

**AWARENESS AND ADHERENCE TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AMONG PUBLIC
RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Commitment to ethical standards has been under strong scrutiny but academic research in ethics have not responded proportionately to the need of subjecting it to some analysis. That was the motivation for this paper. The objectives of the paper were to determine the awareness of ethical requirements by public relations professionals and ascertain the adherence to professional ethics by them in Nigeria. The Social Responsibility (SR) theory was adopted for theoretical framework. The survey method was considered appropriate for the study and questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. Analysis was by means of simple percentage. The study established that professionals in Rivers State, Nigeria were aware of the ethical standards, but without corresponding adherence to ethical standards. It was recommended that the institute should give more attention to ethics at the professional development training.

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Ethics, Public Relations, Social Responsibility theory.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1940's when public relations began in Nigeria with the establishment of government information departments by the colonial administration, the question of adherence to professional ethics among professionals has been a major concern. At that time, ethical standards were almost impossible to be evaluated, partly because Public Relations at that early stage had a semblance of a profession in the making which embraced by all comers, and partly because awareness of those ethical requirements was low among the public and clients. However, since 1963 when the Public Relations Association of Nigeria (PRAN) was formed and subsequently, the professionalism of the practice in 1990 vide the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Practitioners Act, 1990(Act No. 16 of 1990), more questions are being asked by clients, professionals, the general public and NIPR (regulator of the profession) about ethical orientation of professionals. To ignore such questions and concerns undermines the objectives of its professionalisation and may cause chaotic relationships among stakeholders in the communication eco system.

Research interest in the last five years have gravitated towards stakeholders' engagement, Digital Public Relations, Crisis Communication, Reputation Management with little attention paid to adherence to ethical standards among professionals. Nyitse and Agbele (2023), Iyinoluwa, Ismail and Emmanuel (2023),

Olaoluwa (2021) and Somorin (2025) are some of the authors that have given attention to PR Ethics in Nigeria in the last five years. The works are focused on ethical Public Relations and Professionalism, regulatory frameworks without evaluating professionals' awareness of ethical requirements and adherence to the ethical markers by professional. This gap is what this present work bridged.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Public Relations is primarily concerned with building mutually beneficial relations but with so variegated stakeholders in the loop. As a science it adopts principles across the social sciences and humanities to explain the interactions among the several parties involved in the relationship that is anything but simple. However, as an art, the creativity of professionals is required to achieve any meaningful success. The delicate balance between the science and art of Public Relations demands an almost perfect orientation in ethical values. It is surprising therefore that the assessment of public relations professionals' awareness and adherence to ethical standard is not a common phenomenon, hence this study.

OBJECTIVES

The motivation for this study is to determine if Public Relations professionals are aware of the ethical requirements of the profession and if there is compliance to those ethical standards by professionals. The objectives were to determine the awareness of ethical requirements by Public Relations professionals Ascertain the adherence to professional ethics by public relations professionals in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper was guided by two questions

- How do public relations professionals in Nigeria prove the awareness of ethical awareness dilemmas in public relations
- What is/are the Public Relations professionals' level of adherence to ethical markers in Nigeria

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social responsibility theory of the press was developed by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956, drawing influence from the 1947 Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press. Its main postulation was that press freedom carries an equal obligation of responsibility to the society. It was conceived as a media theory, but by extension any communicator should have the freedom to communicate, but must be guided by a sense of responsibility to the audience/parties to the communication process. It is obligatory on the media/communicator including Public Relations professionals that while they exercise the unfettered liberty in the course of exchange of ideas, it is to be weighed against corresponding sense of responsibility (Okunna, 2002). The core features of the theory include truthfulness, objectivity accuracy, self-regulation, responsibility. Issues that are the building blocks of ethical public relations (McQuail, 2005). Social Responsibility theory provides a moderation between libertarianism and authoritarianism.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The concept of Awareness

The concept “Awareness” encapsulates several meanings including being conscious, having knowledge of certain phenomenon. To be aware means to recognise, interpret and demonstrate cognitive alertness (Gupta, 2024). To be aware or have awareness is the psychological state to identify a phenomenon in one’s environment, interpreting and responding or reacting to cues. (Mathewson et al 2018, Golubeva, 2023). Awareness studies explore how people perceive and process information. Key factors in the process include conscious and unconscious, attention and awareness (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, Simons & Chabris, 1999). The process of awareness involves several stages including selective attention, perception, comprehension and retention. (Broadbent, 1958, Neisser, 1967, Kintsch, 1998, Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). When people come into the profession and are exposed to the ethical standards, as human beings there is the likelihood that they could respond differently, depending on what they accept as important to them. Selective attention means that people internalise what they selectively pay attention to. This of course will affect the entire process including how they perceive and retain information. Mere exposure to a phenomenon does not translate to comprehension, talk less of behaviour change. Awareness is a complex and multifaced concept affected by culture, environment and social conditions (Nisbett & Masuda, 2003). The culture could be organisational culture which is the prevailing condition in the workplace. When people find themselves in an environment where ethics is scorned, the bandwagon effect is likely to set in. The same goes for social condition, because human kind is socially defined.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public Relations like other professions is governed by principles that demand a delicate balance among client loyalty, public interest, integrity and transparency, generally referred to as beneficence, non-maleficence. Ethical orientation is the oxygen of professional practice and it is indispensable. Any discussion about professional standards is usually a discussion about ethics. Apart from setting professional standards and codes, individual is moderated by ethical orientation (Ferrel and Fraedrich (1977), Kohlberg and Candice (1984), Krohe (1997) and Guy (1999)). Ethics is the compass that provides the guide to navigate the complex relationship among the various stakeholders that Public Relations owes responsibility. The twin challenges of ethical public relations are teleological –what are the consequences of organisation decisions on the public and Deontological– the moral obligation to disclose these consequences in dialogue in order to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. The pillars on which ethical practice stands are the need to tell the truth, non-maleficence, benevolence, confidentiality and fairness. Ethical professionals are required to be truthful in their transactions or relations with the various publics, do no harm, do well, keep the confidence of parties and be fair and socially responsible. The challenge therefore is to determine whether ethical fulfilment is relative or absolute.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Rasheed Olaoluwa worked on exploring the Factors that Affect the Ethical Values of Public Relations Practice in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by paucity of academic attention to ethical Public Relations in Nigeria. The work was hinged on Deontological theory associated with the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804). Deontology demands ethics as a duty to the profession, colleagues, clients and it

is the responsibility of professionals to pursue the achievement of ethical standards. The study objective was to determine the combined moderating effects of determining factors – employer, client, and colleague, society, and professional body on ethical values of public relations practice in Nigeria. Olaoluwa employed a cross-sectional survey design with questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. Findings indicate that the determinant factors of ethical Public Relations practice and professional body significantly influenced the professional value. The study recommended that the profession must be client-oriented, but the pledge is public and it is owned by the public and there should be a constant review of the NIPR code of conduct. The study did not give attention to the ethical dilemmas facing the profession as a result of professional deviation from standards nor were the core ethical dilemmas evaluated.

METHODOLOGY

The survey research method was adopted for the research because it is an appropriate technique of collecting data from a sample of a population using the questionnaires or interview (Cresswell, 2014). Its strength includes wide reach, cost-effective and versatile but has the drawback of eliciting bias. The population of the study was three hundred and nine, as contained in the register of the Rivers State chapter of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations. The sampling technique was census because the population of 309 does not require the selection of a representative sample. Every member of the Rivers State chapter of NIPR was afforded the opportunity of responding to the research instrument. This was achieved by the means of a google form which was dropped on the chapters WhatsApp platforms. However, only one hundred and sixty-four members responded to the questionnaire. The data was analysed by simple percentage.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Figure 1: List of Ethical Issues/Dilemma Suggested by Respondents

Green washing, manipulation of media, defamation, accountability, false claim, conflict of interest, honesty, transparency, brown envelope, confidentiality, disinformation and fairness.

Green washing, manipulation of media, defamation, accountability, false claim, conflict of interest, honesty, transparency, brown envelope, confidentiality, disinformation and fairness.

Demographic Data

Male – 82 Female – 4
Years Exp.: 1 – 3(32) 4 – 7(40) 8 – 10(6) 11 – 14(6) 15 and above (40)
Sectorial Affiliation: Public (24) Private (100)
Professional Status: ANIPR (52) MNIPR (48) Fellow (24)
Organisational Affiliation: Consultant (44) In-House (78)

ETHICAL MATRIX

	Not a consideration	Rarely	When it is convenient	Occasionally	All the time	Total	Remark
Honesty and fairness in professional practice	2 1.6%	2 1.6%	10 8.1%	8 6.5%	102 82.2%	124	
Transparency in professional practice	8 6.5%	2 1.65%	6 4.8%	14 11.2%	94 75.8%	124	
Factual/Accurate Reportage	2 1.6%	10 8.1%	10 8.1%	12 9.7%	90 72.6%	124	
Respect for Privacy/Confidentiality	4 3.2%	12 9.7%	8 6.5%	2 1.6%	98 79%	124	
Avoidance of Conflict of Interest in Practice e	2 1.6%	6 4.8%	14 11.3%	8 6.5%	94 75.8%	124	
Adherence to the requirement of citation in research	4 3.2%	4 3.2%	10 8.1%	12 9.7%	94 75.8%	124	

DISCUSSION

Respondents were asked to list ethical issues/dilemma and they listed over ten issues which existing literature have identified as issues of ethics in professional practice. By listing those ethical markers, professionals proved their awareness of the ethical requirements of the profession. It may be arguable, but having awareness of ethical requirements and low on adherence could be a pointer that regulation is weak in the industry.

Respondents were asked if they had been honest and fair to all parties in their professional practice. Honesty and fairness have always been viewed as vital pillars of ethics and social relationship. Respondents were required to choose from the following options: not a consideration, rarely, when it is convenient, occasionally, and all the time. Surprisingly over 16% of respondents said they never gave a consideration for honesty and fairness, rarely did, considered honesty and fairness when it was convenient or occasionally considered honesty and fairness. Even though about 82% of respondents affirmed their consideration for honesty and fairness in their professional practice, the fact that about 17% of professionals barely considered honesty and fairness is a cause for worry. A test of professionals' transparency in their practice indicated that only about three quarters of professionals affirmed their commitment to transparency in professional practice. The implication of that is that about 25% of professionals were not

transparent. One can only imagine the damage done to the profession by the very people licensed to uphold the highest level of professional ethics. The allegation of window dressing against public relations may have been fuelled by the conduct of these professionals. Factual/accurate reporting had less than three quarters showing commitment to it. In other words, misrepresentation of facts almost three professionals in every ten habitually misrepresents facts. It is surprising that cases of discipline and deregistration are not common. Results such as this is scandalous and calls the efficiency of the institute to self-regulate to question. At least one in every ten professionals rarely committed to being factual and/or accurate in their reporting. Furthermore, research data established that about twenty percent of respondent violated the ethical requirement to respect privacy and confidentiality. One in every five professionals disregarding the requirement for privacy and confidentiality strikes at the heart of the professional saddled with the responsibility to build goodwill among stakeholders. Conflict of interest is an ethical dilemma that compromises an individual's ability to act impartially and objectively. Commitment to this ethical requirement could mean survival or death of an organisation, particularly the balance between personal and corporate interest. About three quarters of professionals revealed that there was a thin line between personal and corporate objectives.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Awareness studies are complicated and multifaceted in psychology. This study reviewed the concept and public relations ethical dilemmas as a means to understanding how awareness could affect professionals' commitment to ethical standards. Issues of honesty, fairness, transparency, conflict of interest attracted attention because they are ethical markers.

The general conclusion is that even though professionals' awareness of the ethical markers, they were low on the indices of ethical standards which may be a statement of weakness to enforce discipline by the Nigerian institute of public relations. A situation where 20% of professionals only considered honesty and fairness in their professional conduct when it is convenient is an admission of unethical behaviour.

It was recommended that ethical orientation should be given more attention at the professional development courses organised by the institute.

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