Ethics Statements of Public Relations Firms: What Do They Say?

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ABSTRACT. This study was designed to examine the prevalence of a code of ethics and to analyze its content among public relations agencies in the United States. Of the 1,562 public relations agencies reviewed, 605 (38.7%) provided an ethical statement. Among the ethical statements provided by these public relations agencies, 'respect to clients,' 'service,' 'strategic,' and 'results' were the values most frequently emphasized. On the other hand, 'balance,' 'fairness,' 'honor,' 'social responsibility,' and 'independence' were the least frequently mentioned in the ethical codes. Also, none of the sampled agencies included any sanctions regarding enforcement of their particular codes of ethics.

KEY WORDS: public relations ethics, ethics codes, public relations agency ethics

A series of unethical public relations practices has gradually degraded the credibility, value, and image of the field. As a result, public relations professionals, industry associations, and scholars have stressed the importance of ethics codes and have mandated that official codes of ethics serve as guidelines for public relations practices (Cutlip et al., 1994; Wilcox and Cameron, 2006). For instance, several national and international public relations associations, such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), have made efforts and devoted resources to providing their members with ethical standards and guidelines by establishing codes of ethics or ethics statements for public relations practices. However, others have criticized these codes, saying that they are created with the intent of promoting an ethical appearance to publics rather than actually preventing unethical behaviors (Esrock and Leichty, 1998).

Due to the importance of ethics codes in the field, scholars have examined the PRSA Code of Ethics, the code most commonly applied as a standard guideline for ethical practices, from diverse perspectives. Some scholars who reviewed the codes concluded that they may in fact promote the public's positive perceptions of public relations (Forbes, 1986; Huang, 2001; Hunt and Tirpok, 1993; Wright, 1993) and the level of professionalism of the field (Huang, 2001). However, Parkinson (2001) criticized the PRSA Code of Ethics as being both improper and impractical for the profession, because the code does not reflect professional ethics or obligations specific to public relations. Scholars agree that the biggest weakness of the code is its lack of ability to be enforced (e.g., Huang, 2001; Parkinson, 2001; Wright, 1993) due to the fact that the majority of public relations practitioners are not members of the association and PRSA membership is not required for participation in public relations practices. Therefore, there is no effective method to prevent practitioners from committing unethical practices.

The ethics statements of an individual firm can effectively overcome this weakness, however. Unlike a professional association's code of ethics, such as the PRSA Code of Ethics, a particular firm's ethics statement can be outlined to fit the behavioral guidelines necessary for its own employees. An individual firm's ethics statement can play an essential role in the decision-making processes surrounding ethical practices (Fisher, 2005). In addition, an individual firm is a more manageable unit to oversee than the entire public relations industry. Establishing an organizational ethics statement falls within the high ethical certainty because an official ethics statement is an expression of the central values and principles that a public relations firm promises to uphold in its practices. For this reason, some scholars have emphasized

that a firm's ethics statements are merely indicators of ethical practice and that personal values as well as outside forces, including the economy, can also influence ethical behaviors (Cleek and Leonard, 1998; Higgs-Kleyn and Kapelianis, 1999; Wright, 1993).

To date, there has been little discussion surrounding public relations firms' ethics statements, though the professionals in these firms are the ones who actually execute public relations practices. Also, no research has specifically examined the prevalence and content of ethics statements among public relations firms. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify (1) the degree to which ethics statements exist and are implemented among public relations firms, (2) which common ethical values are emphasized by public relations firms, and (3) which issues are barely mentioned. To address these topics, this research utilized a content analysis of ethical statements provided on public relations firms' websites. A content analysis of these firms' ethics statements delineates the values and responsibilities that these firms affirm, thus identifying what kinds of ethics values the firms claim to uphold. The results of this study can be employed as a benchmark for evaluating and developing ethics statements for both public relations firms and professional associations such as the PRSA.

Literature review

Definitions of ethics statement

Codes of ethics have been referred to as codes of conduct, codes of practices, values statements, mission statements, or corporate credos (Berenbein, 1988; Clarkson and Deck, 1992; Stevens, 1994). Recently, Murphy (2005) distinguished these terms as types of ethics statements. Values statements are concise documents that refer to corporate qualities such as integrity, trust, teamwork, and fairness with the purpose of guiding a firm's principles (Murphy, 2005). A corporate credo outlines a company's ethical beliefs and/or responsibilities to its stakeholders and is usually defined in several paragraphs (Murphy, 2005). Additionally, corporate credos tend to be a little longer than values statements.

Compared with values statements and corporate credos, ethics codes are more comprehensive and detailed ethics statements. Most studies in business ethics have focused on ethics codes, providing somewhat different definitions. For example, Nijhof et al. (2003) referred to an ethics code as "an instrument for responsibilities within the organization" (p. 62), while Kaptein and Wempe (2002) provided a more comprehensive definition, calling it a documented policy that guides specific responsibilities of an organization toward its stakeholders and/or the conduct the organization expects of its employees. More commonly, it has been defined as "a written, distinct, and formal document which consists of moral standards which help guide employee or corporate behaviors" (Schwartz, 2005, p. 27). Commonly addressed issues in ethics codes include conflicts of interest, relationships with competitors, privacy issues, gift giving and receiving, etc. (Murphy, 1995). A key difference between an ethics code and other ethics statements is the extent to which it is enforced.

Until recently, the term 'code of ethics' has been used to identify ethics statements (Murphy, 2005). However, ethics statements include the aforementioned three types of ethics statements, including codes of ethics. Since one of the purposes of this study is to determine the prevalence of ethics statements and their types, the more inclusive term 'ethics statement' has been chosen for use and defined as follows: "standards that are designed by an organization to guide and examine expected ethical and professional norms among all employees, especially those who perform public relations practices."

Roles and effectiveness of ethics statements

Scholars continue to debate the roles and effectiveness of ethics statements. On one hand, scholars studying ethics have identified the importance and utility of establishing ethics statements in firms. First, the process of developing such a statement helps the firm clarify its objectives, while delineating the responsibilities, norms, and values it aims to sustain (Kaptein, 2004). In that sense, a clearly written ethics statement is highly indicative of an organization's ethical climate, with the ethics statement serving as a measure of the organization's agreement about norms of ethical conduct (Fisher, 2001; Nijhof et al., 2003; Schwartz, 2004; Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1990;

Somers, 2001; Stevens, 1999, 2008). Furthermore, an organization's ethics code can be used to resolve ethical conflict (e.g., Dubinsky, 1985; Dubinsky et al., 1980).

Second, empirical research has consistently proven the positive correlation between ethics statements and ethical behaviors (e.g., Adam and Rachman-Moore, 2004; Boo and Koh, 2001; Casel et al., 1997; Ford and Richardson, 1994; Harrington, 1996; Laufer and Robinson, 1997; McCabe et al., 1996; Pierce and Henry, 1996; Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1990; Trevino et al., 1999; Valentine and Barnett, 2002). For example, Hegarty and Sims (1979) found that even informal corporate policy, such as a presidential philosophy, positively impacted employees' ethical behaviors. In another study, Weaver and Ferrell (1977) concluded that ethics statements are particularly effective in curbing behaviors such as ''accepting gifts and favors in exchange for preferential treatment'' and ''not reporting others' violations of policies and rules.'' More importantly, an individual working in a firm that enforces a code of ethics regards ethical issues more seriously than an employee in a firm without a code of ethics (Valentine and Barnett, 2002).

Lastly, developing and implementing ethics statements was also found to help organizations achieve their business goals by directly and positively effecting the bottom line (Leeper, 1996; Werner, 1992), providing protection during litigation or regulatory actions (White and Montgomery, 1980), promoting corporate social responsibilities (Kolk and van Tulder, 2002) and positive employee behavior, improving management, and even fostering a more positive corporate culture (Farrell et al., 2002).

How firm's ethics statements can be more effective

Since it has been found that the mere existence of ethics statement is not sufficient for preventing unethical conduct, scholars have tried to determine how to improve the efficacy of a firm's ethics statements and have offered recommendations to this end. For instance, Stevens (1999, 2008) suggested that an organization should teach employees about the importance of ethical conduct through training and orientation programs and that an organization's ethics handbook should help employees learn about organizational ethics. Nijhof et al. (2003) indicated that ethics statements can be more effective if they are properly evaluated and monitored on a regular basis. White and Montgomery (1980) acknowledged the five common elements of an effective ethics statement as (1) context and a purpose statement that make the code important, (2) comprehensive coverage of potential ethical dilemmas, (3) depth and detail to include enough information to guide ethical decision making, (4) an accessible writing style that all employees can understand, and (5) administrative procedures to explain the code's development and implementation. Laczniak and Murphy (1985) offered the following five suggestions, stating that ideal codes of ethics should be (1) communicated to both employees and external stakeholders, (2) specific enough to guide behaviors, (3) relevant to the industry, (4) revised on a regular basis, and (5) enforced.

Lastly, Trevino et al. (1999) identified that ethical leadership and open discussion of ethics in a firm improve ethical behavior. Other studies also confirmed the notion that top executives and/or CEOs should openly support their firms' ethics statements in an effort to encourage employee compliance (Cleek and Leonard, 1998; Pratt, 1991; Stevens, 1999, 2008; Trevino et al., 1999). In sum, for a firm's ethics code to be effective, it should be both communicated through management and consistently enforced.

Ineffectiveness of codes of ethics

On the other hand, some scholars have been skeptical about the role and effectiveness of ethics statements. For example, Wright (1993) claimed that ethics statements are full of ''meaningless rhetoric'' (p. 18). In a similar vein, scholars have indicated that ethics statements are neither sufficient nor powerful enough to lead to ethical behaviors (Allen and Davis, 1993; Callan, 1992; Cleek and Leonard, 1998; Healey and Iles, 2002; Marnburg, 2000; McKendall et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2000; Snell and Herndon, 2004; Stevens, 1999). Higgs–Kleyn and Kapelianis (1999) demonstrated that there is no significant association between employees' perceptions of the penalties for violating ethics codes and the frequency with which employees actually disobey them.

While there are some differing views regarding the role and effectiveness of ethics statements within organizations, Stevens (2008) has asserted that sufficient empirical evidence exists to support the efficacy of a firm's ethics statements; thus, scholars should stop debating this topic and instead focus their efforts on establishing methods to make the statements more effective. This study considers the establishment of an official ethics statement one of the first steps a public relations firm can take to prevent unethical practices in the field.

Universal components of ethics statements

Despite the difficulty in identifying universal elements across various companies' ethics statements, scholars have revealed some components common to many statements. Schwartz (1998) examined four different sources – employees, company codes, global codes of ethics, and business ethics literature – and identified six universal elements of ethics statements: (1) trustworthiness (including the notions of honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty), (2) respect (including the notion of respect for human rights), (3) responsibility (including the notion of accountability), (4) fairness (including the notions of process, impartiality, and equity), (5) caring (including the notion of avoiding unnecessary harm), and (6) citizenship (including the notions of obeying laws and protecting the environment). About 7 years later, he replicated the study by examining three sources – corporate codes of ethics, global codes of ethics, and the business ethics literature – and confirmed that the six components are universal (Schwartz, 2005). Dumas and Blodgett (1999) inspected the mission statements of 50 family businesses and unearthed the following most salient core values: quality, commitment, social responsibility, fairness, respect, integrity, honesty, trust, reputation, and truth. Kaptein (2004) examined the ethics statements of the 200 largest companies in the world and identified 'responsibility' and 'loyalty' as the core moral values demonstrated across these companies.

By using textual analysis to review the ethics statements of 12 public relations agencies, Fisher (2005) identified the following six categories typically addressed in the codes: (1) work environment (including the notions of team work, service,

partnerships, creativity, and challenge), (2) goals (including the notions of growth, results, excellence, and social responsibility), (3) behavior (including the notions of honesty, fairness, openness, and honor), (4) professionalism (including the notions of accountability, responsibility, dedication, and hard work), (5) fulfillment (including the notions of balance, fun, and recognition) and (6) respect (including the notions of respect for the firm, coworkers, clients, and society). This current study used Fisher's six categories as a basic framework for coding, because it is the only available study that has explored ethics statements in public relations agencies.

Based on the exploratory nature of this study, the following research questions were drawn:

> RQ-1: How frequently do public relations firms use ethics statements?
> RQ-2: What are the common ethical values that public relations firms promote?
> RQ-3: Which issues are barely mentioned?

Methodology

Research design and sampling procedure

A content analysis of ethics statements provided on US public relations firms' websites was conducted to examine the aforementioned research questions. This content analysis delineates the responsibilities that the industry claims to affirm. This study focuses solely on US-based public relations firms because of country-specified legal issues that could influence firms' ethics statements. The lists of public relations firms were drawn from the following two sources: ''public relations firm'' from *2007 LexisNexis Advertising Red Books/Agencies July* and the *2007 O'Dwyer's Directory of PR Firms*. Originally, 2,283 public relations firms were drawn from these two sources: 658 from the *Red Books* and 1,584 from the *O'Dwyer's Directory*. The 376 duplicate agencies that were listed by both sources were counted only once, and 35 agencies were excluded from the lists for varied reasons, such as not being based in the US or not appearing to be legitimate public relations firms. The final population for US public relations firms examined in this study was 1,891.

Measure

Existence of websites
This study was designed to examine the content of public relations agencies' ethics statements as presented on the agencies' websites. The website format offers an easy and effective way to disseminate ethics statements to all publics. Providing for such broad availability, the use of websites to communicate ethics statements also reflects the firms' intent to publicly demonstrate their commitment to ethics. Communicating ethics statements beyond employees to the public has the effect of making the agency appear ethically open and transparent. Laczniak and Murphy (1985) suggested that all ethics statements should be communicated to both employees and external publics to promote greater efficacy. According to Murphy (2005), more than 85% of the companies that participated in the study used company websites to promote their ethics statements. In this sense, an agency's website acts as an excellent communication channel. As the first step of coding the ethics statements provided on the websites, this study noted and coded whether or not the agency had its own website.

Existence of ethics statements
The existence of ethics statements in a public relations agency indicates a great deal about that agency's ethical climate and commitment to ethical behavior. Considering this idea, scholars in the field of ethics have reviewed whether or not an organization possesses an ethics statement (e.g., Laczniak and Murphy, 1985; Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1990).

Titles of ethics statements
When an agency provided an official ethics statement on its website, this study counted such a statement as an official ethics statement. This study defines an agency's ethics statement as "standards that are designed by an organization to guide and examine expected ethical and professional norms among all employees, especially those who perform public relations practices," and there are three types of ethics statements, including values statements, corporate credos, and codes of ethics. Information about the titles of ethics statements was also gathered for this study.

In the case that an agency did not provide an official ethics statement on its website, this study

reviewed the "About us" section to determine if any ethical values were mentioned in the section. Some public relations agencies present their organizational values in a statement that refers to their quality of service and employee practices, etc., and this kind of statement is often developed from the agency's mission statement. Although such statements are not exclusively devoted to ethics, they can provide insight into the agencies' stance on ethical and professional issues in relation to their principles.

Ethics statement content
The coding categories extracted from Fisher's (2005) textual analysis of 12 public relations agencies' ethics statements served as a basis for the six categories – work environment, goals, behavior, professionalism, fulfillment, and respect – and a starting point for coding the contents of the ethics statements examined. Based on these categories, this study used open coding, "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101). During the open coding process, the researchers reviewed the data and the ethics statements and determined the prevalent concepts that emerged. The six categories and values for each are explained as follows (see more detail in Fisher, 2005, pp. 17–18).

The first category, *Work Environment*, is defined as "employee actions expected to occur in the firms." Teamwork, service, partnerships, creativity, and challenge are the terms that comprise the concept of *Work Environment*. Fisher (2005) indicated that these terms emphasize group rather than individual work, but they also entail more individualized attributes, such as creativity and service. The second category, *Goal*, is defined as the "organizational expectations of employees and of the firm as a whole" (Fisher, 2005, p. 17). *Goal* emphasizes social consciousness, such as social responsibility and excellence, as well as economic achievement, such as economic growth, results, benefits, etc. Through an open coding procedure, the terms 'effectiveness' and 'relationship' were added to the *Goal* category. The next category, *Behavior*, is defined as "the expected behavior of the employees [public relations practitioners] toward each other and towards the clients" (Fisher, 2005, p. 17). This category includes terms such as honor, openness, fairness, and honesty, which call for

transparency in interactions. *Professionalism*, the next category, is defined as "employee behavior [public relations practitioners' behaviors] and a guiding principle for the firms" (Fisher, 2005, p. 18). Hard work, dedication, responsibility, and accountability are the terms that constitute this category. Through an open coding process, the terms 'expertise,' 'independence or objective advice,' and 'strategic' were also added to the *Professionalism* category. *Fulfillment* is the category defined as "employee's satisfaction both at work and in personal lives" (Fisher, 2005, p. 18). Fisher used the terms recognition, fun, and balance in this category. Finally, the last category, *Respect*, refers to employees' respect for the firm, the company's clients, and their co-workers. This study added the terms 'society' and 'publics' to the *Respect* category through an open coding procedure.

Additionally, some characteristics of public relations agencies were coded as well, including the types of agencies, the number of employees, and the year in which an agency was established.

Coder reliability

Samples were coded by the authors and a graduate student. To measure coder reliability, this study used Scott's pi (Scott, 1955). In order to test reliability, approximately 5% of the total sample of public relations agencies' websites was randomly selected, as suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2000). The inter-coder reliability estimated for each coding category was above the acceptable level of 0.80 (Riffe et al., 1998). Scott's pi was 0.98 for existence of a website, 0.96 for type of firm, 0.96 for existence of code of ethics, 0.96 for title of code of ethics, 0.98 for number of employees, 0.91 for work environment, 0.88 for goals, 0.92 for behavior, 0.89 for professionalism, 0.89 for fulfillment, and 0.94 for respect.

Results

Agencies profile

As Table I demonstrates, of the 1,891 agencies examined, 1,559 (82.4%) provided information regarding the type of agency. Among these 1,559 agencies, 1,167 (74.9%) were local agencies, 289 had multiple agencies (18.5%) within the US, and 103 were global agencies (6.6%). The average age of the agencies was 22 years, with agencies ranging from 2 to 85 years old. Of the 797 agencies with available employee numbers, the majority reviewed in this study had between 5 and 50 employees ($n = 601$, 75.5%). Specifically, 269 agencies had between 5 and 10 employees (33.8%), 207 had between 11 and 20 employees (26%), and 125 had between 21 and 50 employees (15.7%). Approximately one quarter of the agencies employed less than 5 or more than 50 people: 134 agencies had less than 5 (16.8%) and 62 had more than 50 employees (7.8%).

TABLE I

Public relations agency profile

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage[a]
Agency types	Local agency	1,167	74.9
	Multiple branches in the US	289	18.5
	Global agencies	103	6.6
	Total	1,559	100.0
Number of employees	Over 50	62	7.8
	21–50	125	15.7
	11–20	207	26.0
	5–10	269	33.8
	Under 5	134	16.8
	Total	797	100.0

Note: [a]Percentage was calculated only based on the valid cases.

Existence of website

Of the 1,891 public relations agencies reviewed, 1,562 (82.6%) had websites, while 303 (16.0%) did not. Twenty-four (1.3%) had a website that could not be loaded, and two (0.1%) required a password for access. Thus, 1,562 websites were accessed in order to examine (1) if an ethics statement was available, (2) the title of the ethics statement, and (3) the contents of the statements.

Existence of ethics statement

Regarding the first research question – *How frequently do public relations firms use ethics statements?* – of the 1,562 public relations agencies with accessible websites, 605 (38.7%) provided ethics statements, and the remaining 957 websites (61.3%) did not present ethics statements on their websites. Among the 605 agencies with ethics statements, an overwhelming number presented an agency-created, independent ethics statements ($n = 602$, 99.2%), while only 5 agencies (0.8%) adopted the code of ethics from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). However, in case of the 957 websites that did not provide ethics statements, the "about us"

sections of the sites were reviewed to determine which ethics values public relations firms uphold. Although the majority of the firms did not provide explicit ethics statements on their websites, this study did attempt to gain a comprehensive picture of the ethics values present in the public relations industry.

Title of ethics statements

Of all the ethics statement titles examined, 150 (24.8%) contained the word "Philosophy" within the title, 108 (17.9%) mentioned the term "Approach," 81 (13.4%) incorporated the idea of a "Mission statement," 48 (7.9%) included the term "Value(s)," 44 (7.3%) used the phrase "Why us," 27 (4.5%) contained the word "Vision," another 27 (4.5%) used the phrase "How we think," 26 (4.3%) mentioned "Points of difference," 20 (3.3%) contained the word "Culture," and the remaining 74 (12.2%) used a variety of other words or phrases to introduce their ethics statements (see Table II for a full list of the titles found in this study). The term "Code of ethics" was used by only six (1.0%) of the agencies. Instead, the titles of the statements varied distinctly and included some of the following: "How we think" (Dennis PR Group), "Points of difference" (Diane

TABLE II

Full lists of ethics statement titles

Title of codes	Frequency	Percentage
Philosophy	150	24.8
Approach	108	17.9
Mission statement	81	13.4
Value(s)	48	7.9
Why us	44	7.3
Vision	27	4.5
How we think	27	4.5
Points of difference	26	4.3
Culture	20	3.3
Code of ethics	6	1.0
Others: experience, beliefs, principle(s), our promises, point of view, methodology, manifesto, commitment, code of conduct, foundation of success, benefits for you, common sense	74	12.2
Total	605	100.0

Davis Associates), "Approach" (Dux Public Relations), and "Value(s)" (Duffey Communications, Inc.). In instances where agencies presented more than one ethics statement, the more distinctive and specific statement in terms of ethical guides was selected for analysis in this study.

Content of ethics statements

The second research question asked *What are the common ethical values that public relations firms promote?* To begin, the most frequent values across categories, such as *Goal* and *Professionalism*, were analyzed to determine their prevalence and to pinpoint which values emphasized ethics in the public relations agencies. Among the 1,562 samples, the most frequently expressed value was 'respect to clients' ($n = 1{,}170$, 74.9%), followed by 'expertise' ($n = 943$, 60.4%), 'service' ($n = 895$, 57.3%), 'strategic' ($n = 724$, 46.4%), and 'result' ($n = 657$, 42.1%).

The third research question asked *Which issues are barely mentioned?* The least frequently mentioned values were 'balance' ($n = 9$, 0.6%), 'fairness' ($n = 10$, 0.6%), 'honor' ($n = 12$, 0.7%), 'social responsibility' ($n = 15$, 1.0%), and 'independence' ($n = 25$, 1.6%).

In terms of *Work Environment*, the most frequently mentioned category in the ethics statement, as shown in Table III, was 'service' ($n = 895$, 39.5%), followed by 'creativity' ($n = 579$, 25.6%), 'team work' ($n = 289$, 12.8%), 'partnership' ($n = 263$, 11.6%), and 'challenge' ($n = 238$, 10.5%).

Regarding the *Goal* category, 'result' was the most frequently mentioned term ($n = 657$, 42.1%), followed by 'relationship' ($n = 322$, 20.7%), 'effectiveness' ($n = 307$, 19.7%), 'excellence' ($n = 182$, 11.7%), 'growth' ($n = 76$, 4.9%), and 'social responsibility' ($n = 15$, 0.9%).

In the *Behavior* category, which was the second least mentioned category among the ethics statements, 'honesty' was the term most frequently mentioned ($n = 137$, 74.5%), followed by 'openness' ($n = 25$, 13.6%), 'honor' ($n = 12$, 6.5%), and 'fairness' ($n = 10$, 5.4%).

Of the six categories, *Professionalism* was the second most frequently incorporated category in the ethics statements of the public relations agencies reviewed. Among the seven values under *Professionalism*, 'expertise' was the value mentioned most repeatedly ($n = 943$, 42.9%), followed by 'strategic' ($n = 724$, 33.0%), 'dedication' ($n = 342$, 15.6%), 'hard work' ($n = 70$, 3.2%), 'accountability' ($n = 56$, 2.6%), 'responsibility' ($n = 36$, 1.6%), and 'independence' ($n = 25$, 1.1%).

The next category, *Fulfillment*, was expressed the least in the agencies' ethics statements. Among the three values of *Fulfillment*, 'fun' ($n = 92$, 53.2%) was the most frequently mentioned values, followed by 'recognition' ($n = 72$, 41.6%) and 'balance' ($n = 9$, 5.2%).

With regard to the values under the *Respect* category, respect to 'clients' ($n = 1{,}170$, 65.3%) was most significantly considered, followed by 'publics' ($n = 429$, 23.9%), 'co-workers' ($n = 103$, 5.7%), 'society' ($n = 50$, 2.8%), and 'firms' ($n = 41$, 2.3%).

Post hoc analysis

For the post hoc analysis, each agency received a score for each value of ethics on a scale of zero to one, with zero corresponding to nonexistent and one indicating existent. The scores received in each ethics category were combined to extract a total *ethics score*. As a post hoc analysis, this study tested whether different types of agencies, including global, multi branches, and local agencies, demonstrated different levels of ethics scores. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was performed for each of these three types of agencies, revealing insignificant differences among these three groups in terms of their ethics scores.

The correlation analysis indicated that an agency's ethics score is positively correlated with its number of employees ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$), implying that agencies with more employees demonstrate more specific values in their ethics statements. Regression analysis performed with ethics scores as the dependent variable and the number of employees, types of firms, and the age of the firm as the independent variables also indicated that the number of employees positively affects ethics scores, while the magnitude of the impact is relatively small ($R^2 = 0.023$, $\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.000$). It should be noted that the age of the firm negatively affected the ethics scores, indicating that younger agencies have higher ethics scores.

TABLE III

Content of ethics statements among public relations firms

Category	Values	Frequencies	Percentage[a]
Work environment	Service	895	39.5
	Creativity	579	25.6
	Team work	289	12.8
	Partnership	263	11.6
	Challenge	238	10.5
	Total	2,264	100.0
Goal	Results	657	42.1
	Relationship	322	20.7
	Effectiveness	307	19.7
	Excellence	182	11.7
	Growth	76	4.9
	Social responsibility	15	0.9
	Total	1,559	100.0
Behavior	Honesty/truth/accuracy/integrity	137	74.5
	Openness/transparency	25	13.6
	Honor	12	6.5
	Fairness	10	5.4
	Total	184	100.0
Professionalism	Expertise	943	42.9
	Strategic	724	33.0
	Dedication	342	15.6
	Hard work	70	3.2
	Accountability	56	2.6
	Responsibility	36	1.6
	Independence	25	1.1
	Total	2,196	100.0
Fulfillment	Fun	92	53.2
	Recognition	72	41.6
	Balance	9	5.2
	Total	173	100.0
Respect	Clients	1,170	65.3
	Publics	429	23.9
	Co-workers/employees	103	5.7
	Society/community	50	2.8
	Firms	41	2.3
	Total	1,793	100.0

Note: [a]Ethical statements containing multiple sub-categories were coded multiple times. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of combined numbers.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine the current atmosphere surrounding issues related to ethics statements in US public relations agencies. Although public relations scholarship has increased its focus on ethics over the past couple decades, the prevalence and content of public relations agencies' ethics statements have not yet been carefully reviewed. In that sense, this study is meaningful to understand the current status of

ethics statements in these agencies and to provide insight into how agencies should proceed in developing and improving their ethics statements.

Of a total of 1,562 public relations agencies reviewed in this study, only about 40% had an official ethics statement, which indicates that the majority of public relations firms do not present ethics statements on their websites. Ethics statements have been much more prevalent in other industries. For example, more than 90% of large corporations (Center for Business Ethics, 1992), over 70% of Fortune 1000 corporations (Weaver et al., 1999), and over 50% of the 200 largest companies in the world have ethics statements (Kaptein, 2004). Considering that the importance and prevalence ethics statements have been continuously increasing across industries, governments, and professional associations, etc., public relations agencies are comparatively far behind. Thus, more public relations agencies should introduce ethics statements as a first step in promoting their ethical public relations practices and should also share these statements with their internal publics as well as external stakeholders. To ensure the success of an ethics statement, a firm should promote the statement through various communication channels. As Murphy (2005) indicated, a company website is the most popularly used channel to communicate and promote ethics statements. Thus, public relations agencies should consider greater use of their websites to promote ethics statements.

Among the ethics statements reviewed, the most frequently emphasized values were 'respect to clients,' 'service,' 'strategic' and 'results.' The aforementioned values were expressed in more than half of the ethics statements examined. On the other hand, the least emphasized values were 'balance,' 'fairness,' 'honor,' 'social responsibility,' and 'independence.' Regrettably, these less expressed values in agencies' ethics statements are those highlighted in the PRSA Code of Ethics and are notable as they consider not only the clients' interests, but also public interest. According to the PRSA Member Code of Ethics 2000, 'independence' is specified as 'we provide objective counsel to those we represent' (p. 7), and 'fairness' means that 'we deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public' (p. 8). While public interests have been indicated as being an intrinsic

value in public relations practice (Bivins, 1993; Martinson, 1995), the findings of this study demonstrate that public relations agencies are currently emphasizing result-oriented values, such as serving clients' interests, over serving public interest. At present, ethics statements of public relations agencies seem to serve primarily as agency advertisements, emphasizing their results-oriented expertise in an attempt to satisfy their clients, rather than true declarations of ethics statements that reflect consideration for the public. This finding demonstrates the disparity between the goals of professional organizations, such as PRSA, and the actual public relations practices taking place in public relations firms based on the ethical values they promote.

The comparison analysis among each category provided an insightful opportunity to determine the worthwhile value of these concepts in the real world. With regard to the sub-categories, 'service' and 'creativity' were noted most frequently in the '*Work environment*' category. The public relations field was portrayed as serving, assisting, and aiding in the clients' success, and in terms of practitioners' work, 'creativity' appeared to be the most essential skill for the job.

In the *Behavior* category, 'honesty' and 'openness' were the most emphasized values, though their frequencies were small. 'Honesty' and 'openness' are core values particularly important in crisis communication in public relations (Seeger et al., 2001) and have been emphasized as focal concepts for establishing and sustaining long-term relationships between an organization and its publics. 'Expertise,' 'strategic,' and 'dedication' were focused on in the category of *Professionalism*. In public relations academia, the infrastructure necessary to be considered a true profession—a body of knowledge, codes of ethics, and certification—are often explained as the characteristics of a profession (Cutlip et al., 1994; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Wylie, 1994). The concept of 'expertise' is similar to 'a body of knowledge,' and 'strategic' and 'dedication' seem to be key ideas that refer to public relations practitioners' working attitudes about being a professional. In the *Fulfillment* category, 'fun' was the mostly frequently expressed value and was understood as the significance of enjoyable work in the company. The terms 'clients' and 'publics' were stressed much more than 'co-workers,' 'society' and 'firms' in the *Respect* category. In this sense, an emphasis on 'client' and

'publics' indicated a focus on PR firms' respect for clients and clients' publics. This result also indicates that agencies do not place as high a value on public interest as they do on clients' interests.

As a by-product, this study discovered a direct correlation between the size of public relations firms, in terms of the number of agency branches and the total number of employees, and the quantity and quality of values included in their ethics statements. Lages and Simkin (2003) included public relations agency size, which is measured in terms of agency turnover and the number of directors, in the criteria for the public relations practitioners' professionalism. It seems obvious that larger public relations agencies will provide more professional rules or guidelines for ethical behaviors.

Another interesting result from this study is that comparatively younger public relations agencies that were formed in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated greater ethical values than their older counterparts. In this study's sample, the eldest agencies were formed in 1923 and the youngest agencies in 2006. Of the 1,374 agencies that provided information about the year in which they were created, about half, 892 agencies, were formed in the 1980s and 1990s and showed more ethical values than the 323 agencies that were formed before the 1980s. The public relations field has been suffering from low standards of professionalism (Cameron et al., 1996; Van Ruler, 2005; Wylie, 1994), and the ethics of public relations has become an important issue to consider in the field's attempts to achieve professionalism in public relations firms (Boynton, 2007). Therefore, young public relations firms have initiated their businesses by acknowledging the need for ethics statements and also actively promoting their ethical values on their websites to reach both internal and external publics. On the other hand, it is assumed that old public relations firms have not been sensitive to the current trend of incorporating ethics statements into public relations practice and therefore either do not have or do not promote ethics statements through their websites.

Though this study began as an effort to analyze the prevalence and significance of ethics statements in public relations practice, it found that the majority of public relations firms in the United States do not actually have ethical or professional statements on their websites, and the ethics statements that do exist were aimed more toward advertising the agencies' services in an effort to gain future clients than presenting a legitimate statement of their ethical values. Additionally, this study revealed a connection between the size of the firms and the specificity of the values included in the ethics statement, with larger firms expressing more delineated values. It was also discovered that younger firms are apt to include more ethical values than older firms. These results suggest that the public relations field is still struggling to move forward in a professional and ethical direction. While ethics statement alone cannot ensure ethical behaviors, as scholars have emphasized and warned (e.g., Nijhof et al., 2003; Wright, 1993), the organized rules and systematic size of public relations firms can serve as criteria for levels of professionalism and ethical work. Management and the organizational environment should emphasize implementation of ethics statements within an agency. For example, public relations firms should adopt appropriate ethics statements and continuously review and update them as necessary. More importantly, an organization must be committed to persuasively articulating, rigorously applying, and implementing the ethics statements that are established.

Limitation and future research agendas

This study successfully attempted to evaluate the prevalence and content of ethics statements in US public relations firms for the first time. However, this work leaves us with several future research agendas to be considered. First, this study does not evaluate the degree to which the ethics statements of public relations firms are effective in influencing professionals' ethical decision-making process or practices. Therefore, future research should consider whether or not organizations' ethics statements are effective in actually promoting ethical action. Second, this study could not determine whether public relations practitioners share the same values emphasized in the ethics statements of the public relations agencies in which they work. Therefore, the future research needs to answer a question "what are the differences or similarities in the ethical values demonstrated by agency employees and their employers?" Third, communicating ethics statements with internal and external publics is a key factor in improving the efficacy of ethics statement.

Therefore, future research needs to find answers to the questions "how do public relations firms communicate ethics statements with their internal and external publics?" and "how can they more effectively communicate their ethics statements?" Fourth, this study could not determine the most effective avenues for promoting ethics statements and whether or not multiple exposures help to reinforce ethical public relations practices. Thus, future research should address questions such as: "What would be the best way to promote ethics statements?" and "Are multiple exposures more effective?" Lastly, this study reviewed and analyzed only one ethics statement provided in each public relations firm's website. However, as Murphy (2005)'s study indicated, there are several types of ethics statements, including values statements, corporate credos, and codes of ethics, etc. This study could not determine which ethics statement is most prevalent among public relations agencies. Therefore, a future study should analyze all types of ethics statements provided by public relations firms to answer the question, "What type of ethics statement is most prevalent among public relations agencies and why?"

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