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### An Exploratory Study of Ethics Codes of Professional Public Relations Associations: Proposing Modified Universal Codes of Ethics in Public Relations

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# An Exploratory Study of Ethics Codes of Professional Public Relations Associations: Proposing Modified Universal Codes of Ethics in Public Relations

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Public relations scholars have demonstrated contradictory views regarding the application of universal versus culture-specific approaches for understanding global public relations ethics. However, few comparative studies have empirically explored public relations ethics on a global scale. To that end, this study represents an exploratory attempt to provide a descriptive picture of public relations professional associations and their codes of ethics across 107 countries. In conclusion, we argue that honesty, safeguarding of confidences of clients, and prohibition of conflicts of interest of competing clients should be accepted as the universal values, while other issues, such as free flow of information and fees and gifts, could be understood as the relativistic values specific to a nation's situation and needs.

The majority of public relations firms offer international public relations services (Rudgard, 2003), and public relations is arguably becoming a global profession. As Sharpe and Pritchard (2004) note, the practice of professional public relations has grown globally, although the degree of professionalism differs across countries. Public relations practitioners may experience difficulty and confusion when their own professional values of their culture and local professional practices differ from those in international settings. Nikolaev (2011) addresses this type of dissonance by explaining,

The main problem that underlies ethical issues in international communication is that culture is a complex and deep-seated psychological structure that runs the lives of millions of people who

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share a similar history, language, physical environment, religious beliefs, etc. And any type of simplistic approach to cultural variables is dangerous and counter-productive. (p. 2)

Considering the significant increase in need for professional international public relations, global standards for the profession are necessary now more than ever. In public relations, a code of ethics is an essential component in the pursuit of professionalism within the field (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994; Gower, 2003; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Huang, 2001; Wilcox & Cameron, 2005; Wylie, 1994). Toth and Trujillo (1987) regard the codes of ethics of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) as exemplars that demonstrate public relations professionals' efforts to act ethically. In particular, the PRSA Member Code of Ethics is considered to represent the core ethical values of the public relations field (Fitzpatrick, 2002a, b; Wilcox & Cameron, 2005). However, Wright (1993) criticizes the ineffectiveness of ethical codes in professional associations, since an association membership is not a prerequisite for professionals to practice. In fact, Roth, Hunt, Stavropoulos, and Babik (1996) point out that only one in ten public relations practitioners is affiliated with a professional association.

Bowen (2007) argues that the codes of ethics of major professional public relations associations reflect the current state of ethics in the field. In this regard, the ethics codes of professional associations in one country represent the core values of the profession and are deemed to demonstrate the normative direction of the public relations profession in that country. Some public relations scholars have emphasized universal ethical values as professional values (Kruckeberg, 1998) while others have stressed cultural and societal differences in understanding ethical values across different countries (Gower, 2003; Roth et al., 1996; Sanders, Mark, Maria, & Aranda, 2008).

Scholars have yet to identify universally applicable ethical values or explicate how these values can be applied across cultures in public relations practice. Specifically, an empirical search for the universal values of public relations professional associations has not yet been executed. Also, this study attempts to answer Sriramesh and Verčič's (2009) call for further research needs in the area of global public relations by examining public relations professional associations and their corresponding ethics codes in 107 countries. Accordingly, investigating the ethics codes of professional public relations associations across countries provides an opportunity to discover how each country's professional public relations association emphasizes universal or relativistic values.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Philosophical Implications of the Code of Ethics of Professional Associations

The law does not exist in order to make society ethical. Rather, laws provide clear limits for violations of regulations (Bivins, 2004). One effort to guide the legitimate direction of a profession is the establishment of professional associations. Wiley (2000) describes such associations as "the natural parties to articulate standards for professional accountability" (p. 95). The majority of professions have codes of ethics defined by the professional associations in the respective fields (Jamal & Bowie, 1995; Wiley, 2000), and professional codes of ethics

define explicit professional norms for professionals (Frankel, 1989; Wiley, 2000). Ethical codes are “typically occupation specific” and accordingly can “define the ideal practitioner, and generally indicate how to attain that goal or become that practitioner” (Bivins, 2004, p. 21). Within public relations, a body of knowledge, a code of ethics, and certification have been regarded as the necessary infrastructure for qualifying as a true profession (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001; Wylie, 1994). Accordingly, professional public relations associations aim to promote professional status and ethical conduct by providing normative directions for public relations professionals (Henderson, 2010). The goal of professional codes of ethics is not only to remind the members of the profession about professional standards but also to ensure that the profession maintains ethical standards (Gower, 2003). Therefore, the professional codes of ethics reveal the core and specific professional values of each profession as well as the expectations held by relevant publics and society.

Several scholars stress that codes of ethics exist with the normative nature (e.g., Payne, Raiborn, & Askvik, 1997; Raiborn & Payne, 1990; Schwartz, 2005; Son, 2002). Tilley (2005) mentions “ethics codes are probably the most common deontological tool” (p. 311). Schwartz (2005) states that “codes of *ethics* by their definition imply that they contain normative guidelines for behaviour” (p. 27) and strongly argues that “to the greatest extent possible, the selected moral values should retain their significance despite differences in culture, religion, time, and circumstances” (p. 31). He has defined the six following universal moral values: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Son’s (2002) study about journalistic codes of ethics also acknowledges that despite criticism of codes of ethics for being “emblematic and impractical, codes of ethics have been the most widely used mechanism for journalistic accountability. Codes of ethics are expected to upgrade the behavior of journalists” (p. 163). Therefore, the existence of a code of ethics holds sufficient philosophical meaning to provide legitimate direction for the profession from a contractualist perspective.

According to Ward (2005), a contractualist perspective on ethics derives from the work of Rawls (1993, 2002) and Scanlon (1998). Understanding ethics as the social contract maintains that “the ethical norms are respected as long as society agrees on their value or utility” (Day, 2006, p. 59). Ward (2005) applies a contractualist perspective to the examination of global journalism ethics by arguing that “the application of contractualism to journalism means that we regard its ethics as a set of legitimate but fallible principles that ought to guide the difficult decisions and actions in a particular domain” (p. 7). Therefore, by applying a contractualist perspective to our understanding of ethics codes, we acknowledge that ethics codes should exist to share the standards and agreements of particular professions for the professionals, society, and public.

### Universalism Versus Relativism in Global Public Relations Ethics

Two extreme theoretical arguments in understanding ethical issues in international communication are those conveyed by *universalists* and *internationalists* (Nikolaev, 2011). Universalism is the belief that “there are universal ethical standards, and the communication profession worldwide shares certain moral and ethical standards that run across cultures” (Kim, 2005, p. 334). Similarly, Bowen (2006) notes that Kant’s categorical imperative as it “transcends cultural bias, religion, socioeconomic status, and paucity of philosophical training . . . allows all rational decision makers the freedom to make universally acceptable decisions of moral

worth and validity” (p. 82). However, relativism refers to the concept that “legitimate notions of good and bad often vary from society to society and may change within society or culture in a particular historical setting” (Rao & Lee, 2005, p. 103). Christians (2011) describes cultural relativism in the following way: “Contextual values replace ethical absolutes. The domain of ethics shifts from principle to story, from formal logic to community formation” (p. 26). He acknowledges the value of ethical relativism in respecting cultural diversity, despite the challenge to communication ethics. Therefore, universalism supports the possibility of cosmopolitan ethical value while relativism emphasizes societal or cultural differences in ethical decision making.

Within the public relations field, there have also been disputes over understanding ethics codes from *universalist* or *relativist* perspectives. Some scholars stress the significance of universal ethical values across countries for enhancing public relations professionalism (Hunt & Tirpok, 1993; Kim, 2005; Kruckeberg, 1989, 1998). For example, Kruckeberg (1998) indicates that as public relations professionalism increases, fewer multicultural perspectives should exist, as professionalization implies a common set of ethical values for a unique profession, regardless of national differences. Kim (2005) argues for universal ethical standards by the following reasoning:

For universalists, ethics is an inquiry into right and wrong through a critical examination of the reasons underlying practices and beliefs. As a theory for justifying moral practices and beliefs, ethical relativism fails to recognize that some societies have better reasons for holding their views than others. (p. 338)

However, Sanders et al. (2008), Wakefield (2010), and others have strongly argued for employing a cultural approach to understanding international public relations. Some scholars, such as El-Astal (2005), Gower (2003), and Roth et al. (1996), assume a relativistic viewpoint by contending that U.S. public relations associations should adopt culturally specific perspectives in their ethical codes. Roth et al. (1996) emphasize the importance of cultural variables for informing ethical codes of professional public relations, and Gower (2003) warns that a universal public relations code of ethics should not simply represent the American public relations code of ethics. In terms of practice, Place (2010) stresses that the difficulty of “the situational nature of public relations and the varying degree of clients’ ethical standpoints” (p. 238) hinders public relations practitioners’ respect for a supposedly universally ethical stance.

A handful of empirical comparative studies (e.g., Ki & Kim, 2010; Walle, 2003) have analyzed global public relations ethics. Walle (2003) examines the codes of conduct of public relations associations in the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa and identifies universal categories of duties to society, public, client, profession, and self; endorsement of public welfare and happiness; public as the first priority; truthful behavior; responsibility for client behavior; emphasizing symmetrical two-way communication; and regular discourse about ethics and ethical values. Ki and Kim (2010) evaluate the ethics codes of public relations firms in the United States and South Korea and observe a similar trend. Both countries tend to share several of the most prevalent common values, such as respect to clients and expertise, and also place lesser importance on the least prevalent values, including balance, honor, independence, and fairness. Despite these significant ethical similarities, American and

Korean public relations firms promote their firms' services to attract future clients rather than to embrace the core ethical values. As such, Ki and Kim (2010) have called for the incorporation of values into professional ethics codes with the aim of enhancing professionalism. These studies support the possibility of universal codes of ethics in public relations by reviewing the ethics codes of a small number of countries.

Other scholars assume a neutral position between the two extremes of universalism and relativism, emphasizing them so called "the Aristotelian Golden Mean" (Gordon & Kittross, 1999, p. 64) and "modified universalism" (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008, p. 229). Gordon and Kittross (1999) indicate the pitfalls of relativism in media ethics by asserting "codes that are too general can also produce ethics so closely bound to the existing (majority) culture that they provide little or no guidance to individuals who tend to think for themselves" (p. 64). Addressing the weakness of universalism, they maintain "one would certainly get into trouble with Kantian approach, insisting that code provisions must be absolute, formal, or universal in order to be worthwhile" (p. 64). Johannesen et al. (2008) identify "humaneness, truthfulness, trust, promise keeping, nonviolence, and caring relationships" (p. 229) as minimum universal standards while acknowledging the existence of additional relativistic values. Finally, this modified universalist approach can offer the realistic and efficient benefits of both extremes of the universalism-relativism spectrum by providing the minimum significant value while still accepting cultural differences.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We are reluctant to completely assume either of the two extremes of *universalism* or *relativism* for understanding global public relations ethics. Our reasoning for this reluctance is twofold. First, it is not practical that all national professional public relations associations be compelled to emphasize the same universal values regardless of societal and cultural differences. Second, we are wary of the limitations of relativism, namely the danger of adhering to only the existent culture and lacking any normative directions. Given the aforementioned reasoning, we assume a neutral position between the two extremes, a so-called "modified universalism" (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 229), in order to understand the significance of minimum universal values with other possible relativistic values. Then in the modified universalism approach, the most significant issue would be how to determine the minimum universal value for national professional public relations associations.

To explore this topic, we attempt to apply the following criteria to define universal value in public relations profession: First, the universal value should be prevalent and therefore demonstrated in more than half of professional public relations associations across countries. Second, if one value appears in more than half of professional associations, though it is found to have different meanings, the value should be theoretically and practically reexamined to determine if it should be the universal or relativistic value. Third, attributes of the public relations profession should serve as fundamental criteria for determining universal or relativistic value.

Then how can we determine relativistic values? It is possible to say that all values other than the minimum universal value can be understood as relativistic values. However, it is more convincing to label relativistic values as those that are most infrequently mentioned and also

very unique. We assume that relativistic values arise from the cultural, economic developmental and political differences among different nation, and as Curtin and Gaither (2007) state, “the discussion of international public relations [is] unpredictable, complex, an even illogical at times” (p. 3). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the following research questions were established:

- RQ1a: What are the prevalent ethical values of professional public relations associations across countries?
- RQ1b: Among the prevalent ethical values, which of these represent universal values of professional public relations associations across countries?
- RQ2: What are the infrequent and culturally unique ethical values of professional public relations associations?

## METHODS

To date, little research has focused on reviewing codes of ethics of national professional public relations associations on a global scale. This study draws from the list of countries in Sriramesh and Verčič's (2007) system, which classifies the four globalization levels of the public relations industry in 193 countries.<sup>1</sup> Working under the assumption that the excluded countries have no professional public relations associations, only the 107 countries were included in the sample for this study (see Table 1).

To locate public relations associations in those countries, we obtained lists of national or regional public relations associations from the International Public Relations Association,<sup>2</sup> the Chartered Institute of Public Relations,<sup>3</sup> the Public Relations Student Society of America,<sup>4</sup> and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, we conducted a Google search using the search term “[*nation's name*] public relations association” to identify additional associations. In this study, professional public relations associations are defined as *organizations that aim to set standards and guidelines for public relations practices for their members in a country*. Consequently, the study sample excluded education-focused institutes (e.g., European Public Relations Education and Research Association) and international associations targeting professionals from unspecified multiple countries (e.g., Middle East Public Relations Association). Of the 107 countries, 67 (62.6%) were found to have at least one association, and 89 associations were identified overall. Of the 89 associations, 77 (86.5%) provide accessible websites. Of the 77 websites, 31 (40.3%) did not offer an English version, and in these instances, Google translator was used to convert the websites into English to locate ethics codes featured on the sites.

As Laczniak and Murphy (1993) suggest that a code of ethics should be shared not only internally but also externally to increase its efficacy; professional association websites from the 107 countries were examined as a first step toward evaluating the content of their professional ethics codes. The unit of analysis for this study was each individual web page featuring ethics code-related content. Ethics codes are *standards and guidelines that are designed by a professional public relations association to guide and examine expected ethical and professional norms among members*, and do not necessarily include the word *ethics*. Both Walle's (2003) social responsibility scheme of ethics codes of public relations associations and the PRSA



TABLE 1  
Full Lists of National Public Relations Professional Associations' Official Websites

<i>Globalization Level</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Professional Public Relations Association</i>	<i>Official Website</i>
Globalized	Argentina	Professional Council of Public Relations of Argentina	<a href="http://www.rrpp.org.ar">http://www.rrpp.org.ar</a>
	Australia	Public Relations Institute of Australia	<a href="http://www.pria.com.au/">http://www.pria.com.au/</a>
	Austria	Public Relations Association of Austria	<a href="http://www.prva.at">http://www.prva.at</a>
	Belgium	Belgian Public Relations Consultants Association	<a href="http://www.bprca.be/index.php?LAN=en&amp;FILE=home">http://www.bprca.be/index.php?LAN=en&amp;FILE=home</a>
	Brazil	Brazilian Public Relations Association Brazilian Association for Business Communication	<a href="http://www.conreprssc.org.br/">http://www.conreprssc.org.br/</a> <a href="http://www.aberje.com.br">http://www.aberje.com.br</a>
	Canada	The Canadian Public Relations Society	<a href="http://www.cprs.ca/">http://www.cprs.ca/</a>
	Chile		
	China	Shanghai Public Relations Association China International Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.chspra.com/">http://www.chspra.com/</a> <a href="http://www.cipra.org.cn/English/">http://www.cipra.org.cn/English/</a>
	Czech Republic	Association of Public Relations Agencies	<a href="http://www.apra.cz/uk/index.php">http://www.apra.cz/uk/index.php</a>
	Denmark	Danish Association of Communication Professionals Danish Association of Public Relations Consultancies	<a href="http://www.kommunikationsforening.dk/">http://www.kommunikationsforening.dk/</a> <a href="http://www.publicrelationsbranchen.dk/">http://www.publicrelationsbranchen.dk/</a>
	Finland	The Finnish Association of Professional Communicators The Finnish Association of PR Consultancies	<a href="http://www.procom.fi/en/">http://www.procom.fi/en/</a>
	France	SYNTEC Public Relations Consultants Organization	<a href="http://www.syntec-rp.com/">http://www.syntec-rp.com/</a>
	Germany	Information Press & Communication German Public Relations Consultancies Association German Public Relations Society	<a href="http://www.infopressecom.org/">http://www.infopressecom.org/</a> <a href="http://www.gpra.com/">http://www.gpra.com/</a> <a href="http://www.dprg.de/statische/itemsshowone.php4?id=140">http://www.dprg.de/statische/itemsshowone.php4?id=140</a>
	Greece	Hellenic Association of Advertising-Communications Agencies	<a href="http://www.edee.gr/">http://www.edee.gr/</a>
	Italy	Italian Federation of Public Relations Italian Public Affair Association	<a href="http://www.ferpi.it/ferpi/association">http://www.ferpi.it/ferpi/association</a> <a href="http://www.pa-association.it/">http://www.pa-association.it/</a>
	Ireland	Public Relations Consultants Association of Ireland Public Relations Institute of Ireland	<a href="http://www.prca.ie/">http://www.prca.ie/</a> <a href="http://www.prii.ie/">http://www.prii.ie/</a>
	India	Public Relations Consultants Association of India	<a href="http://www.prcai.org/">http://www.prcai.org/</a>
	Indonesia	Association of Indonesian Public Relations Companies Public Relations Association of Indonesia Public Relations Society of Indonesia	<a href="http://www.perhumas.or.id/">http://www.perhumas.or.id/</a> <a href="http://www.prsociety.or.id/">http://www.prsociety.or.id/</a>
	Japan	Public Relations Society of Japan	<a href="http://www.prsj.or.jp/english/">http://www.prsj.or.jp/english/</a>

(continued)

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

<i>Globalization Level</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Professional Public Relations Association</i>	<i>Official Website</i>
	Malaysia	Institute of Public Relations Malaysia Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia	<a href="http://www.iprm.org.my/">http://www.iprm.org.my/</a> <a href="http://www.prcamalaysia.org">http://www.prcamalaysia.org</a>
	Mexico	Mexican Association of Public Relations Professionals	<a href="http://www.prorp.org.mx">http://www.prorp.org.mx</a>
	Norway	The Norwegian Communication Association  Norwegian Public Relations Consultants Association	<a href="http://www.kommunikasjon.no/foreningen/om-oss/english">http://www.kommunikasjon.no/foreningen/om-oss/english</a> <a href="http://www.nir.no/vis_eng_oversikt.php">http://www.nir.no/vis_eng_oversikt.php</a>
	Philippines	Public Relations Society of the Philippines	<a href="http://www.prsp.ph/">http://www.prsp.ph/</a>
	Poland	Polish Public Relations Consultancies Association	<a href="http://www.zfpr.pl/en/">http://www.zfpr.pl/en/</a>
	Russia	Russian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.raso.ru/">http://www.raso.ru/</a>
	South Africa	<i>Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa</i>	<a href="http://www.prisa.co.za/">http://www.prisa.co.za/</a>
	South Korea	Korea Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.koreapr.org/">http://www.koreapr.org/</a>
	Singapore	Institute of Public Relations of Singapore	<a href="http://www.iprs.org.sg/">http://www.iprs.org.sg/</a>
	Spain	Spanish Association of Communicators  Association of Public Relations Consultancies	<a href="http://www.adecec.com/ingles/index.html">http://www.adecec.com/ingles/index.html</a> <a href="http://www.dircom.org">http://www.dircom.org</a>
	Sweden	Public Relations Consultancies in Sweden Swedish Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.precis.se/">http://www.precis.se/</a> <a href="http://www.sverigesinformationsforening.se/in-english.aspx">http://www.sverigesinformationsforening.se/in-english.aspx</a>
	Taiwan		
	Thailand	Public Relations Society of Thailand	
	The Netherlands	Logeion, Association for Communication Netherlands Association of Public Relations Consultants	<a href="http://www.logeion.nl/">http://www.logeion.nl/</a> <a href="http://www.vpra.nl/en/">http://www.vpra.nl/en/</a>
	Turkey	Turkish Public Relations Association Public Relations Consultancies Inc. of Turkey	<a href="http://www.tuhid.org/tr/">http://www.tuhid.org/tr/</a>
	United Arab Emirates	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	United Kingdom	Chartered Institute of Public Relations Public Relations Consultants Association	<a href="http://www.cipr.co.uk/">http://www.cipr.co.uk/</a> <a href="http://www.prca.org.uk/">http://www.prca.org.uk/</a>
	United States	Council of Public Relations Firms Center for Global Public Relations	<a href="http://www.prfirms.org/">http://www.prfirms.org/</a> <a href="http://cgpr.uncc.edu/">http://cgpr.uncc.edu/</a>
Globalizing	Bahrain	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	Bulgaria	Bulgarian Public Relations Society	<a href="http://www.bdvo.org/index.phtml">http://www.bdvo.org/index.phtml</a>
	Columbia		
	Costa Rica		
	Croatia	Croatian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.huoj.hr/Default.aspx?sec=118">http://www.huoj.hr/Default.aspx?sec=118</a>
	Egypt		
	El Salvador		

(continued)

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

<i>Globalization Level</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Professional Public Relations Association</i>	<i>Official Website</i>
	Estonia	Estonian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.epra.ee/?id=46&amp;keel=ee">http://www.epra.ee/?id=46&amp;keel=ee</a>
	Guatemala		
	Hungary	Hungarian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.mprsz.hu/">http://www.mprsz.hu/</a>
	Israel	Israel Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.ispra.org.il/">http://www.ispra.org.il/</a>
	Jordan		
	Kuwait	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	Latvia	Latvian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.lasap.lv/news/">http://www.lasap.lv/news/</a>
	Lebanon		
	Morocco		
	New Zealand	Public Relations Institute of New Zealand	<a href="http://www.prinz.org.nz/">http://www.prinz.org.nz/</a>
	Panama		
	Peru		
	Portugal	Association of Public Relations Consultancies in Portugal	<a href="http://www.apecom.pt/en/home">http://www.apecom.pt/en/home</a>
		Portuguese Association of Corporate Communication	<a href="http://www.apce.pt">http://www.apce.pt</a>
	Puerto Rico	Association of Public Relations Professionals of Puerto Rico	<a href="http://www.relacionistas.com/">http://www.relacionistas.com/</a>
	Qatar	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	Romania	Romanian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.arrp.ro/">http://www.arrp.ro/</a>
	Saudi Arabia	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	Slovakia	Association of Public Relations of the Slovak Republic	<a href="http://www.aprsr.sk/?kategoria=en">http://www.aprsr.sk/?kategoria=en</a>
	Slovenia	Public Relations Society of Slovenia	<a href="http://www.piar.si/">http://www.piar.si/</a>
	Switzerland	Swiss Association of Consultancies HARBOURCLUB	<a href="http://www.harbourclub.ch">http://www.harbourclub.ch</a>
		Swiss Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.prsuisse.ch">http://www.prsuisse.ch</a>
		Swiss Public Relations Institute	<a href="http://www.spri.ch/">http://www.spri.ch/</a>
	Ukraine	Ukrainian PR League	<a href="http://www.prschool.kiev.ua/">http://www.prschool.kiev.ua/</a>
	Uruguay		
	Venezuela		
	Vietnam		
Emerging	Algeria		
	Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan Public Relations Association	
	Barbados		
	Bolivia		
	Bosnia and Herzegovina		
	Burkina Faso		
	Congo		
	Cyprus	Cyprus Public Relations Professionals Association	
	Democratic Republic of Sierra Leone		
	Dominican Republic		

(continued)

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

<i>Globalization Level</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Professional Public Relations Association</i>	<i>Official Website</i>
	Ecuador		
	Gabon		
	Honduras		
	Iceland	Public Relations Association of Iceland	
	Iran	Iranian Association of Public Relations Specialists	
	Ivory Coast		
	Kazakhstan		
	Kenya	Public Relations Society of Kenya	<a href="http://www.prsk.co.ke/">http://www.prsk.co.ke/</a>
	Lithuania		
	Macedonia	Macedonian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.atcomet.com/url_view/www.mpra.org.mk/">http://www.atcomet.com/url_view/ www.mpra.org.mk/</a>
	Madagascar		
	Malawi		
	Mauritius	The Public Relations and Communication Professionals Association	
	Nicaragua		
	Niger		
	Nigeria	Nigerian Institute of Public Relations	<a href="http://www.nipr-ng.org/">http://www.nipr-ng.org/</a>
	Oman	<i>IPRA Gulf Chapter</i>	<a href="http://www.ipra-gc.com/">http://www.ipra-gc.com/</a>
	Pakistan		
	Paraguay		
	Senegal		
	Serbia & Montenegro	Public Relations Society of Serbia	<a href="http://pr.org.rs/">http://pr.org.rs/</a>
	Syria	Syrian Public Relations Association	<a href="http://www.spra-sy.com/english/?more=1311&amp;category_id=117">http://www.spra-sy.com/english/? more=1311&amp;category_id=117</a>
	Tanzania		
	Trinidad and Tobago	Public Relations Association of Trinidad and Tobago	
	Tunisia		
	Uganda	Public Relations Association of Uganda	<a href="http://www.prauganda.com/general/index.php">http://www.prauganda.com/general/ index.php</a>
	Uzbekistan		
	Zambia	Zambia Public Relations Association	
	Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations	

*Note.* Professional associations that are italicized are regional associations, including *Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa*, and *IPRA Gulf Chapter*.

Member Code of Ethics 2000<sup>6</sup> were implemented as a basic coding scheme in this study for the reasons listed below, although it should be noted that these criteria represent Western perspectives.<sup>7</sup> First, Walle's is the only available study that investigates the content of ethics codes across national public relations associations. Second, the PRSA Member Code of Ethics 2000 is known as one of the most representative codes of ethics in the public relations industry (Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b; Gower, 2003; Wilcox & Cameron, 2005).

In examining Walle's (2003) seven categories alongside the professional values and the PRSA Code Provisions of the PRSA Member Code of Ethics 2000, Walle's first category and the concept of fairness in the PRSA Member Code of Ethics reflect the same values, as do Walle's fourth category and the concept of honesty in the PRSA Member Code of Ethics. Accordingly, this study counted only fairness and honesty for the analysis. Additionally, since this study used the PRSA Member Code of Ethics as a coding scheme, PRSA was excluded from the study's sample of U.S. associations. In addition, this study used open coding, "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101), when evaluating the ethics codes to identify frequently occurring concepts or issues.

Samples were coded by one of the authors and a graduate student. To test reliability, Scott's pi was used (Scott, 1955), and approximately 15% of the websites were randomly selected from the total sample. The inter-coder reliability estimated for each coding category was above the acceptable level of .80 (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Scott's pi was measured at .98 for the existence of a website, .99 for the type of association, .96 for the existence of a code of ethics, .98 for title of code of ethics, .88 for Walle's (2003) categories, .87 for PRSA professional values, and .88 for PRSA Code Provisions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Prevalence of Professional PR Associations and Their Ethics Codes

This study aims to present a global picture of professional public relations associations and their ethics codes around the world by providing a full list of nations and their corresponding public relations professional associations' official websites (Table 1). Of the 107 countries, 67 (62.6%) countries were affiliated with 89 associations, both national (92.1%) and regional (7.9%). These countries with associations were then placed into the categories of globalized ( $n = 35$ , 51.5%), globalizing ( $n = 19$ , 27.9%), and emerging ( $n = 14$ , 20.6%). Of the 67 countries, 18 countries (globalized: Brazil, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Ireland, Indonesia, Malaysia, Norway, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States; globalizing: Portugal and Switzerland) had at least two public relations associations.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of the globalization levels, the majority of countries (94.5%) at the globalized level have at least one professional association, while slightly more than half (58.0%) of the countries in the globalizing level have at least one. With regard to emerging countries, approximately two-thirds (64.1%) did not possess a professional association. These findings clearly indicate that the existence of professional associations in a given country corresponds with the level of development and globalization for the public relations industry in that country. This conclusion confirms Sriramesh and Verčič's (2001) emphasis on the five important contextual variables that affect the status of public relations practice internationally—political systems, level of activism, culture, economics, and media systems—as well as Henderson's (2010) argument that public relations professional associations should take the lead in public relations development in their respective countries.

Regarding the existence of professional codes of the 77 websites, a majority ( $n = 55$ , 71.4%) provided professional codes, and 45 of the codes were examined in greater depth.<sup>9</sup> As shown

TABLE 2  
Code Contents in Public Relations Associations Across Countries

Category	Values	N = 45	% <sup>b</sup>
Walle (2003)	Endorsement of public welfare	3	6.7
	Public as the first priority	18	40.0
	Responsibility for client behavior	10	22.2
	Emphasizing symmetrical two-way communication	13	28.9
	Regular discourse about ethics and ethical values	11	24.4
PRSA professional values	Advocacy for public interest	17	37.8
	Advocacy for public debate	3	6.7
	Honesty	29	64.4
	Expertise of knowledge	15	33.3
	Expertise of professional development	12	26.7
	Expertise for mutual understanding	3	6.7
	Independence (objective counsel)	9	20.0
	Independence (accountable for professional's action)	10	22.2
	Loyalty	15	33.3
	Fairness	21	46.7
	Fairness for free expression	8	17.8
PRSA code of provision	Free flow of information	4	8.9
	Competition	10	22.2
	Disclosure of information	10	22.2
	Safeguarding confidences	29	64.4
	Conflicts of interest	24	53.3
	Enhancing the profession	13	28.9

Note. <sup>b</sup> = Percentage was calculated based on 45 countries' associations having a professional code.

in Table 2, to answer RQ1a and RQ1b, the most frequently expressed values displayed in more than half of the sample were honesty ( $n = 29, 64.4\%$ ) and safeguarding confidences ( $n = 29, 64.4\%$ ), followed by conflict of interest ( $n = 24, 53.3\%$ ). In answer to RQ2, the most infrequently mentioned values were endorsement of public welfare ( $n = 3, 6.7\%$ ), advocacy for public debate ( $n = 3, 6.7\%$ ), expertise for mutual understanding ( $n = 6.7\%$ ), and free flow of information ( $n = 4, 8.9\%$ ). In addition, open coding procedures revealed an additional relativistic value such as fees and gifts (see Table 2).

### Universal Values: Honesty and Safeguarding Confidences of Clients

The majority of professional associations highlight the values of honesty, accuracy, truth, and integrity; honesty proved to be an obvious universal value. As an example, the Public Relations Institute of Australia's Code of Ethics<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the value of honesty as follows: "Members shall deal fairly and honestly with their employers, clients and prospective clients, with their fellow workers including superiors and subordinates, with public officials, the communication media, the general public and with fellow members of PRIA" (para. 3). Honesty represents a significant universal ethical value emphasized in ethics codes across industries (Payne et al., 1997; Roberts, 2012; Schwartz, 1998, 2005) and specifically within the public relations field (El-Astal, 2005; Walle, 2003). Roberts (2012) confirms that the value of truth is the sole value

found in different mass media codes of ethics, including public relations, advertising, and journalism. El-Astal (2005) also affirms that honesty is the only value that does not demonstrate significant differences among the public relations practitioners in seven different nations. In public relations, honesty plays a fundamental role in the process of gaining organizational trust from stakeholders (Rawlins, 2009) and for public relations to act as ethics counsel (Bowen, 2008). Finally, because honesty represents the most commonly shared value among professional public relations associations across countries, this study identifies honesty as a significant universal value for improving public relations professionalism on a global scale.

Many national professional associations also emphasize the value of safeguarding confidences. However, the extent of safeguarding confidences between the countries was slightly distinct, as some associations (e.g., Czech Republic, Malaysia, Portugal, Spain) were concerned only with protecting clients' confidences while others (e.g., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Uganda) considered not only their clients' but also their employers' confidences. For example, the Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia<sup>11</sup> only emphasizes the protection of information of various clients' sides, indicating that "Corporate Member firms and their employees must abide and respect client confidentiality, the privacy of client employees, and must also refrain from recruiting employees of their clients' organization without prior agreement and written consent of the parties involved" (para. 13). However, the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand's code of ethics<sup>12</sup> highlights the value of loyalty for both clients and employers, stating the following: "We safeguard the confidences of former or present employers and clients" (Loyalty, para. 2). Public relations is a significantly client-based profession (Bivins, 2004), and previous empirical studies (Ki & Kim, 2010; Roberts, 2012) found that this client-loyalty-related value is a key professional value in public relations ethics across cultures. This study determined that the issue of safeguarding confidences is a significant work-ethics value emphasizing loyalty to clients universally and to employers relatively among professional public relations associations examined around the globe. Finally, 'safeguarding confidences of clients' was found to be a universal value for public relations professionalism due to the client-based nature of the profession. As such, sensitive issues from a client's perspective should be protected and possible legal action taken in cases of breaches of this protection.

### Relativistic Value: Conflicts of Interests of Competing Clients

This study found that roughly half of the ethics codes include the value "conflicts of interest." A greater number of public relations associations prohibit conflicts of interest without a client's consent while a few European associations leave decisions regarding this issue up to individual companies. This outcome demonstrates that the professional guidelines from the examined associations can be contradictory across different nations. The Institute of Public Relations of Singapore,<sup>13</sup> for example, prohibits conflicts of interest by stating that "a member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests" (para. 9). The associations in many countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, India, Kenya, United Kingdom) prohibit conflicts of interest unless clients give their consent to allow for such conflicts, as in the example of the Public Relations Society of Kenya,<sup>14</sup> that stipulates "a member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the complete consent of those concerned given after the full disclosure of the facts" (para. 7). However, the associations in some European countries (e.g., Denmark,

Sweden, Switzerland, and Portugal) allow for conflicts of interest and assure the public relations firms' autonomy in these situations. The Public Relations Consultancies in Sweden<sup>15</sup> state the following: "PR consultancy companies can work with competing clients or interests. Assisting two or more clients in the same industry is essentially a question of the individual company's professional capacity" (para. 20). Therefore, the value of 'conflicts of interests of competing clients' exhibits ethical relativism across different national public relations associations.

### Argument for the Universal Value: Prohibition of Conflicts of Interests of Competing Clients

In business, the issue of a conflict of interest often exists "when the individual has to choose between her or his interests and the interests of someone else or some other group" (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2008, p. 227). Many argue that the conflicts of interest value represents a core value in diverse professional relationships (Carson, 1994; Herrscher, 2002) and is a commonly addressed universal value in ethics codes (Murphy, 1995). Han, Park, and Jeong (2013) emphasize the complicated nature of professional ethics regarding conflicts of interest in the real world, noting that "it is unavoidable that decision makers in business settings experience ethical conflicts not only between their given accountability and duty to various stakeholders in situations involving conflicts of interest but also between their organization's interests and their personal interest" (pp. 553–554). Herrscher (2002) includes conflict of interests as a significant value within the universal code of journalism ethics. Consequently, the value of conflicts of interest has been identified as a universal value in diverse professional relationships.

The PRSA first presented the value of conflicts of interest in its 1963 code revision and began to emphasize the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest between public relations practitioners' duties and allegiances to clients, employers, and other members (Fitzpatrick, 2002a). The public relations profession is rooted in the subjective nature of advocating for clients. Specifically, "advocates are expected to be subjective—that is the nature of advocacy" (Bivins, 2004, p. 17). After conducting in-depth interviews with public relations professionals, Place (2010) contends that the "public relations profession was too diverse, client-focused, and time-sensitive to implement a deontological decision-making model" (p. 237). Conversely, this argument demonstrates the advocative and subjective nature of the public relations profession, thus illustrating why a universal approach is necessary for enhancing public relations professional ethics. The pitfalls of relativism include its adherence to existing culture and the lack of normative direction provided (Gordon & Kittross, 1999). If we simply stress the complicated nature of the public relations profession and argue the impracticality of applying the universal approach to codes of ethics in public relations practice, professional codes of ethics cannot then provide necessary normative direction for the profession. Therefore, we argue that prohibition of conflicts of interests of competing clients should be the universal value for enhancing public relations professionalism, as we cannot assume that one public relations agency, which by nature is client-driven, can serve multiple competing clients sincerely and professionally at the same time.

### Infrequent Values: Additional Values to Advocacy for Public Interest

The most infrequently mentioned professional values emphasized by only a few specific professional associations can be labeled as relativistic values. A few examples of the infrequent



values found in this study include advocacy for public debate, endorsement of public welfare, and expertise of mutual understanding. However, these three values are intrinsically similar to the values of advocacy for public interest, fairness, and public as the first priority, in that they emphasize not only clients' interests but also public interest. For example, the Public Relations Institute of Australia<sup>16</sup> displays the endorsement of public welfare value, given that "PRIA is mindful of the responsibility which public relations professionals owe to the community as well as to their clients and employers" (para. 1). The Public Relations Institute of New Zealand<sup>17</sup> states, "we build mutual understanding, credibility and relationships among an array of institutions and audiences" (Expertise, para. 3), thus demonstrating the value of expertise of mutual understanding.

In this study, 21 associations (46.7%) displayed the values of fairness, 18 associations (40.0%) mentioned public as the first priority, and 17 associations (37.8%) demonstrated advocacy for public interest. Walle's (2003) examination of the codes of conduct of public relations associations in five countries defines six universal values; three of those were duties to society, public, client, profession, and self; endorsement of public welfare and happiness; and public as the first priority. Although Walle delineates those three separate values, they are similar in that all three stress the public interest. Public interest or public responsibility has long been emphasized in public relations as a significant professional value (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Koehn, 1994; Kultgen, 1988). Grunig and Hunt (1984) note "public responsibility is a basic tenet of public relations. If the organization does not need to be responsible to its publics, it also does not need a public relations function" (p. 52). Koehn (1994) emphasizes the public relations professional's self-awareness of public interest, stating that "if the professional is indeed bound to do whatever the client wants as long as the client's desires do not interfere with others' desire satisfaction, then the professional is little more than a hired hand" (p. 38). Although only a small portion of associations mention the values of advocacy for public debate, endorsement of public welfare, and expertise of mutual understanding, these should not be regarded as examples of relativistic values, since they complement the fundamental value of advocacy of public interest. For public relations to have professionalism, public relations practitioners should embrace the value of public interest (Kim & Reber, 2009).

### Relativistic Values: The Free Flow of Information and Fees and Gift Issues

Four associations—Public Relations Institute of Ireland, Institute of Public Relations Malaysia, Association of Public Relations Consultancies from Spain, and Chartered Institute of Public Relations from the U.K.—mentioned the free flow of information. For example, the first two associations adopted the International Code of Ethics, the Code of Athens,<sup>18</sup> for their associations' ethics codes. The code is meant to guide public relations professionals as follows: "To establish communication patterns and channels which, by fostering the free flow of essential information will make each member of the group feel that he/she is being kept informed, and also give him an awareness of his/her own personal involvement and responsibility, and of his solidarity with other members" (Shall endeavour, para. 2).

Open coding also facilitated the identification of a few ethically relativistic values particular to the professional associations' codes of ethics in certain countries. Only a few associations provide strict and specific guidelines concerning fees and gifts. The Turkish Public Relations

Association<sup>19</sup> states, “neither directly nor indirectly offer or give any financial or other inducement to public representatives, the media, or other stakeholders” (Inducement, para. 1); the Canadian Public Relations Society<sup>20</sup> indicates “members shall personally accept no fees, commissions, gifts or any other considerations for professional services from anyone except employers or clients for whom the services were specifically performed” (para. 22); and Danish Association of Public Relations Consultancies<sup>21</sup> affirms that “the company must take account of good behaviour and be moderate in terms of gifts and hospitality” (Working methods and pricing, para. 10).

Those two values are relevant since gifts to journalists and bloggers can alter the free flow of accurate information in public relations practice. The PRSA code originally cautioned members about these two issues using the exact words, “corrupting the channels of communication” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012, p. 86); however, the code no longer directly mentions this ethical issue. Nevertheless, to address the free flow of information, the PRSA code still offers guidelines regarding gift issues by presenting examples of inappropriate conduct. Within the field of public relations, it is known to be more culturally reasonable to accept gifts in Africa, the Middle East, and Southern Europe than in Asia, Western Europe, Australia, and the United States (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012, p. 87). This point may explain the findings, as Spain (Southern Europe) and Turkey (Middle East) are countries where gift-giving is comparatively acceptable while this practice is not typical in Ireland and the United Kingdom (Western Europe). Finally, countries where gift-giving is accepted tend to emphasize the free flow of information and fees and gift issues to eradicate gift-giving; other countries where this practice is not typical also seem to stress these ethical principles to prevent instances of gift-giving.

## CONCLUSION

This study empirically and thoroughly analyzed 45 ethics codes of professional public relations associations on a global scale to identify the universal and relativistic values among those codes and associations. The values most frequently identified were honesty, safeguarding confidences, and conflicts of interest, which were evident in at least half of the ethics codes analyzed. Honesty and safeguarding confidences of clients were identified as universal values, and conflicts of interest of competing clients was determined to be a relativistic value. While the latter ethical aspect was identified as relativistic, this value should be added as a core universal value for the public relations profession in consideration of its occupational nature. Given that the public relations field is client-based and serves multiple clients at the same time, there is potential for conflicts of interest to arise. These conflicts could prevent public relations professionals from being completely honest to all of the clients they serve and inhibit the successful delivery of services to them.

However, we do not necessarily insist that every national public relations professional association should maintain the same ethical values. Instead, according to the current study’s findings, we assert that core principles, including honesty, safeguarding of confidences of clients, and prohibition of conflicts of interest of competing clients, should be accepted as the fundamental universal values for public relations professionalism regardless of nation or culture. Gordon and Kittross (1999) issued the following argument for employing the Aristotelian Golden Mean to understand media codes of ethics:

Codes of ethics *cannot* be universal in their application, given human ingenuity in creating unique dilemmas. But even though codes can't possibly be tailored to every situation where media ethics issues arise, they certainly can be quite useful in dealing with general concerns that face most practitioners in a given medium. (p. 63)

In this regard, other relativistic values such as free flow of information and the fees and gifts can be understood as the relativistic for particular nations. Acknowledging relativistic values in global public relations ethics is important for the development of public relations professionalism internationally. By considering the growth and necessity of international public relations practices, we hope this study's findings can provide both empirically universal core ethical values as well as examples of relativistic values applicable to particular nations.

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### NOTES

1. The globalized cluster includes "countries with at least eight offices belonging to different top 10 global public relations multinationals" (p. 356); the globalizing cluster includes "countries with between 4 and 7 public relations offices belonging to different top 10 global public relations multinationals" (p. 356); the emerging cluster includes countries "having from one to three public relations offices" (p. 356); and the excluded level includes "countries without a single public relations office" (p. 356).
2. <http://www.ipra.org/links.asp>
3. <http://www.cipr.co.uk/direct/directory.asp?v1=bodies>
4. <http://www.prssa.org/prsic/resources.aspx>
5. <http://www.globalalliancepr.org/>
6. <http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish/>
7. Monica Walle's affiliation is Bond University in Australia, and the PRSA Member Code of Ethics 2000 is from the PRSA in the United States.
8. Countries having multiple associations were coded multiple times. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of combined numbers for further analysis.
9. Of the 55 associations, 10 possessed ethics codes whose contents could not be evaluated because either the websites did not provide the necessary content or they could not be adequately translated (e.g., ethics code provided in PDF format from the Professional Council of Public Relations of Argentina).
10. <http://www.pria.com.au/documents/item/6317>
11. <http://www.prcamalaysia.org/home-landing-page/about-us/code-of-ethics/>
12. [https://www.prinz.org.nz/Folder?Action=View%20File&Folder\\_id=73&File=PRINZ\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics.pdf](https://www.prinz.org.nz/Folder?Action=View%20File&Folder_id=73&File=PRINZ_Code_of_Ethics.pdf)
13. <http://www.iprs.org.sg/iprs-code-ethics>
14. <http://www.prsk.co.ke/index.php/membership/code-of-conduct>

15. <http://www.precis.se/standards/>
16. <http://www.pria.com.au/documents/item/6317>
17. [https://www.prinz.org.nz/Folder?Action=View%20File&Folder\\_id=73&File=PRINZ\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics.pdf](https://www.prinz.org.nz/Folder?Action=View%20File&Folder_id=73&File=PRINZ_Code_of_Ethics.pdf)
18. [https://www.prii.ie/show\\_content.aspx?idcategory=1&idsubcategory=1](https://www.prii.ie/show_content.aspx?idcategory=1&idsubcategory=1)
19. [http://www.tuhid.org/pdf/ipra-consolidated-code-2011\\_1381390120.pdf](http://www.tuhid.org/pdf/ipra-consolidated-code-2011_1381390120.pdf)
20. [http://www.cprs.ca/aboutus/code\\_ethic.aspx](http://www.cprs.ca/aboutus/code_ethic.aspx)
21. <http://www.publicrelationsbranchen.dk/etiske-normer>

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