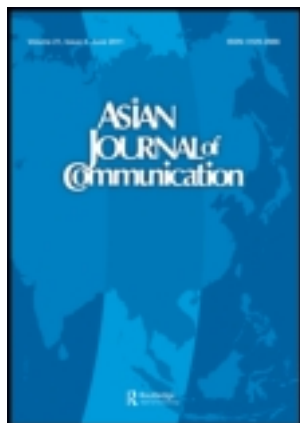


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## Determinants of ethical practices of public relations practitioners in Korea

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The present study was designed to examine various determinant variables influencing public relations practitioners' ethical practices. Six variables, consisting of idealism, relativism, age, gender, education, and awareness of ethics code existence, were utilized for this study. Results indicate that relativism and awareness of ethics code existence directly impact ethical practices, whereas age influenced ethical practices through relativism.

**Keywords:** public relations ethics; public relations firms; ethics code

Due to numerous unethical practices in the public relations profession (Fisher, 2009), overall public perception of the field has been generally low, especially in terms of public opinion surrounding the profession's ethical standards. This negative perception has hindered organizations' and public relations firms' abilities to attract highly-qualified practitioners to the field and has also compromised effective communication with their stakeholders. Ethical concerns in public relations have moved to the forefront in recent years. To fight negative public perceptions and unethical practices, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) launched ethical criteria for public relations practices and educated practitioners about the importance of following these criteria when faced with ethical dilemmas (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006).

Despite the association's efforts, the PRSA Code of Ethics failed to escape several criticisms. The first complaint involves the code's efficacy, with many pointing out that the code is meaningless due to the fact that it remains unenforceable (Parkinson, 2001). Although a practitioner's membership to PRSA may be revoked if he/she is in violation of the Code of Ethics, such action will not prevent the violator from working in the field, as PRSA membership is not a requirement for practicing public relations. The unenforceability of the code has been considered its shortcoming (Ki & Kim, 2010). In addition, some guidelines in the code appear contradictory. The Code of Ethics includes six core principles: 'free flow of information', 'competition', 'disclosure of information', 'safeguarding confidences', 'conflicts of interest', and 'enhancing the profession' (Public Relations Society of America Member Code of Ethics, 2000). For example, 'free flow of information' is explained in the following

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statement: ‘protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision-making in a democratic society’. At the same time, the code guides practitioners to avoid ‘real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest’ to build ‘the trust of clients, employers, and the publics’ (Kim, 2003; PRSA Member Code of Ethics, 2000). Therefore, it can be challenging for practitioners to maintain the free flow of information while also serving public interest (Kim, 2003).

Given the lack of clear guidelines to inform public relations practices, practitioners are apt to apply their personal ethical principles or philosophies in particular situations (Kruckeberg, 1993). Hence, it is essential to examine practitioners’ perceptions of ethical issues to understand their ethical judgments. Individual perceptions about ethical issues can be evaluated according to ethical ideologies such as idealism or relativism (Forsyth, 1980).

Although research in ethics literature has confirmed that personal ethical ideology is a significant individual factor of ethical behavior, the scholarship in public relations has paid little attention to its effect, with the exception of a few studies (Kim, 2003; Kim & Choi, 2003). The studies examined the influence of ethical ideology among either Korean (Kim, 2003) or American public relations practitioners (Kim & Choi, 2003) on the evaluation of professional ethics codes. They identified significant differences in evaluation according to practitioners’ demonstrated ethical ideologies. While these studies are meaningful for understanding the influence of ethical ideology on professional ethics evaluation, they failed to directly measure the ethical practice or practitioners’ intentions of action. Furthermore, the aforementioned studies did not incorporate the efficacy of public relations practitioners’ awareness of the existence of an ethics code, which has been identified as a key factor in explaining ethical behavior in ethics studies. To fill the gap, this study examines practitioners’ awareness of the existence of an ethics code and employs ethical scenarios to ask practitioners relevant questions about ethical practices that reflect their real-life decision-making processes. Additionally, several individual characteristics, including age, gender, and education, are tested to determine if these factors influence ethical practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to extend empirical evidence of the relationship between (1) ethical ideology, (2) individual characteristics, and/or (3) awareness of an ethics code existence and ethical practices in the area of public relations.

### **Literature review**

In ethics literature, scholars tend to agree that two types of factors—individual and organizational—influence ethical decision-making (Akaah & Riordan, 1989). Among individual factors, this study applies individual ethical ideology and personal characteristics, including age, gender, and level of education, to test their efficacy in terms of ethical judgment. Additionally, among organizational factors, this study incorporates practitioners’ awareness of the presence of ethics codes in their public relations firms in efforts to test code efficacy in guiding ethical judgment.

### *Ethical ideology*

This construct is based on the ethical theories of deontology, teleology, and ethical skepticism (Forsyth, 1980). Within this framework, an individual's ethical orientation may be parsimoniously and meaningfully represented by the degree to which one is relativistic or idealistic (Forsyth, 1992). Scholars have employed two dimensions—relativism vs. idealism—to explain the differences (Barnett, Bass, & Brown, 1994; Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977; Stead, Worrell, & Stead, 1990). From a theoretical standpoint, individuals demonstrating differing ideology types are often expected to develop distinct rationales in response to ethical concerns and to make disparate decisions regarding the morality of particular actions.

#### *Relativism*

Relativism explains the degree to which individuals refuse to follow universal moral rules or principles (Forsyth, 1980). High relativistic individuals tend to reject moral absolutes, believing instead that appropriate ethical action is dependent on each given situation. Individuals demonstrating high relativism believe that unethical courses of action, which may bring about harmful consequences for certain people, are sometimes necessary in order to pursue a greater good for the most people (Forsyth, 1992; Forsyth & Nye, 1990).

#### *Idealism*

Idealists believe in universal moral principles or laws and adhere to these rules in their evaluations of ethical behavior (Forsyth, 1992). They are therefore more likely to demonstrate higher levels of honesty and integrity (Vitell, Nwachukwu, & Barnes, 1993). Moreover, individuals with high idealism tend to consider the impacts of unethical behavior on the welfare of others. They believe that ethical behaviors bring about positive consequences and that actions with the potential to harm others are wrong. More importantly, individuals demonstrating an idealism orientation believe that ethics are meant to achieve organizational effectiveness (Singhapakdi, Kraft, Vitell, & Rallapalli, 1995).

#### *Empirical evidence of the efficacy of ethical ideology on ethical behavior*

For more than two decades, ethics scholars consistently added empirical evidence indicating that individuals with different ethical ideologies are more likely to make differing ethical judgments (e.g., Bass, Barnett, & Brown, 1998; Douglas & Schwartz, 1999; Forsyth, 1980, 1981, 1985, 1992; Forsyth & Pope, 1984; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977). Specifically, idealism is positively related to ethical decision-making, while relativism shows a negative relationship with ethical judgments. More importantly, researchers identified ethical ideology as a key variable for explaining even actual ethical behavior in organizations (Stead et al., 1990). By reviewing empirical evidence addressing ethical decision-making in the literature, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) concluded that studies investigating idealism and relativism have found consistent results. That is, idealism is positively related to the ethical decision-making process, whereas relativism and teleology are negatively related.

An individual ethical ideology guides practitioners' evaluations of ethically questionable practices, ultimately influencing their personal decisions regarding whether or not to engage in an activity. While ethical ideology can be a potentially key variable in explaining public relations practitioners' decision-making in ethical dilemmas, only one study has applied and examined its efficacy. Kim and Choi (2003) applied ethical ideology to examine whether public relations practitioners with different ethical orientations exhibit different levels of agreement with the PRSA Code of Ethics. Their results demonstrated that practitioners exhibiting idealism showed higher levels of agreement with the Code than those who demonstrating relativism. However, agreement with the Code might not be transferable to ethical practices, and consequently, such an examination cannot indicate if public relations practitioners' ethical ideology actually influences their ethical practices. Therefore, this study examines if practitioners' personal ethical ideology does in fact affect their ethical practices.

Based on the preceding theoretical framework and empirical evidence derived from ethics literature, the following hypotheses are offered:

- H1: Public relations practitioners exhibiting idealism will be more likely to demonstrate ethical decision-making in their practices.*
- H2: Public relations practitioners exhibiting relativism will be less likely to demonstrate ethical decision-making in their practices.*

### ***Personal characteristics***

Ethics literature indicates that three personal characteristics—age, gender, and level of education—tend to be significant indicators of important aspects of ethical decision-making, including recognizing ethical issues, making ethical judgments, and shaping ethical behavioral intentions. Following the empirical evidence, this study was designed to test the impact of public relations practitioners' personal characteristics on their ethical practices.

#### ***Age and ethical judgment***

In business ethics literature, a positive link between age and ethical judgment emerged (Dabholkar & Kellaris, 1992; Dubinsky, Jolson, Michales, Kotabe, & Lim, 1992; Hunt & Jennings, 1997; Kim & Chun, 2003; Lund, 2000; Ruegger & King, 1992). That is, older participants tend to make more ethical decisions.

In public relations, a few studies have examined the effect of practitioners' age on ethical decision-making and demonstrated findings consistent with studies in business ethics literature. By surveying PRSA members, Shamir, Reed, and Connell (1990) found that individuals in younger age groups demonstrated lower ethical standards of both personal and practitioner ethics. Additional studies (e.g., Pratt, 1991; Wright, 1989) revealed that older practitioners exhibited higher levels of ethical beliefs. Similarly, Kim and Choi (2003) confirmed that older practitioners were in greater agreement than their younger counterparts with professional ethics codes.

Based on the aforementioned empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H3: Older public relations practitioners will exhibit greater ethical practices than younger practitioners.*

#### *Age and personal ideology*

Ethics literature has examined the relationship between age and personal ideology. Scholars have determined that age is negatively correlated with relativism (Ho, Vitell, Barnes, & Desborde, 1997) but positively correlated with idealism (Vitell, Lumpkin, & Rawwas, 1991). As people grow older, they tend to rely more heavily on universally accepted moral principles to guide their ethical judgments and focus less on social concerns about being reprimanded for unethical actions. In other words, as individuals age, they tend to place less emphasis on self-interest and more on the welfare of others.

Although research has confirmed the relationship between age and personal ideology, only one study in the public relations field has examined this link. In their study of public relations practitioners, Kim and Choi (2003) found evidence supporting the relationship between age and personal ideology. That is, older practitioners in their study demonstrated high idealism and low relativism and also tended to agree more with the PRSA Code of Ethics.

Consequently, this study hypothesizes the following:

*H4: Older public relations practitioners will exhibit lower levels of relativism than younger practitioners.*

*H5: Older public relations practitioners will exhibit higher levels of idealism than younger practitioners.*

#### *Education*

Ethics literature has identified this variable as the most powerful predictor of moral behavior (i.e., Rest, 1979, 1986), demonstrating much greater predictive power than age. Thoma and Davison (1983) examined the effects of education and age on cognitive moral development but did not discover any significant interaction effect. This result indicates that education and age are independent. In their study of marketers, Goolsby and Hunt's (1992) findings supported the relationship between an individual's education and his/her ethical judgment.

Although education has been identified as a powerful predictor of ethical behavior, public relations studies evaluating the effects of personal characteristics on ethical judgment have rarely incorporated this variable (e.g., Kim & Choi, 2003; Pratt, Im, & Montague, 1994; Shamir et al., 1990). Based on existing ethics literature, this study hypothesizes the following:

*H6: Public relations practitioners with higher levels of formal education will engage in more ethical public relations practices.*

#### *Gender*

Though this variable has been incorporated in various ethics studies, findings around gender have been contradictory. Fritzsche (1991) surveyed marketing managers and found that gender is an important predictor of unethical behavior. Specifically, the study stated that male marketers are less likely to pay a bribe than their female

counterparts; however, males are more likely than females to solicit a bribe. Chonko and Hunt (1985) reported that female marketers are more likely to perceive ethical issues than their male counterparts. In their survey of public relations practitioners, Pratt et al. (1994) identified gender as a significant predictor of deontological response. In contrast, other studies have determined that gender is an insignificant predictor of ethical judgment (e.g., Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Shafer, Morris, & Ketchand, 2001; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1991). For example, Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991) did not find any relationship between sales professionals' gender and their ethical judgments.

In general, in studies that found gender to be a significant predictor, females tended to demonstrate higher levels of ethical judgment. Because more empirical evidence is necessary to further examine these inconsistent findings, this study hypothesizes the following:

*H7: Female public relations practitioners will exhibit more ethical practices than their male counterparts.*

#### ***Awareness of ethics code existence***

A code of ethics in an organization is a written expression of its core ethical values and norms (Farrell & Farrell, 1998; Schwartz, 2001; Valentine & Barnett, 2002). Ethics studies suggest that the existence of an ethics code within an organization indicates an organizational commitment to ethical practices (Valentine & Barnett, 2002; Wotruba, Chonko, & Loe, 2001) and represents a viable method for discouraging unethical behaviors (Ferrell & Skinner, 1988; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 1996; Pierce & Henry, 1996; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1990).

Conversely, other scholars have claimed that ethics codes demonstrate minimal efficacy in an organization (Chonko & Hunt, 1985; Cleek & Leonard, 1998). From their perspective, a code of ethics is worth little more than the paper on which it is written. One explanation for the inefficacy of an ethics code is that employees in organizations with ethics codes may not even be aware of the codes' existence (Wotruba et al., 2001). For this reason, employees' awareness of an ethics code is more important than the mere existence of a code itself. Valentine and Barnett (2003) tested and confirmed the effect of employees' awareness of an organization's ethics code on their perceptions of organizational ethical values and organizational commitment.

Because public relations practitioners are confronted with ethical dilemmas almost daily, the existence of ethics codes in public relations firms would be beneficial for the following reasons. First, a code of ethics articulates the ethical values to which a firm adheres and, as such, forces the firm to consider those values with respect to the public relations practitioners working for the firm. Second, a firm's ethics code is also useful for clarifying ethical values and standards to the other important publics, including prospective clients. Client responses to firm activities may be influenced by their awareness of an ethics code in the organization.

Within the public relations context, there has been little to no empirical research conducted to examine the impact of public relations practitioners' ethics code awareness within their firms on their own ethical practice. Based on outcomes of previous ethics studies, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H8: Public relations practitioners who are aware of the existence of an ethics code in their firm will demonstrate greater intentions of ethical practice.*

Figure 1 visualizes the proposed hypotheses.

### ***Public relations ethics in Korea***

A few public relations professional associations have developed ethical guidelines to encourage their members to practice more ethically. For instance, in 2001, the Korean Public Relations Association (KPRO) outlined 10 ethical value recommendations to guide their members' practices. The primary values KPRO addressed were public interest, client service, and cooperation with other practitioners (Shin & Cha, 2000), which are ethical values similar to those emphasized by PRSA (Kim, 2003).

In the public relations industry in Korea, firms have established their own ethics codes for their employees to follow. Recently, Ki and Kim (2010) compared the content of public relations firms' ethics code in South Korea to those of US firms and found that a majority of public relations firms in Korea possessed an ethics code. The core values of the Korean codes focused on result-oriented values, including serving clients' interests and promoting their firms' services to attract more clients. Specifically, most of the firms' codes highlighted values like 'respect to client' and 'expertise', while some values presented in the PRSA code of ethics were absent, such as fairness, independence, serving public interest, etc.

Cultural orientation highlights the importance of relationships with moral obligations depending on respect and a sense of community. Hofstede (1983) identified South Korea as a collectivistic and masculine country. The idealism ethics position is associated with collectivism and masculinity dimensions. For example, some items measuring idealism clearly represent collectivism in nature (e.g., 'the

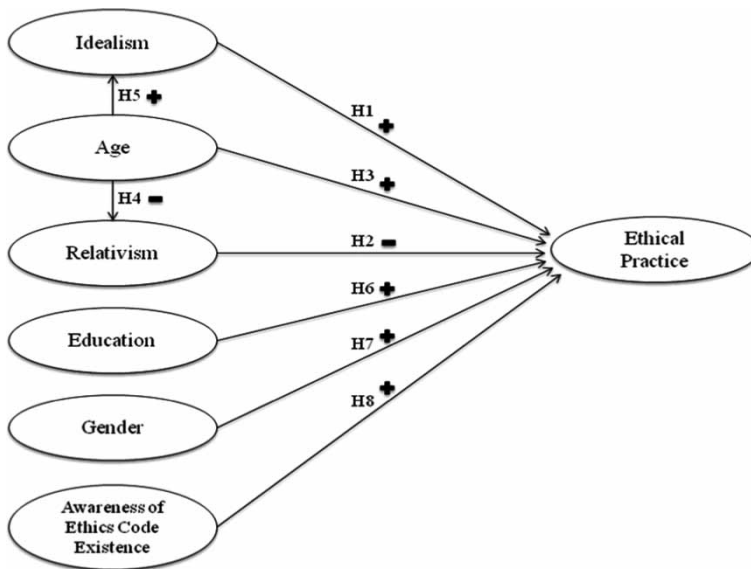


Figure 1. Conceptual model.



dignity and welfare of people should be the most important concern in any society'; Forsyth, 1980, p. 178).

## **Methodology**

### ***Population and sample***

This study was designed to examine the effects of public relations practitioners' individual ideology (idealism and relativism), personal characteristics, and their awareness of the existence of an ethics code in their firms on their ethical practices. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researchers conducted a survey among public relations practitioners in Korea. As no complete directory of Korean public relations practitioners existed at the time of this study, researchers contacted public relations firms listed in the Korean Public Relations Consultancy Association (KPRCA). The KPRCA contains 31 public relations firms, and the researchers contacted CEOs of these firms via emails or phone to provide them with information about the study, including the purposes of the research and a brief description of the intended procedure. Among the 31 CEOs contacted, 19 agreed to cooperate by encouraging the public relations practitioners in their firms to participate in the research. While the questionnaires were sent to every public relations practitioner in the 19 firms, participation in the survey was voluntary.

### ***Research procedure***

This study collected data using two main steps over the course of two months—two pretests and a main survey.

#### ***Two pretests***

The researchers performed two preliminary tests to ensure the quality of the questionnaires developed for the survey. During the first stage of the test, researchers invited eight senior level public relations practitioners, each with at least five years of industry experience and holding a position higher than general manager, and asked them to provide feedback on the originally developed questionnaire. The researchers then revised the questionnaires based on their feedback. In the second stage of the pretest, 30 additional public relations practitioners were recruited to evaluate the clarity and face validity of the revised questionnaire.

#### ***Main survey and data collection***

This study employed a personal delivery and collection method of a self-administered questionnaire to increase the response rate as suggested by Lovelock, Stiff, Cullwick, and Kaufman (1976). They suggested that personal delivery of surveys by trained researchers tends to yield higher response rates than other survey methods. As such, the researchers personally visited CEOs and asked them to distribute questionnaires to their employees. To guarantee the anonymity of the participants and ensure voluntary participation, each questionnaire was inserted into an envelope. The measure was taken to ensure that the CEOs and the researchers

would not know who had or had not participated. Three days after their initial visits, the researchers re-visited the public relations firms to collect the questionnaires. The data was collected over the course of a little over two months from 15 August to 25 October 2008. Of the 470 questionnaires distributed, 249 were completed, yielding a 53% response rate. Twenty-four unusable questionnaires were excluded, and the final sample of 225 surveys was used for data analysis.

### *Ethically suspicious scenarios*

This study used the four scenarios originally developed by Pratt et al. (1994), who used the established technique for evaluating their validity. First, they drafted the scenarios based on the reviews of the standards of practices promoted by the three major professional associations, including PRSA, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), as well as the relevant ethics literature (e.g., DeConinck & Good, 1989; Fritzsche, 1991). They then submitted the vignettes to a panel of experts and pretested the vignettes on subjects with characteristics similar to those of the sample population. The scenarios were pretested and revised with based on comments from public relations practitioners who attended a PRSA local chapter panel discussion addressing public relations ethics. Each vignette describes a situation and a fictitious public relations practitioner's action. Ethical issues presented in the scenarios included 'disguising information' and 'conflict of interest'. The scenarios have been tested and determined to represent a reliable and valid measure of public relations practitioners' behavioral intentions surrounding ethics. Such hypothetical, ethics-related scenarios can offer insights into public relations ethics and, as such, would be useful for replicating real-world situations for the purpose of evaluating moral conduct (DeConinck & Good, 1989; Dubinsky, Jolson, Kotabe, & Lim, 1991; Hegarty & Sims, 1979).

To ensure validity, two native Korean speakers translated the scenarios into Korean and adjusted each situation to appropriately fit the Korean public relations work context. Comments and ideas about public relations ethics provided by respondents and practitioners during the two pretest procedures further guided the phraseology of the scenario (see Appendix 1 for final versions of the Korean scenarios).

## **Measures**

### *Dependent variables*

The dependent variable, public relations practitioners' ethical behavior, was measured using the four ethically suspicious vignettes intended to ascertain the respondents' 'likely behavior'. Responses to scenario items were measured on a four-point scale: (1) *definitely yes*, (2) *maybe yes*, (3) *maybe no*, and (4) *definitely no*. A higher score corresponds with a higher level of ethical practice. Coefficient alpha was .75.

### *Independent variables*

This study employed three independent variables, including ethical ideology, personal characteristics, and the awareness of the existence of an ethics code.

*Ethics ideology*

To measure the ethics ideology of individual public relations practitioners, the researchers adapted Forsyth's (1980) ethical position questionnaire (EPQ). The EPQ contains 20 items divided into two 10-item subscales, one measuring idealism and the other relativism. Similar to earlier studies (e.g., Forsyth, 1980; Kim, 2003; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977) employing the EPQ, factor analysis yielded a two-factor structure. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .90 for idealism and .89 for relativism.

*Personal characteristics*

Researchers included survey items addressing three personal characteristics—age, education, and gender—to test the influence of these factors on ethical practices. The mean age of the participants was 31 ( $SD = 5.73$ ) within an age range from 23 to 56. Participants possessed the following levels of education: high school diploma ( $n = 4$ , 2.3%), college degree ( $n = 137$ , 78.7%), and graduate degree ( $n = 33$ , 19%). Of the 202 participants who provided information regarding gender, female greatly outnumbered males ( $n = 150$ , 74% vs.  $n = 52$ , 26% male). These statistics suggest that the sample reasonably reflects the gender composition of the public relations practitioner population overall in Korea.

*Awareness of ethics code*

Participants were asked if they were aware of a written code of ethics in their public relations firms. A 'no' answer was coded as '0' and a 'yes' answer was coded as '1'.

*Statistical analysis*

To test the eight hypotheses proposed, this study uses two types of statistical analyses: regression analysis and path analysis. Researchers employed regression analysis to test all of the hypotheses with the exception of 4 and 5, and path analysis tested all of the hypotheses in one model. Specifically, the effects of idealism, age, relativism, education, gender, and awareness of ethics code existence on ethical practices were tested simultaneously through regression analysis. Therefore, the regression model is defined as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Ethical Practice} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Idealism} + \beta_2 \text{Relativism} + \beta_3 \text{Age} + \beta_4 \text{Education} \\ & + \beta_5 \text{Gender} + \beta_6 \text{Awareness of Ethics Code Existence} \end{aligned}$$

While regression analysis has been widely used to test the effect of multiple independent variables on a dependant variable and yields easily understandable results, this type of analysis presents a few pitfalls. First, regression analysis cannot test the endogeneity of mediating variables. This means that the relationships between or among independent variables cannot be tested through regression analysis. As Hypotheses 4 and 5 test the relationship between mediating variables, this study used path analysis, an extension of the regression analysis (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998), to test these hypotheses. Second, while regression analysis can provide information regarding the degree of multicollinearity among the independent variables, it cannot control the problem. Path analysis might

be a practical option to solve the issue because it allows for interdependent relationships among independent variables. Therefore, path analysis uses bivariate correlations by specifying the relationships in a series of regression-like equations, which can be estimated by determining the amount of correlation attributable to each effect in each equation simultaneously (Hair et al., 1998). To test the model along all its paths, this research employed a goodness-of-fit test from a structural equation modeling program, AMOS 7, which computes multiple alternatives of goodness-of-fit coefficients. The goodness-of-fit was calculated by entering the path model and its data into the software package.

To test the suggested hypotheses, this study used a saturated model. Specifically, 'age' is assumed to affect 'idealism' and 'relativism', and all of the six independent variables, including 'age', were assumed to affect 'ethical practices' in the path model. In sum, the use of multiple statistical analyses increased the anticipated robustness of results for this study.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

The descriptive statistics employed provide interesting insight into the variation of the data and show the means of the respective variables. The average of ethical practice, the dependent variable, was 5.89 ( $SD = 1.25$ ) on a nine-point scale. Respondents were more idealistic ( $M = 7.88$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) than relativistic ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). It was statistically significant in one-sampled *t*-test (*t*-score = 124.660 and 59.430,  $p = .000$ ). The mean age of the participants was 31 ( $SD = 5.73$ ), with an age range from 23 to 56. Participants possessed the following education levels: high school diploma ( $n = 4$ , 2.3%), college degree ( $n = 137$ , 78.7%), and graduate degree ( $n = 33$ , 19%). Level of education ranged from 1 to 5. A higher score corresponds to a higher level of education. Of the 202 participants who provided information regarding gender, females greatly outnumbered males ( $n = 150$ , 74% vs.  $n = 52$ , 26% male). Forty percent of the respondents reported that they were aware of the existence of an ethics code in their public relations firms ( $n = 86$ , 40% for yes vs.  $n = 129$ , 60% for no). Gender and awareness of ethics code existence were coded as dummy variables. Males were coded as '0' and females as '1' for gender, while for code awareness, a 'no' answer was coded as '0' and a 'yes' as '1'.

### *Correlations*

Prior to performing the regression analysis, researchers conducted a correlation analysis. As shown in Table 1, the four suggested variables—idealism, relativism, age, code awareness—are significantly associated with the dependent variable, ethical practice. In addition, all of the directions have the same signs as predicted by the hypotheses. However, two of the variables—education and gender—are not associated with the dependent variable, ethical practice. The correlation analysis indicates that a majority of the suggested independent variables are significantly associated with ethical practice, as the hypotheses predicted. Most of the suggested independent variables passed the first criterion and were therefore included in the regression analysis.

Table 1. Correlation matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Ethical Practice	—						
2. Idealism	.17*	—					
3. Relativism	-.24**	-.10	—				
4. Age	.20**	.06	-.26**	—			
5. Education	-.03	-.07	.13*	.12*	—		
6. Gender	-.60	-.02	.12*	-.47**	-.16*	—	
7. Code Awareness	.29*	.17**	-.19*	.30**	.06	-.12*	—

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .  $N = 197$  (listwise deletion was used for missing variables)

### Regression analysis

Table 2 demonstrates the regression analysis outcomes. The total variance accounted for in the regression analysis was 14%, and the model was highly significant in terms of  $F$  values ( $F = 5.174$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Among the six independent variables tested in the regression analysis, awareness of ethics code existence ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and relativism ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were found to be significant. However, the remaining four variables—idealism, age, level of education, and gender—were not significant. Therefore, the results of the regression analysis supported Hypothesis 2, which anticipated that practitioners exhibiting higher levels of relativism would engage in less ethical practice, and Hypothesis 8, which predicted that practitioners' awareness of the existence of an ethics code in their firms would be positively related to ethical practices. However, results of regression analysis rejected Hypothesis 1, which anticipated that practitioners exhibiting higher levels of idealistic would engage in greater ethical practices, Hypothesis 3, which predicted that older practitioners and those with higher levels of education would engage in more ethical practices, and Hypothesis 7, which anticipated that female practitioners would engage in more ethical practices.

### Path analysis

As indicated earlier, hypothesis testing was conducted through both path and regression analyses. In the path model, age was assumed to affect ethical practice

Table 2. Regression analysis.

Independent variable	Ethical Practice (Beta)
Idealism	.13
Relativism	-.22*
Age	.02
Education	-.07
Gender	.13
Code Awareness	.53**
$R^2$	.14
Adjusted $R^2$	.11
$F$	5.174
Prob. > $F$	.000

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

directly and indirectly via the mediation of idealism and relativism. By using this model, the effects of the independent variables on ethical practice could be tested together with the interdependent relationship between age, relativism, and idealism.

A path analysis with maximum likelihood estimation showed that ethical practice was affected by relativism ( $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ) and awareness of ethics code existence ( $\beta = .50, p < .05$ ), whereas idealism, age, gender, and education had no significant direct relationship to ethical practice. This outcome demonstrates good fit with the results of the regression analysis in that the same independent variables were found to be significant in both analyses. Therefore, Hypotheses 2 and 8 were supported, whereas Hypotheses 1, 3, 6, and 7 were rejected in the path analysis.

Importantly, the path analysis demonstrated that age was significantly but negatively related to relativism. Therefore, Hypothesis 4, which predicted that older practitioners would demonstrate lower levels of relativism, was supported in this study. Figure 2 shows the results of the path model. As previously indicated, relativism and awareness of ethics code existence were found to have a direct effect on ethical practice. In addition, although the magnitude of the effect size was small, age ( $\beta = -.04, p = .000$ ) was found to affect relativism. Therefore, age might affect ethical practice indirectly. As predicted by Hypothesis 4, age functioned as a mediating variable in the path model. Table 3 shows that the fit of the path model was generally satisfactory according to the given fit indices.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study provides an opportunity to gain better understanding and insights into factors significantly related to practitioners' ethical practices. The researchers employed regression and path analysis to obtain data, and the results indicate that relativism and awareness of ethics code existence play a significant role in predicting ethical practices among public relations practitioners. In addition, the path analysis

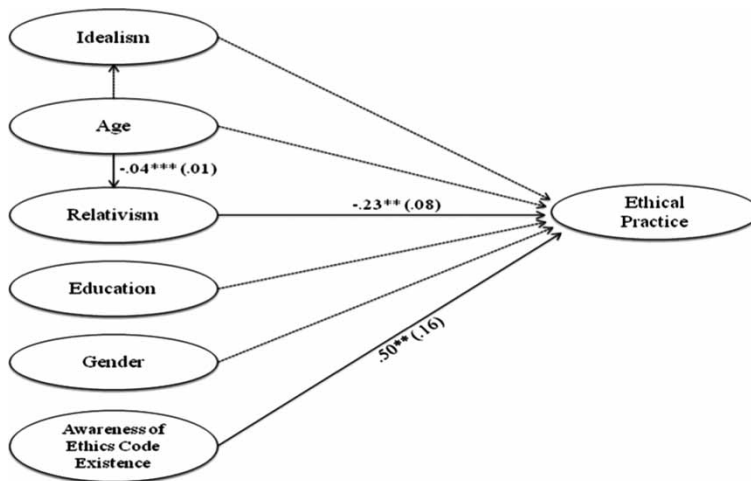


Figure 2. Path model.

Note: \*\* < .01, \*\*\* < .001 and the number in parenthesis indicates standardized error.

Solid lines indicate significant paths and dotted lines indicate insignificant paths.

Table 3. Fit measures for path model.

Model Fit Index and Criteria	Fit Statistics
Chi-square/ <i>df</i> < 5	3.91 ( $\chi^2 = 42.96, df = 11$ )
Goodness-of-fit Index (GFI) > 0.9	.95
Adjusted GFI (AGFI) > 0.9	.91
Normed fit index (NFI) > 0.9	.82
Comparative fit index (CFI) > 0.9	.89

reveals that relativism is significantly associated with age, while the magnitude of the effect size is relatively small. This finding indicates that age may have an indirect effect on ethical practice via relativism. The results of this study hold several implications for public relations practice and future research around this topic.

First, of all the factors tested, practitioners' awareness of the existence of an ethics code in their firms exhibited the most powerful effect on the ethical practices of these practitioners. In other words, practitioners who are aware of the existence of an ethics code in their firms are more likely to engage in ethical practice. This finding confirmed the claim that awareness of an ethics code effectively influences ethical decision-making (Adams, Tashchian, & Shore, 2001; Wotruba et al., 2001) and also suggests that public relations firms interested in promoting ethical practices among their practitioners should develop, implement and, most importantly, clearly communicate their ethics codes to their employees. Ki and Kim (2010) found that about 40% of the US and 70% of Korean public relations firms have established ethics codes. However, the existence of an ethics code alone in a firm does not automatically ensure an impact on practitioners' perceptions of the value of ethical practice. Rather, practitioners must be aware of the code's existence before it can influence their ethical practice. A public relations firm can convey its ethical standards through daily operations in the firm, including modeling by managers, code enforcement, and clear and explicit communication with the employees (Fritz, Arnett, & Conkel, 1999). Firms could benefit from the establishment of ethics awareness training programs or workshops, which would offer a useful method for communicating with public relations practitioners regarding their firms' ethics codes and the content of the codes. In particular, a new employee orientation program should include ethics training sessions to provide an overview of ethical issues relevant to public relations practitioners. Such programs could present ethical dilemmas to prompt discussion and ethical decision-making among participants and emphasize that the company's ethics code should not be perceived as relativistic. This training may help sensitize young public relations practitioners to the potential ethical concerns that may arise throughout their careers.

Second, this study shows that a relativistic ethics position is significantly and negatively associated with ethical practice. That is, practitioners exhibiting a relativistic ethical position are more likely to participate in unethical practices. This result supports previous findings across ethics studies that have found that individuals demonstrating relativist orientations possess lower ethical standards (Barnett et al., 1994; Forsyth, 1992; Forsyth & Nye, 1990; Kim, 2003; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Although it cannot be argued that one ideology is superior to another, the findings of this study indicate that high relativism is linked to lower levels of ethical public relations practice. These findings also indicate that, when judging the acceptability of

ethically questionable practices, public relations practitioners tend to consider the consequences of their actions more so than their morals regarding universal ethical principles. Again, this points to the need to generate awareness of the company's code of ethics and emphasize that it is not a relativistic document.

Third, in the examination of the relationship between age and ethical position, this study found that age has a significant but negative impact on relativism, indicating that older practitioners tend to have less relativistic ethical positions as compared to their younger counterparts. In other words, older practitioners exhibit high idealism and low relativism, a finding consistent with the majority of earlier studies examining the effect of age on ethical position (Kim & Choi, 2003; Pratt et al., 1994; Vitell et al., 1991). Given that this study found that relativism is negatively associated with ethical practices, it follows that older practitioners tend to practice more ethically. Correlation analysis confirms this positive link between age and ethical practice ( $b = .20, p < .01$ ), while regression analysis and path analysis do not indicate any significant effect of age on ethical practice. As Kohlberg (1981) explained, individual moral values tend to mature as people pass through different stages of moral development, and it is therefore logical that older practitioners would demonstrate higher ethical standards. Based on a limited number of studies, it would be premature to claim that older practitioners are more idealistic and less relativistic in their ethical position than their younger counterparts. Nonetheless, the outcome of this study, if supported by future research, could have important implications for public relations firms intending to recruit more ethical practitioners. Public relations firms should consider the use of older and more idealistic practitioners as mentors to younger ones to generate awareness that the company's ethics code is not a relativistic code.

This study found that several of the factors tested were not statistically significant and therefore need further explanation. First, both regression and path analyses revealed that idealism is statistically insignificant in explaining ethical practice. This finding is not consistent with a majority of studies that have examined the effects of ethical ideology and determined that idealism is the key dimension responsible for explaining differences in ethical judgments (e.g., Barnett et al., 1994; Bass et al., 1998; Kim, 2003; Kim & Choi, 2003; Rallapalli, Vitell, & Barnes, 1998). In particular, Forsyth, O'Boyle, and McDaniel (2008) conducted meta-analytic reviews of studies addressing ethics positions across countries and concluded that South Korea is one of the five-absolutist countries in terms of ethics position. Although the participants in this study tend to be more idealistic than relativistic in their ethics position, idealism does not explain ethical decision-making. This result may be accounted for by a couple factors. First, these relationships may be more complex than the linear relationships tested in this study. Practitioners might endorse multiple ethical positions (i.e., more relativistic and less idealistic). However, practitioners adhere more to universal ethical standards and are less relativistic. Second, the scenarios used in this study might not be involved in severe ethical violations. It is reasonable to assume that ethical ideology influences ethical judgment to a greater degree when the action involved is considered highly unethical. When the action is not highly unethical, however, ethical orientation might not factor into practitioners' evaluation of the action as Barnett et al. (1994) claimed. This explanation is consistent with the perspective that holds that for an individual's moral evaluation to be activated, one should first believe that an action has severe ethical consequences (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Therefore, ethical ideology might not be relevant enough to



those issues about which there is general agreement as to the ethical nature of the action. On a nine-point scale, the mean of participants' agreement that each of the four scenarios presented was morally wrong was 4.38. This finding could indicate that the ethical dilemmas described in the scenarios might not be severe enough to have activated the practitioners' ethical orientations.

Consistent with some previous studies, this research found that education (e.g., Green & Weber, 1997; Malinowski & Berger, 1996) and gender (e.g., Fleischman & Valentine, 2003; Pratt et al., 1994) were insignificant in relation to ethical practice. However, these results are findings in themselves, indicating that these variables are unrelated to ethical practices and thus need not be of direct concern to public relations practitioners.

While there are certainly many questions left to be answered around this topic, it appears that practitioners' awareness of the existence of an ethics code in their firms as well as their ethical ideologies may shed some light on the ethical nature of their decision-making and practices. Although ethical ideologies have not received a great deal of attention in public relations scholarship, they seem to play an important role in determining practitioners' ethical practices and decision-making. Hopefully, this study will foster an even greater interest in the examination of ethics in public relations.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings from this study contribute greatly to the field, some limitations should be noted. First, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$  values) in regression analysis was relatively low. This low  $R^2$  value indicates that only a small proportion of the variation in the dependent variable, ethical practice, is explained by the independent variables in this study. Although a larger  $R^2$  value is desirable, the low amount of variation explained was expected, as only a small part of many predictors of public relations ethical practice were included in this study. Second, this study did not include other possible personal characteristics and environmental factors that could affect public relations practitioners' ethical practices. Future studies could expand this examination by incorporating more variables to identify predictors of ethical practices. Third, this study divided the public relations professionals into two groups, one consisting of participants who were aware of the existence of an ethics code in their firm and the other consisting of participants who were unaware of the code's existence. Even professionals who are aware of such a code could be differentiated. For example, the professionals who are simply aware of the code would be different from the ones who understand and internalize the contents of the code in terms of ethical standards or intentions of ethical practices. It would therefore be interesting to divide the professionals into more diverse groups based on their levels of awareness and knowledge of the ethics code and test to determine if they are empirically different in terms of ethical standards. Fourth, because a comprehensive directory of public relations professionals was not available at the time this study was conducted, nonprobability sampling was employed. Therefore, the interpretations of the study should be cautiously applied keeping this limitation in mind. Fifth, this study intentionally excluded in-house public relations professionals, because their host organizations are more likely to demonstrate ethics codes that are more broadly applicable to general organizational practices, rather than being specific to public relations practices. It would be valuable

for future research to compare professionals in public relations agencies with those working in corporate in-house public relations departments in terms of ethical standards and practices. Sixth, contrary to the majority of studies, this study did not determine a significant impact of idealism on ethical decision-making. Reasoning for this study's contradictory findings could derive from the fact that the four scenarios employed did not depict serious ethical violations. As such, future research should develop scenarios that portray some more serious ethical violation cases. Lastly, the scope of this study was limited to a single country, South Korea, and the findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. Moreover, other studies should apply this study's framework to examinations of other countries in order to identify core value differences between cultures.

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### Appendix 1: Scenarios of ethical dilemmas

#### Scenario 1

John is developing a promotion for a housing development his company is about to start. The development is located in a low area that was flooded recently. Consequently, John's company did some work to reduce the danger of flooding. However, if flooding occurs, some of the homes may have some water in their yards. John's company has no plans for additional work to reduce the possibility of flooding. John did not include in his promotion any information on the possibility of flooding.

*Question: I would do just what John did.*

#### Scenario 2

Laura is a senior account executive in the Public Relations Division of a leading advertising agency. Several months ago her division signed a major account. Recently the client called to request an update on the account. Laura informed the client that the execution of the account had been delayed because the production department had been 'bogged down'.

Fact: The account had been set aside in the meantime in preference for a newer, higher billing, higher profile account. Laura believes that telling the client the truth could place her agency in an awkward position with client—and perhaps jeopardize all future business.

*Question: I would do just what Laura did.*

#### Scenario 3

Bob recently completed multi-thousand-dollar evaluation research on a corporate image promotion he had completed recently. Results indicated that the promotion did not produce the expected gains in corporate image. Bob's agency had been counting on those results for a continuation of its business relationship with the client.

Your research department said that the statistics 'tell the truth' and that Bob was obligated to use them in his executive summary. Bob said, 'No way. The numbers could be self-destructive'. He said that the numbers were only known in-house, and to use them now would 'cost the agency big bucks and put us in an awkward position with our client'. In his report to the client, Bob used older, more flattering statistics from a previous survey, while awaiting the results of the next evaluation study.

*Question: I would do just what Bob did.*

#### Scenario 4

Frank, a senior public relations manager, was staying overnight on a business trip. He went into the hotel lounge to have a drink. He found himself seated next to another public relations manager from his leading competitor. The public relations manager, who appeared to have had several drinks, was in a talkative mood. He talked about his clients and divulged confidential information to Frank. Frank happened to handle the account of a competitive brand.

Frank did not identify himself and instead bought the other executive several more drinks, thinking that if he could not hold his liquor it was his problem. Frank received valuable confidential information about the competitor's new advertising campaign, marketing strategies, and other information that could sharply increase the profits of his own client.

*Question: I would do just what Frank did.*