professional associations. Finally, confidence in discussing ethical concerns with their mentor or direct supervisor did influence their likelihood to offer ethics counsel.

Other studies have also found that millennials were concerned about unethical business practices in public relations agencies. They include: client billing, media relations, and client presentations (Gallicano et al., 2012). However, the authors pointed out that the millennials did not provide any suggestions on how to address these issues, which may indicate, that "they felt they lacked any power to change them" (p. 239). Other scholars also found that when millennials were presented with three ethical dilemmas, they preferred "to avoid an issue rather than taking a stand" by simply referring the issue to a superior, ignoring a request or choosing to follow their bosses' orders (Curtin et al., 2011, p. 13).

Culiberg & Mihelic (2016) investigated the ethical decisions of millennials, who are not only part of an expanding cohort of the workforce but also represent potential future managers with a growing influence on work practices and employment relationships. In a conceptual model, they proposed that three ethical frames of reference, including perceived organizational ethics, perceived employee ethics and reflective moral attentiveness, antecede ethical judgments, which further influence ethical intentions of millennials. Three different business ethics scenarios were used: paying a consulting fee, dumping hazardous waste, and running an offensive advertising campaign. The findings confirm correlation of ethical judgements and intentions across the board, while the influence of the ethical frames of reference varies among the scenarios. They proposed that the differences in the predictive ability of the ethical frames of reference depend on the nature of the ethical issue, which holds important implications for today's managers in their attempts to encourage ethical behavior of millennial employees. The implications also extend to developers of PR curriculum who should come up with relevant courses that will equip aspiring practitioners with the capacity to tackle digital PR ethical concerns.

Communication practitioners who have enhanced social media skills show a higher perception of the importance of building relationships in the digital arena (Zerfass et al., 2016). To develop and establish specific competencies for communication practitioners in the future, the acquisition of digital skills that address social media management becomes a sine qua non (Tench & Moreno, 2015). Despite these insights, scholars have decried the lack of empirical studies regarding "Millennials' perspectives on work and ethics, particularly in public relations" (Curtin et al., 2011, p. 1).

Given the foregoing revelation - that millennial public relations practitioners do not have sufficient awareness of the ethics of practicing their profession on social media - it becomes pertinent to develop this awareness among public relations students who represent the future practitioners of this profession. In light of these multiple ethical challenges facing public relations practitioners in a digital environment, this study questions whether academic programs consider the importance of preparing students to face and manage these challenges in their future work environment. The study will also probe to determine the extent to which public relations students are aware of these challenges.

2.4. Ethics in Public Relations Education

There are few, if any, studies that seek to address the issue of social media ethics in light of virtue education within the public relations discipline (Kim, 2019). Ethical practice on social media is a particularly salient issue for public relations educators due to two key considerations. First, social media is a core skill set public relations students are expected to possess upon graduation (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). Because of this expectation, educators adapt curricula, courses, and assignments to integrate social media into public relations education (Kim, 2017). Second, beyond the use of social media as a tool, public relations education is rooted in an ethical framework that guides the communication and relationship-building competencies that students are expected to use in the professional world.

Given this scenario, PR scholars have stipulated that educators must integrate multiple disciplinary approaches and cultural contexts into coursework for students to have a more concrete ethical toolbox from which to draw (Austin & Toth's ;2011). Public relations educators should emphasize that applying ethics is about weighing moral choices. Students need to learn where the principles of ethics come from and how they are related to basic human values rather than just focus on the codes. Students also need to study a set of virtues for public relations profession that are the basis for codes of ethics. Students need to practice weighing moral choices to find a balance, depending on the individual situation and the impact of a decision on the stakeholders involved. This can also mean that they have to consider cultural and political contexts. A decision in one country or context may be different in another because of its impact on different stakeholders. (Auman et al., 2020).

To create the ethical tool box, Neil (2017), argued that ethics should be integrated throughout the curriculum rather than taught as a stand-alone course in public relations. However, there are substantial differences in the types of content taught in the two formats based on survey research with 96 educators. Some of the topics that are less likely to be taught outside of an ethics course included other codes of ethics beyond those of the Public Relations Society of America, classical theories by philosophers, decision-making models, the effect of organizational culture and values, and global perspectives on ethics. In addition, few educators were positive about raising ethical concerns in their courses. Ultimately ethics content should be applied to public relations profession to show students real-world scenarios that they may encounter. Educators believed that very often textbook scenarios did not mirror what students would face in the profession or show effectively the nuances in ethical decision-making in PR practice (Austin & Toth, 2011).

Expanding the discussion, Bortree (2019) recommended building digital ethics topics and issues related to confidentiality into the public relations curriculum. These topics were not among the most common areas covered by educators (Neill, 2017). Helping students understand the differences between personal and professional communication on social media, as well as learning what to disclose and to whom will prepare them for the professional environment.

In the same vein, Kim (2019) suggested that virtue education in public relations can assist students learn to ethically manage complex situations. Kim contended that, while students valued civility, personal responsibility, and human dignity, there is nonetheless a disconnect in how students manifest those values within social media. Virtue education focuses on developing character in students over a particular assignment, course, or program. The end goal would be that students develop virtues that serve them as professionals to help navigate complex ethical decisions. Students seem to need additional training and education in the areas of the values that support online public relations practice. This additional education has the potential to shape students' character. This may shape their ethical decision-making processes in ways that foster ethical dialogue between people of differing views.

Given the importance attached to ethics in PR education and the range of ethical dilemmas faced by PR professionals, The Commission on Public Relations Education in 2017, made a recommendation to add ethics course as a required public relations curriculum. The purpose of the recommended course is to explore the most common issues and to provide students with tools to work through moral dilemmas. The course was projected to cover a wide range of topics including transparency, digital ethics, social responsibility, and media framing. The course was expected to be a stand-alone public relations ethics course, different from courses in media ethics or media law. One of the main recommended topics to be covered in the course is "ethics in the digital age" (Ethics Education Report, 2017).

Given the increasing level of complexity in the digital world and the challenge of fake news and misinformation in the public sphere, ethical behavior among public relations professionals is critical for continuing to build the reputation of the field. What the report does not address is how current public relations education prepares (or fails to prepare) young professionals to face ethical issues in the workplace and how training on ethics continues into a student's first job (Bortree, 2019, p.24).

2.5. Students' Attitudes Towards Public Relations Ethics on Social Media

While many studies have addressed social media use and ethics, there is limited research that examined the implications for students' learning about ethical social media practice in public relations (Kim, 2019, p.23). Studies that assessed the impact of ethics instruction on advertising and public relations graduates indicated that media ethics instruction corresponds with ethical awareness and ethical leadership (Gale & Bunton; 2005)

Generation Y (Gen Y) is a cohort of the population consisting of approximately 80 million people born between 1981 and 2000; it is the most recent cohort to enter the workforce. Workplaces are being redefined and organizations are being pressed to adapt as this new wave of workers is infused into business environments. One critical aspect of this phenomenon not receiving sufficient research attention is the impact of Gen Y ethical beliefs and ethical conduct in workplace contexts. It is widely accepted that distinct generational experiences shape ethical ideologies and this in turn, affects the way people function in the workplace. Thus, Gen Y's unique cohort experiences are likely to shape their ethical ideologies and consequent workplace judgments and actions (VanMeter et al., 2013).

Verčič et al. (2015) focused on the nexus between public relations and ICTs, and digital, social and mobile media. They found that public relations students were the group that

received the least attention of researches concerned with the ethical practice of their future profession.

Meganck et al. (2020) concluded that both educators and practitioners believed that upon graduation public relations students should have knowledge of ethics, diversity and inclusion, cultural perspectives, business acumen, social issues, and laws and regulations affecting public relations. Navarro et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of developing strong student' social media knowledge and skills. Professionals that are unprepared for upcoming digital challenges face a number of barriers and encounter more difficulties in entering the job market.

Thus it is pertinent to ensure that PR students are well versed, for example, in client work ethics which involves honesty, respect, following personal convictions, bracketing personal values, and balancing ethical values (Place, 2018). Place's study indicated that students perceived that client work prepared them to be accountable, perform quality work, rely on mentoring, and learn that being ethical takes practice. Ultimately, client work appears to help students explore ethical beliefs and competencies in a realistic environment with assistance. Students' focus on the element of honesty in client work is expected, as it remains the most cited ethical value among public relations professionals (Place, 2018, p.423).

In a different stance, Yannikkaya (2015) indicated that communication students treat higher education only as a means to reach one goal, which is, to find a job. In order to reach this goal, it seems that they do not feel obliged to follow certain ethical principles. This does not augur well for the PR industry, especially given that visualized and digitalized media have taken over media industries. They have become prevalent forms for specific segments of the public who have access to digital devices, and thus there is a current need to make a change in teaching ethics under the prevailing circumstances. Given the apparent contradictory practice to the field's guiding ethical principles, public relations scholars, practitioners, educators, and students need to revisit the importance of social media ethics (DiStaso & Bortree, 2018, p.15).

## 3. Research Questions

As digitalization is continuously bringing forth new and more advanced possibilities for communicating with stakeholders online, moral challenges for students who are future practitioners may further increase. Thus, the research questions focus on understanding the perspectives PR students hold regarding the ethical practice of public relations via social media, as follows:

RQ1: What public relations practices do students consider as ethically acceptable or not acceptable, mainly in the domain of social media?

RQ2: Do students' perceptions of ethical issues on social media differ according to the sociocultural environment in which they study and will practice in the future?

RQ3: What are the opportunities to support ethical practice of public relations via social media? RQ4: What are the variables influencing ethical practice of public relations via social media?

RQ5: To what extent are PR students academically qualified to manage the ethical challenges of digital practice?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Survey and data collection

The tremendous impact of social media on public relations brings up numerous ethical considerations. It would be interesting to examine how public relations students are aware of social media's influence on their future profession's ethics and practice. In doing so, 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). The current study calls for critical reflection on the part of public relations students in light of emerging consequences of using a form of media where the only gatekeeping is done by algorithms. It also expands the research agenda to include students' concerns and perceptions about the ethical practice of their future profession via social media. The current research responds to Kent's (2014) call for theoretical questions that go beyond the study of social media as a message vehicle, and to Valentini's (2015) call to critically reflect on the consequences and effects of social media on public relations with publics and society at large, and especially the implications for organizations that use the social media platforms to communicate with their stakeholders.

So far, only a few studies have addressed the perception of public relations students towards the appropriate moral use of digital communication tools and practices (Bortree, 2019; Place, 2018 & Neil, 2017). To address the gap in this research area, we explored the perceptions of undergraduate public relations students from University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Cairo University (Egypt) on PR ethical practice on social media platforms

This study employed the cross-national and collaborative approach to gauge public relations students' views on professional ethics, especially via social media platforms, in United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Thus this research undertook a comparative analysis of the expected level of respect for ethical conduct among future PR practitioners in two national cultures; Emirati and Egyptian. Survey questions were drawn from public relations literature and previous studies. An online survey, that sought answers to the research questions, was deployed to participants, using Survey Monkey, a well-known survey platform, over Fall and Spring semesters of 2021-2022. The online survey was active for three months: from December 2021, to February 2022. A total number of 227 respondents completed the survey; 115 students from University of Sharjah and 162 students from Cairo University. Although 'ethics' is a very sensitive topic and respondents are often reluctant to share experiences or answer questions about ethical concepts nevertheless the respondents in this study provided valuable data.  The Table below represents the demographics of the respondents of this study.

Table (1) Demographics & Academic Variables

| Sample  Variable | | n. |
|---|---|---|
| Country | UAE | 115 |
| | Egypt | 162 |
| Gender | Male | 53 |
| | Female | 224 |
| Academic level | Level A (1,2) | 163 |
| | Level B (3,40) | 114 |
| Academic grade (GPA) | Below  2.5 | 43 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Above  2.5 | 234 |
| Sample Total | | 227 |

## 4.2.    Instrument

In addition to demographic and academic information - country, gender, academic level and GPA, - our investigation focused on students' perceptions and perspectives towards what they might consider ethical or unethical PR practices on social media. Each respondent was asked to identify the following dimensions by a three-point Likert-scale question: (3 = agree, 2 = neutral, and 1 = disagree):

- Public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media.

- Opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media.

- The authenticity of organizational social media content.

- Influencing variables on the ethical practice of PR via social media.

- Students' academic qualification to manage ethical challenges of digital practice.

- Role of social media influencers in ethical PR practice on social media.

## 4.3. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). In addition to descriptive analyses, researchers used t-test to examine the differences among demographics and academic variables of the two students' groups. Pearson correlation was used to measure relationships among the six dimensions of ethical public relations practice.

## 5. Results

Findings of this study provide significant and useful insights into current ethical challenges perceived by public relations students in the two universities.

5.1. Overall Students' attitudes towards ethical PR practice on social media

Figure (1) shows the total means of students' perception dimensions about the ethics of professional public relations practice via social media platforms.
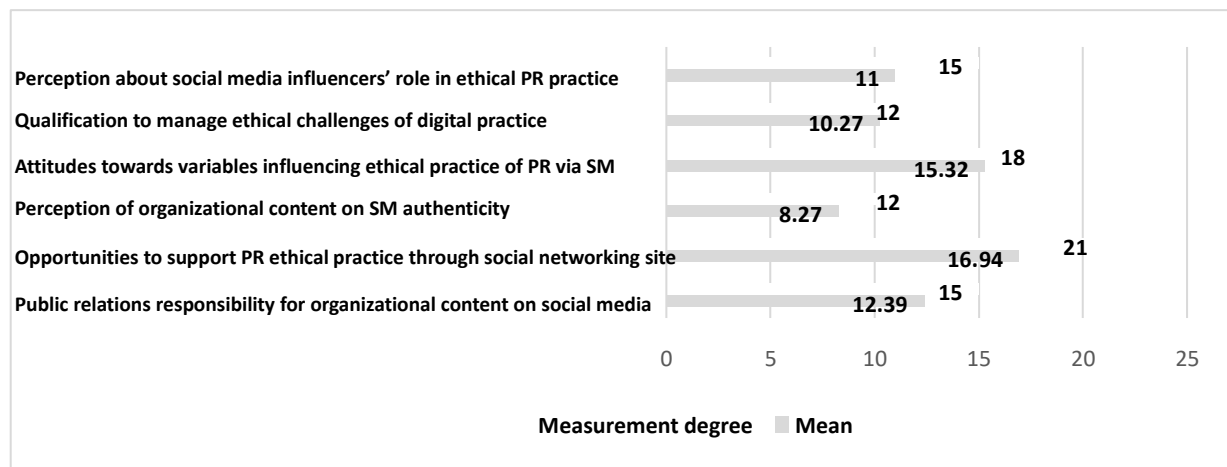


Figure (1) Means of students' perception dimensions

Findings indicate that the means of these dimensions are high, as the mean of students' awareness towards public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media was (12.39) out of a scale of (15) degrees. The mean of students' perception of the opportunities available to support public relations ethical practice through social networking sites was (16.49) from a scale of (21) degrees.

With regard to students' perception of organizational content on social media authenticity, the mean was (8.27) out of a 12-degree scale. This low mean may be due to the students' inability to fully evaluate the authenticity of organizational content at this stage of their academic career. The mean of students' attitudes towards variables influencing ethical practice of public relations through social media was (15.32) from a scale of (18) degrees. Students' perception about their academic qualification to manage ethical challenges of digital practice was (10.27) from a scale of (12) degrees. Finally, the mean of their perception about social media influencers' role in ethical PR practice was (11) in a scale of (15) degree.

5.2. Public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media Table (2) students' attitudes towards PR responsibility for organizational content

| Public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
| 1 | PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organization's ethical conduct on social media. | 84.8 | 13 | 2.2 | 2.83 |
| 2 | A PR practitioner who knows about digital ethical corruption in the organization should act as a 'whistle-blower'. | 82.7 | 16.2 | 1.1 | 2.82 |
| 3 | The organization's accounts on social media must be authenticated by the concerned government agencies. | 80.5 | 17.7 | 1.8 | 2.79 |
| 4 | Social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organizations they serve. | 68.2 | 29.6 | 2.2 | 2.66 |
| 5 | PR practitioners have no role in guiding employees towards ethical conduct on social media. | 7.6 | 15.2 | 77.3 | 1.30 |

This section focused on students' perception of public relations responsibility for the organizational content on social networking sites. Five statements were used to assess this perception with a three-point Likert scale; agree, disagree or neutral. First and second statements "PR practitioners should take responsibility for the organization's ethical conduct on social media" and "A PR practitioner who knows about digital ethical corruption in the organization should act as a 'whistle-blower'" came with mean = 2.83 & 2.82 respectively. This reflected a good understanding from participants of public relations practitioners' role in managing and following up on the content published on organizations' social networking accounts. Two statements came in the third and fourth order: "The organization's accounts on social media must be authenticated by the concerned government agencies" (mean = 2.79) and "Social media have improved PR practitioners' control over the distribution of messages on behalf of the organizations they serve" (mean = 2.66). The high means recorded in those statements indicated a clear perception of public relations responsibility for following up the organization's accounts

and interacting with its followers. These findings showed also that students see their future profession as being responsible for documenting these accounts in cooperation with relevant entities to protect the account and keep intellectual property rights.

In contrast to the previous statements, the mean of "PR practitioners have no role in guiding employees towards ethical conduct on social media" showed the lowest mean = 1.30. This also reflects the students' good understanding of both the managerial and ethical role of public relations in the use of organizational official accounts established on social networking sites.

In general, findings indicated a high rate of awareness among students studying public relations in UAE (University of Sharjah) and Egypt (Cairo University) of the ethical role that public relations and corporate communication departments must play through organizational social media. This confirms the impact of the relevant content presented to them on ethical issues in the formation of this awareness, whether related to the direct practices of employees or the role played by public relations, they should emphasize adherence to ethical standards and guarantee the rights of both the organization and users of its accounts.

5.3. Opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media

Table (3) students' perception about opportunities to support the ethical PR practice

| Opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
| 1 | Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organization. | 75.1 | 23.1 | 1.8 | 2.73 |
| 2 | Organizations have the right to intervene by deleting or changing public comments on their social media accounts. | 72.9 | 22.7 | 4.3 | 2.69 |
| 3 | When using social media, PR practitioners advance organization interests over the interests of the public. | 70.4 | 27.4 | 2.2 | 2.68 |
| 4 | It is ok for organizations to analyse and use the data of their digital platforms users to achieve communicational goals. | 66.4 | 32.1 | 1.4 | 2.65 |
| 5 | Social media provide PR with an opportunity to inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions. | 46.6 | 26 | 27.4 | 2.19 |
| 6 | PR practitioners consider public interests as the priority when using social media. | 41.9 | 24.9 | 33.2 | 2.09 |
| 7 | using artificial intelligence techniques in organization's conduct on social media supports the ethical practice of public relations. | 32.1 | 27.1 | 40.8 | 1.91 |

In this section we sought to identify students' perception of available opportunities through which they can support public relations ethical practices through social media. Seven statements were used to assess this perception. Four statements produced means that were more than (2.50): "Social media provide PR with an opportunity to elevate its status within the organization" (mean = 2.73), "Organizations have the right to intervene by deleting or changing public comments on their social media accounts" (mean = 2.69), "When using social media, PR practitioners advance organization interests over the

interests of the public" (mean = 2.68) and "It is ok for organizations to analyze and use the data of their digital platforms users to achieve communicational goals" (mean = 2.65). Findings indicate that students in both countries have clear understanding about practices that support public relations ethics by recognizing and benefiting from the standards of each social media platform; the responsibility of public relations in interfering with the content published by users at the expense of the organization and the importance of taking into account the interests and concerns of the organization through those modern platforms, continuous follow-up and analysis of numbers and statistics of users' data, interests, comments and characteristics. The findings also show that students are aware of the ethical dimension of digital practices so that the interest of one party is not imposed over another and that everyone adheres to a clear ethical framework during communication and interaction through social media platforms.

The means of the other three statements were less than (2.50): "Social media provide PR with an opportunity to inspire management's socially responsible and ethical decisions" (mean = 2.19), "PR practitioners consider public interests as a priority when using social media" (mean = 2.09) and "Using artificial intelligence techniques in organization's conduct on social media supports the ethical practice of public relations" (mean = 1.91). These findings show an intermediate perception among the students about the institutional, societal and technical variables that could support public relations ethical role in terms of the organization's moral commitment; the priority of commitment to the interests of the public; and employing modern technologies to support ethical practices. The researchers attributed this to the fact that these variables and obligations are linked to a more comprehensive understanding of public relations role for which students, at their current academic level, may not yet have achieved.

5.4. The authenticity of organizational social media content

Table (4) students' perception about authenticity of organizational social media content

| | The authenticity of organizational social media content | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
| 1 | I find it difficult to write blogs on behalf of CEOs because social media requires authentic voices. | 32.9 | 40.4 | 26.7 | 2.26 |
| 2 | Publics suspect the authenticity of communicative content provided by organizations on digital platforms. | 32.1 | 52.3 | 15.5 | 2.17 |
| 3 | I believe that most corporate communicational messages on digital platforms are reliable. | 31.8 | 49.1 | 19.1 | 2.13 |
| 4 | It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without declaring his/her identity. | 33.2 | 25.6 | 41.2 | 1.92 |

This section intended to determine the extent of students' awareness of organizational contents, published on social media platforms; adherence to ethical standards. Four statements were used in this section. The means of all four statements were less than (2.50): "I believe that most corporate communicational messages on digital platforms are reliable" (mean = 2.26), "It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without declaring his/her identity" (mean = 2.17), "Publics suspect the authenticity of communicative content provided by organizations on digital platforms" (mean = 2.13) and "I find it difficult to write blogs on behalf of CEOs because social media requires authentic voices" (mean = 1.92). The findings indicate that students have an average awareness of the specific ethical practices for public relations. These include the appropriateness of organizations' content to ethical standards, which requires a

specialized critical view that may not be available to the students yet, or tactics for dealing with public comments or their view of the audience's evaluation of the contents in the organizational accounts, in addition to the public relations practitioners role in editing communications messages on behalf of senior management.

5.5.    Influencing variables on ethical practice of PR via social media

Table (5) students' perception of variables influencing ethical practice of PR

| | Influencing variables on ethical practice of PR via social media | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
| 1 | Adhering to the ethics of digital public relations practice becomes more important during crises. | 85.6 | 12.6 | 1.8 | 2.84 |
| 2 | Societal culture influences what is morally acceptable or unacceptable in digital public relations practice. | 85.2 | 11.9 | 2.9 | 2.82 |
| 3 | Each organization should publish a policy to instruct employees on their communication on social media. | 80.5 | 13.7 | 5.8 | 2.75 |
| 4 | PR professional societies have a significant role in clarifying the ethics of digital practice to practitioners. | 70.8 | 27.4 | 1.8 | 2.69 |
| 5 | Best practice requires a disclaimer by all bloggers and PR practitioners if they are paid by an organization for delivering a specific message. | 58.1 | 34.3 | 7.6 | 2.51 |
| 6 | It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it. | 22 | 27.8 | 50.2 | 1.72 |

 The intent of this part of the enquiry is to identify the students' perception of the variables that influence ethical practices of public relations through social media. Six statements were used to assess perception. The results indicated a high level of students' awareness of the variables that may prompt public relations professionals to employ ethical behavior standards while using social media to interact with organization's stakeholders. The means of the six statements are as follows: "Adhering to the  ethics of digital public relations practice becomes more important during crises" (mean=2.84), "Societal culture influences what is morally acceptable or unacceptable in digital public relations practice" (mean = 2.82), "Each organization should publish a policy to instruct employees on their communication on social media" (mean = 2.75), "PR professional societies have a significant role in clarifying the ethics of digital practice to practitioners" (mean=2.69) and "Best practice requires a disclaimer by all bloggers and PR practitioners if they are paid by an organization for delivering a specific message" (mean = 2.51). This indicates that the students are aware of the importance of observing the ethics of interaction and communication during crises, and taking into consideration the culture of society, as well as the culture and identity of the organization, which also contributes to building its ethical standards. It also shows that the students recognize the role of professional associations in setting ethical codes, and the importance of separating public relations from advertising activities and the commitment to be clear to the public about paid advertising materials published on social media accounts.

Findings showed a high awareness among public relations students of the ethical guidelines in which public relations operate, which includes the ethics and culture of the society, the nature of the organization, its identity and its own culture, as well as the role of professional associations in updating and publishing codes of ethics and calling for action. This high awareness indicates, for the second time, a positive role for the students' academic qualification as regards public relations ethics. Conversely, the mean of the following statement decreased, "It is ok for PR practitioners to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it" (mean = 1.72). This may indicate a relative weakness of students' awareness of some advertising practices through social media.

5.6. Students' academic qualification to manage ethical challenges of digital practice

Table (6) students' academic qualification to manage ethical challenges

| | Students' academic qualification to manage ethical challenges of digital practice | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
| 1 | PR practitioners need to be very aware of their professional ethics when managing digital platforms. | 92.4 | 7.2 | 0.4 | 2.92 |
| 2 | Academic programs in public relations need more consideration about ethics of professional digital practice. | 85.6 | 13.4 | 1.1 | 2.84 |
| 3 | I am well qualified to deal with ethical issues relating to organizational communication on social media. | 57.4 | 36.8 | 5.8 | 2.52 |
| 4 | I do not clearly know the ethical standards for practicing public relations via social media. | 29.2 | 40.8 | 30 | 1.99 |

In this section we sought to explore the students' vision of their academic qualification requirements to deal with ethical challenges evolving in digital communication practices. Findings indicate that most of the needs identified by students in the field for realizing and understanding the ethics of public relations are related to the following statements, respectively: "PR practitioners need to be very aware of their professional ethics when managing digital platforms" (mean = 2.92), "Academic programs in public relations need more consideration about ethics of professional digital practice" (mean = 2.84) and "I am well qualified to deal with ethical issues relating to organizational communication on social media" (mean = 2.52). This indicates that students recognize clearly that it is necessary for them to learn about the professional ethics organizing social media interactions, and their desire that the academic curricula address more topics related to these ethics. Students indicated that they considered themselves well qualified in areas such as organizational communication and social media management. Inversely, the mean for the statement "I do not clearly know the ethical standards for practicing public relations via social media" (mean =1.99) decreased. This highlights the students' desire to know more about ethical standards and guidelines of using digital media on behalf of the organization they serve, particularly in the light of rapid technical development in digital media platforms.

5.7. Role of social media influencers in ethical PR practice on social media

Table (7) students' perception of social media influencers' role in ethical PR practice

| No. | Statements | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Mean |
|-----|-----------|-------|---------|----------|------|
| | Role of social media influencers in ethical PR practice on social media | | | | |
| 1 | Prominence of social media influencers has increased ethical challenges for public relations practitioners. | 74.7 | 21.7 | 3.6 | 2.71 |
| 2 | Social media influencers are involved in managing digital communication between organizations and their public. | 54.9 | 35 | 10.1 | 2.45 |
| 3 | I would create an activist group to support my employer's interests and pay them to post our side of the story on social media. | 53.8 | 30.7 | 15.5 | 2.38 |
| 4 | It is ok to pay bloggers to deliver the organization's message as everybody is doing it anyway. | 43.7 | 26.4 | 30.1 | 2.13 |
| 5 | It is ok to pay social media influencers for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with my employer. | 13 | 6.5 | 80.5 | 1.32 |

In this section, five statements were used to assess and identify the students' awareness of social media influencers' role in shaping the ethical practices of public relations via social media. Students agreed strongly with the statement "Prominence of social media influencers has increased ethical challenges for public relations practitioners" (mean = 2.71). It indicates the students' high recognition of the challenges created by social media influencers regarding public relations ethical practice. The means converged for each of the following statements: "Social media influencers are involved in managing digital communication between organizations and their public" (mean = 2.45), "I would create an activist group to support my employer's interests and pay them to post our side of the story on social media" (mean = 2.38) and "It is ok to pay bloggers to deliver the organization's message as everybody is doing it anyway" (mean = 2.13). These findings highlight awareness among students of a number of public relations practitioners who use social media influencers to activate communication with the publics and positively mobilize the organization's issues and push them to spread the organization's messages to large numbers of stakeholders. Contrarily, the mean of the following statement "It is ok to pay social media influencers for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with my employer" (mean = 1.32) sharply decreased. This could be because the statement is a negative and reflects an unethical public relations practice. Students' disagreement with it indicated their profound awareness about the unacceptable practices that some public relations practitioners engage in.

5.8. Differences between the two student groups

Based on the country, academic level, and grade point average (GPA), the researchers resorted to t-test to measure the differences between students in the UAE and students in Egypt - males and females in first, second, third and fourth academic levels with a GPA of 2.5 or less and more than 2.5. The results of the tests concluded that there were no statistically significant differences between the clusters. The mean of the country variable indicated that University of Sharjah students are higher in all indicators related to students' perception of public relations ethical practice via social media.

With regard to the gender, the means are higher for male students' responses with respect to these two dimensions: 'The authenticity of organizational social media content' and 'Role of social media influencers in ethical PR practice on social media'. The means of female students are higher regarding 'public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media', 'opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media' and influencing variables on ethical practice of PR via social media. Means for students' academic qualification as a catalyst to manage ethical challenges of digital practice are equal between male and female students.

As for the academic level, means are higher for advanced levels (third and fourth) in all perceptions dimensions except influencing variables on ethical practice of PR via social media. With regard to the GPA, the means indicated a rise for students with the highest average in all dimensions except for opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media.

Table (8) Differences between the two student groups

| Perception dimensions | Country | | Gender | | Level | | GPA | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media | UAE | 12.49 | Male | 12.36 | Level A(1,2) | 12.36 | Below2.5 | 12.35 |
| | Egypt | 12.33 | Female | 12.40 | Level B(3,4) | 12.44 | Above2.5 | 12.40 |
| Dimension Mean | | 12.39/15 | | 12.39/15 | | 12.39/15 | | 12.39/15 |
| Opportunities to support the ethical practice of PR via social media | UAE | 17.39 | Male | 16.89 | Level A(1,2) | 16.57 | Below2.5 | 17.70 |
| | Egypt | 16.62 | Female | 16.96 | Level B(3,4) | 17.47 | Above2.5 | 16.80 |
| Dimension Mean | | 16.92/21 | | 16.94/21 | | 16.94/21 | | 16.94/21 |
| The authenticity of organizational social media content | UAE | 8.52 | Male | 8.38 | Level A(1,2) | 8.04 | Below2.5 | 8.81 |
| | Egypt | 8.10 | Female | 8.25 | Level B(3,4) | 8.61 | Above2.5 | 8.18 |
| Dimension Mean | | 8.27/12 | | 8.27/12 | | 8.27/12 | | 8.27/12 |
| Influencing variables on ethical practice of PR via social media | UAE | 15.49 | Male | 15.15 | Level A(1,2) | 15.38 | Below2.5 | 15.62 |
| | Egypt | 15.21 | Female | 15.36 | Level B(3,4) | 15.24 | Above2.5 | 15.27 |
| Dimension Mean | | 15.32/18 | | 15.32/18 | | 15.32/18 | | 15.32/18 |

| Students' academic qualification to manage ethical challenges of digital practice | UAE | 10.35 | Male | 10.28 | Level A(1,2) | 10.25 | Below2.5 | 10.37 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Egypt | 10.22 | Female | 10.27 | Level B(3,4) | 10.31 | Above2.5 | 10.26 |
| Dimension Mean | | 10.27/12 | | 10.27/12 | | 10.27/12 | | 10.27/12 |
| Role of social media influencers in ethical PR practice on social media | UAE | 11.33 | Male | 10.92 | Level A(1,2) | 11.02 | Below2.5 | 10.95 |
| | Egypt | 10.78 | Female | 11.03 | Level B(3,4) | 10.99 | Above2.5 | 11.02 |
| Dimension Mean | | 11.01/15 | | 11.01/15 | | 11.01/15 | | 11.01/15 |

5.9.    Correlations among the ethical perception dimensions:

The researchers used Pearson test for correlation to measure the relationships among the six ethical perception dimensions. Results indicated that there are positive relationships among all dimensions. The highest value for Pearson correlation was between "Opportunities to support ethical practice" and "Content Authenticity" (.499). Then the correlation between "Opportunities" and "Influencing variables on ethical practice" (.466) and between "Opportunities" and "PR Responsibility for Organizational Content". These results reflected the strength of correlation between the different dimensions that underpin ethical practice of public relations via social media from specialized students' perspectives in both universities. When observing the strong relationship between the students' perception of authenticity dimension on the one hand, and their awareness of the opportunities provided by social media platforms to support the ethical practice of the profession, on the other hand, it can be said that the students are well aware of the positive correlation between adherence to the professional standards and successful management of digital accounts. The correlation between students' perception of public relations responsibility for organizational content on social media, and opportunities to support ethical practice, reveals a clear vision of the moral responsibility concept of public relations operations in a rapidly changing digital environment influenced by technical, cultural, and organizational variables.

## 6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of public relations students at the Universities of Sharjah (UAE) and Cairo (Egypt) regarding the ethics of practicing their future profession via social media. It was clear from the results that there is a profound awareness among students of the two universities about the various dimensions of ethical practice of public relations profession through social media.

Students exhibited clear perception about the variables that influence ethical practice of public relations. The most notable variables, according to the students were the culture of the society in which public relations exercises its functions; the crises that organizations may face, and the ethical vision that the organization emphasizes in the guidance provided to employees about their ethical behavior on social media.

It is also noteworthy that students had a deep conviction that public relations department of an organization is fully responsible for the content posted on the official accounts of the organization on social networks. This conviction highlights the role of public relations practitioners in managing the organization's ethical conduct on the social networks, and even warning the organization's officials about any ethical transgression that may affect its reputation in a changing digital environment.

One of the most prominent opportunities available to support the ethical practice of public relations through social media, as indicated by the students, was the ability of social media to enhance the position of public relations within the organization. On the other hand, the students believed that public relations is entitled to prioritize the interests of organizations over the interests of the publics when using social media. This belief may threaten the balanced interactive relationships managed by organizations via digital platforms and contradict the basic role of social media in public relations activities, which is the management of an ethical interactive dialogue between organizations and various stakeholders.

Furthermore, this study reveals that the students did not have a clear perception of the authenticity of organizational content published on social media compared to other dimensions of ethical practice, especially with regard to public skepticism about the credibility of this content or the possibility of denying or concealing the true identity of public relations practitioners when writing comments or posts on social media accounts. This weakness could be as a result of the incompleteness of the comprehensive moral vision among students, especially since the dimension of data authenticity and credibility is considered one of the controversial issues in the ethical practice of professionals working in the field of digital communication in general not just public relations.

Students indicated that they would be academically qualified to manage ethical challenges they may face when practicing their future profession through social media. Despite this belief, they strongly emphasized the need for special academic programs in public relations to support professional ethics training and practice via digital platforms. This, very clearly, would be catalytic in improving the qualifications and practice of public relations practitioners in the future and enhance their readiness to manage the ever-growing ethical challenges in the virtual environment.

With regard to social media influencers interference in the ethical practice of public relations, the results manifested students' awareness of the challenges (see 5.7) resulting from the prominence of this interference, especially when influencers intervene in the communication and interaction processes between the organization and its publics on digital platforms. From an ethical stance, the students were able to distinguish between paying influencers to deliver the organization's messages/spread its views among their followers, and not paying them to distribute rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with their employers.

In comparing Cairo University students with University of Sharjah students based on gender, academic level and GPA, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups of students under these variables. However, we noted that students from advanced academic levels and high academic averages from both universities had a clearer view of ethical practice of public relations through social media compared to students from lower academic levels or those with low academic averages. This finding is justified by the fact that a student's academic knowledge in ethics of professional practice increases with the progress of the student's academic level and that awareness of the ethical dimensions is clearer among students who excel academically.

## 7. Limitations

While this study was a step toward understanding public relations ethics in the context of social media, there are several limitations. This study is based on public relations students' perceptions in two different countries. This description calls our attention to two types of initial limitations. First, the work on perception data, and, second, the work on comparative international research between two cultural contexts. Qualitative data about the concrete use of ethical standards by public relations practitioners in both countries is needed. Second, this quantitative study has allowed us to work with a large amount of data to compare students' perceptions about ethical practice via social media in both countries. However, at the same time, that data does not allow us to observe other aspects, such as a more particularized attention to the different contexts of the development of the profession in each country. Country-by-country studies and qualitative studies are necessary to discover the reasons for the use of particular strategies and tools for enhancing digital ethics of public relations practices.

There are some methodological limitations to this study that need to be noted. First, the small sample size means the findings, while providing a clear picture of public relations students' attitudes at University of Sharjah and Cairo University, lack generalizability to other regional and national contexts. Qualitative interviews with recent students at entry-level roles would be handy in exploring the preparedness in the required skills of curricula set against the demands of the industry. Finally, this study was conducted in specific geographic areas with the same (Arabic) culture; this is a limitation. Future studies should address this by investigating public relations students' perceptions of digital ethics in diverse cultures.

## 8. Implications

At the theoretical level, this research helps us to progress in the knowledge of public relations ethics on social media, as it is a little-explored topic. Results enrich academic understanding of social media ethics in relation to what extent public relations students are aware of the moral issues resulting from social media use in their future profession. It also provides directions for future public relations research.

In a practical sense, current professionals by implication also benefit from this study as it offers them practical suggestions for public relations management and social media usage. More importantly, the study identified the need to incorporate relevant public relations curricula that will address ethics in public relations practice via digital platforms. Therefore, curriculum developers, especially in the area of public relations will find this study very useful.  Also, PR managers will benefit from this study as it will encourage them to organize refresher courses for their employees in PR ethics, especially those that relate to social media platforms.

## 9. Future research and Recommendations

9.1. Future Research

Practice of online public relations faces many ethical challenges especially in the evolving digital era. As scholarship about social media moves forward, there is a need to keep pace with the rapid and consequential changes in the social media environment. This calls for a broader view of social media beyond looking at them as communication tools for public relations practice. Future research can focus on theoretical understanding about PR ethics and public relations students' awareness of professional standards in social media environments, with regard to surveillance capitalism, micro-targeting of audiences, and the use and sale of artificial intelligence for social engineering. Studies are needed to

better understand how messages are disseminated by algorithms, which have replaced news editors as gatekeepers, and to map the ethical boundaries of artificial intelligence.

Scholars and public relations professionals must advance the thinking of dialogic ethics online within the context of the marketplace of ideas created through social media and other digital platforms. The role of the public relations professional as a contributor to the free flow of information must be revisited in a global atmosphere where information can be removed from search engines. Under this circumstance, the marketplace doesn't have the opportunity to function properly as it is riddled with gaps in information (Byrum 2017).

The current study looked at social media use from university students' perspective, but studies are needed from a public perspective. While societal concerns about social media use have been explored extensively in disciplines that include social psychology, education, and public health, studies about the effects and impacts of social media on publics have been largely absent in public relations scholarship.

Eventually, we suggest that scholars replicate the study at hand within the next few years, using a similar instrument, in order to track the development of moral issues. Over the last years, public relations students and practitioners have faced and experienced tremendous moral issues, and as digital innovation proliferates, we are almost certain to observe a continuing proliferation of the moral issues.

Future scholars can broaden the scope of research by integrating more sub-areas of public relations with social media, such as public diplomacy and public relations ethics. Because these topics are considered to be important for public relations scholarship.

Future research would benefit from building on the current study findings by larger numbers of participants or including students from various countries. Future studies that further examine this issue, using both qualitative and quantitative data, would be beneficial.

9.2. Conclusions and Recommendations

Professional associations need to constantly update their ethical guidelines or develop new codes from scratch to stay on par with the ever-evolving communication tools and practices and the increasing number of moral challenges facing public relations profession. In joint endeavors with academics in the fields of public relations, professional associations can develop codes of ethics that are both rooted in theory and research and practically applicable. This ethics code offers specific guidelines for students and practitioners with regard to several issues of digital communication ethics, including transparency and labeling of paid content, fair and respectful online communication, and responsibilities for social media communication. Offering practical tools like these may also help PR associations to attract new members: As noted in the description of our sample, a significant share of participants is still not yet a member of a national or international PR association.

Organizations can adopt these ethical guidelines and modify them to their specific needs. Advice on morally preferable actions may differ according to the purpose and strategy of the specific organization and its stakeholders, as there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Furthermore, organizations should provide regular training sessions to implement channel-specific guidelines and enhance the general problem-solving skills of their staff for moral hazards. These sessions may—in the best interest of the organization and its reputation—even become mandatory for communication leaders.

Public relations scholars also have a responsibility. National (Linke & Kiesenbauer, 2015) and global (Austin & Toth, 2011) studies have identified a lack of dedicated ethics courses for most undergraduate and graduate curricula in public relations. We suggest that graduate programs targeting future public relations professionals and managers should

add such dedicated ethics courses, that go beyond the tenets of theory, as mandatory courses. This will go a long way in equipping the students to face and manage PR ethical challenges, especially in the social media domain.  Austin and Toth (2011), have identified that ethics should be taught by referring to real-life examples rather than abstract theory.

Public relations graduates are ready to use social media platforms, but they are not able to manage ethical challenges resulting from this use. Beyond teaching tools, practices, and campaigns, public relations faculty should give dedicated attention to the ethical implications and responsibilities that come into play with social media usage for corporate purposes.

As young professionals launch their careers in public relations, they will face increasingly complex ethical issues. Faculty members' and managers' efforts to prepare them for these challenges not only protect young employees but also help protect agencies and the organizations they serve to avoid consequences brought on by ethical missteps. Filling the gap between current ethical education and expectations should be the responsibility of both faculty and professionals who train and educate new employees.

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