



Professional Values and Standards of PR Industry in Pakistan: A Comparison with International Practices

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Abstract: *This article analyses the status of professional practice in the public relations industry in Pakistan in terms of the application of professional values. The adoption of professional values by public relations practitioners is explored by interviewing public relations practitioners. The conceptions of professional values have been taken from the Public Relations Society of America's code of professional standards. Ten qualitative interviews were conducted with practitioners from the government sector. The results explained the conditions of the public relations landscape in Pakistan in terms of professional practice and maturity. The applications of professional values are less in practice due to factors including lack of professional organization in PR, less recognition of PR apparatus by the management, less professional training opportunities, weak research infrastructure in PR departments, and professional attitude of the practitioners while performing day to day obligations.*

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Introduction

A social world necessitates communication for all organizations. An organization's existence is consequently dependent on its ability to communicate. As part of the organization's basic functions, some communication activities are mandated by the organization itself. More than a few of these activities are carried out on a voluntary basis in support of the organization's development strategy and management practices. Non-mandatory activities like public relations fall into this category. When making decisions for the organization and its stakeholders, public relations practitioners must consider the long-term impact of their actions on both. Public relations is an art form that necessitates the development of a set of

ethical standards for any sector. Due to a lack of public awareness related to the public relations phenomenon, the concept of public relations is not fully comprehended by many people in the field. Therefore, before going into intricacies, the phenomenon needs to be defined. According to the Public Relations Institute of Australia, Public Relations can be defined as *"the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization (or individual), and it is (or their) publics."* At the same time, they also described it as *"the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization*

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with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.” (PRIA, 2020) During the 1970s, Harlow analyzed the terms associated with this profession and arrived at a working definition of Public Relations, which was reflected in the PRIA’s definition as mentioned above. He described that,

“Public Relations performs a distinctive management function that helps to establish communication, understanding, acceptance, and co-operation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive of public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its essential tools.” (Harlow,1977)

According to Herbert M. Baus, public relation is a broad field that cannot be limited under a single classification of categories. It affects practically every aspect of human communication and includes every member of society as a stakeholder. He sees public relations as a system of human understanding that combines philosophy, sociology, economics, language, psychology, communication, and other knowledge (Baus, 1948). The field of public relations has grown in popularity throughout the previous century, notably in the last few decades, due to its diversity. It is important to highlight that this strategic mode of communication is extensively utilized in developed countries where technology and strategy have joined forces to perform more productively, albeit the situation in South Asian countries is slightly different: In nations such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, public relations practitioners are still trying to gain a respectable position (Sriramesh, 1992; Khan, 2001; Xu, & Huang, 2016). Despite being one of Asia’s most important countries, it is clear that little research has been undertaken in the field of public relations in Pakistan.

Public Relations culture is rapidly changing in this new millennium with new customs and

values. These changing traditions in the international public relations industry included uniformity in practices, multinational and globalized publics, and cross-cultural campaigns (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005). In view of these rapid changes in the scholarship of public relations, professionals need increased information about practices happening in different parts of the globe. In Asia, the economy of public relations (PR) is on a speedy track with more research and information (Xu, & Huang, 2016). South Asia as a region cannot be ignored as a contributor to the Asian public relations economy, and the landscape of the Public Relations (PR) sector in Pakistan is an important part of this process (Lim, Goh & Sriramesh, 2005).

Anne Gregory and Johanna Fawkes did a two-year research project to propose universally accepted guidelines for the practitioner, employer, and academic communities in PR and communication management titled *“A Global Capability Framework: Reframing Public Relations for a Changing World,”* which was published in Public Relation Review in 2019. The finding of this research shows that no universally accepted framework for PR Practitioners is possible due to differences in socio-cultural settings of countries. The research focused on nine countries, including “Argentina, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA.” It is interesting to see that more or less all these countries have similar socio-cultural settings even than the researcher couldn’t agree on universal principles of PR. This research encouraged the researcher to explore the underlying principles of professionalism of PR in the Pakistani setting.

Moreover, Anke Osswald concludes that doing any decision, social and cultural practices, and meaning of that decision are kept in mind by the PR practitioner. Moreover, the status, role of the organization, and the tools used in PR are also very important in making a decision. The author concludes that the decision-making practices of PR practitioners are less explored, and more empirical research is required in this field. This research also gave an idea to the researcher to determine the loopholes in the decision-making of PR practitioners viz-a-viz their professional competence.

In comparison with other Asian countries, the PR industry is less explored in Pakistan, especially in comparison with India and other regional countries. Much of the published information about the public relations profession is focused on discovering the profession concerning the infrastructure of public relations departments vis-a-vis their ability to deal with media publics or analysis of the public relations materials produced by different public relations units (Jeelani, 2001; Khan, 2001; Cheema, 1996). The professional landscape is also recently reflected by applying theoretical lenses of different roles and models adoption patterns (Mukhtar, 2019). In Pakistan, very little and insignificant research work is available highlighting the importance of professional standards of Public relations, adoption of professional values, and application of professional standards (Mukhtar, 2019). Hence, the public relations profession in Pakistan is never reflected by applying a social scientific perspective. The social scientific perspective is based on sociological literature, which uses lenses of professional values and principles of professional performance practices to explore the landscape and professionalism of this industry (Masood, 2017; Wylie, 1994; L'Etang, 1999). In view of all the above, thorough research is required to investigate professionalism in the Public Relations industry of Pakistan. One of the important lenses to explore PR professionalism is by exploring the adoption and practice patterns of professional values among practitioners.

This article explores the adoption of professional values by public relations practitioners in Pakistan. The professional values are adopted from the Public Relations Society of America's code of professional standards. The operational definitions of these values are the same as defined by the PRSA code of ethics. These values included advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. The professional practice of public relations is dependent on the adoption rate of these values. To practice excellent public relations on professional scales, social responsibility and ethical decision-making are important factors. Social responsibility and ethical decision-making

are positively correlated with the adoption of public relations values. Thus, public relations values are significant and supportive while making professional decisions making. Further, the adoption of these values creates balances of power between the organization and its publics (Grunig, 2000).

RQ1: What are the adoption patterns of different professional values among public relations practitioners in Pakistan?

RQ2: What is the critique of the practitioners regarding the adoption and practice of professional values in Pakistan?

Methods

The purpose of this article is to explore PR professional values in the public relations industry in Pakistan. Therefore, the article is based on a qualitative research design approach. Ten in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with ten public relations practitioners working in various departments of the public sector. The participants were selected purposely adopting a non-probability sampling design. A structured questionnaire was used to take responses from the participants. The reason behind taking only ten participants was saturation stage stoppage. The responses were recorded and transcribed. The responses were analyzed based on five themes associated with public relations professional values.

Results and Analysis

RQ1: What are the adoption patterns of different professional values among public relations practitioners in Pakistan?

The data shows that the majority of public relations practitioners have a good understanding of the conceptions of these professional values, and they try to embed these values with their practice. Sometimes they are successful, but due to official, bureaucratic and corporate factors, sometimes, they face hurdles in applications of these values in their professional practice. Practitioners were well aware of the increasing importance of public relations in global communication practice (Kruckeberg, 1996), and they were inclined concerning the practice of

professional values to make a more professional atmosphere of the PR industry in Pakistan.

In response to the adoption of advocacy in their practice, the majority of the practitioners were of the view that advocacy as a professional value is more difficult to carry as they are working with institutions with weak democratic traditions and vulnerable democratic culture. Thus, it is very difficult to claim that they are more inclined towards public interest while advocating the position of their institutions in media. Some practitioners were of the view that they work more as lobbyists and press agents than advocates. But the majority of the practitioners agreed that they serve with a clear vision using a communication grid while advocating our client/employer/organization. And similarly, they always serve by using common language while advocating/placing the interests of their client, employer, and their organization. One of the practitioners said, "I can claim that I use communication grid and common language while advocating/publicizing my institution in media and in the general public, but it would be unfair if I claim to ensure the highest standards of catering public interest." One practitioner was of the opinion that we could facilitate our organizations in protecting their image, but we need more space for advocacy practice and further supports from civil society and the public sphere to cater to the public interest. Unfortunately, bureaucratic organizational culture restricts to adoption and practice of better advocacy-related values.

All practitioners opined that they practice honesty as their core value. They were of the view modern-day public relations requires more honesty as you cannot hide information from bosses or from media in this global communication age. Thus, we always tend to approach to the highest standards of accuracy while providing any information to media and the public, one practitioner argued. Similarly, we always issue truthful though favorable information towards internal and external public circles. The majority of the practitioners thought that holding honesty is sometimes very difficult to adopt while performing official duties, especially when they are briefing their own management hierarchies. One of the practitioners

said, "I always try to be honest at a personnel level, but when it comes to professional level, I have to obey instructions from my boss and top management. This obedience to top management sometimes hurts professional honesty to adopt and practice. But anyhow my conceptions about honesty as a public relations values are clear, and I want to grow in my career being an honest PR professional". Another practitioner said, "These days media role has become more crucial and critical but supportive to establish trust between institutions. The other end of this trust mechanism is tied with public relations apparatus. Truthful and accurate information-based feeding mechanism of PR cells to media institutions can support democratic culture to prosper in the country".

All the practitioners were agreed that professional expertise is necessary to grow in this field in Pakistan now. All the practitioners were told that they held university degrees before entering this field. The majority of the practitioners hold a degree in journalism or mass communication. All the practitioners claimed to have specialized experience of their profession being a part of the profession for so long.

All the practitioners claimed to practice professional independence while communicating public relations policy and day-to-day professional affairs. Some practitioners were of the view that they always provide objective and unbiased counsel to their department, but if they are asked to do so. They said that sometimes management does not make them involved in the decision-making process. Being a technician, it would become difficult to provide objective counsel, but anyhow they understand the importance of independence as PR value and always practice it when their organization asks for their support. All the practitioners said that they always provide a professional point of view in any circumstances. The practitioners believed the professional point of view as their main strength to make their profession more recognized, and they are aware of this fact. One practitioner said, my independence is my professional life, and I never allow my organization to hurt it. Thus, "I always communicate professional angle to all public

relation threats or opportunities. But act as per organizational decisions to make PR strategy".

Practitioners believe that loyalty is a bigger challenge to prove for them in today's professional practice. Organizations definition of loyalty is based on single-sided, but professional loyalty is dual in nature as you have to be loyal with the organization and also with the public interest. Creating a balance between loyalty to organizational objectives and loyalty to the public interest is very difficult. Both parties (media and their organizations) sniff their loyalty with an antagonistic gesture. One practitioner said that anyhow, they understand the importance of loyalty in their professional career and always stick to it but to which side is difficult to reveal.

All the practitioners shared that they practice the highest standards of fairness while dealing with the internal or external public. They said dealing with the media public is tricky when we measure it on fairness scales. They always try to be impartial while dealing with the media as they always act on behalf of the organization, being a spokesperson, not on a personal basis. But some media persons do not understand this professional habitat and criticize their fairness. One practitioner said that my fairness is attached to the process of dealing with information mechanisms, and I fairly deal with it. I fairly provide my organization's point of view to the media and vis-à-vis media response to my organization. My fairness should not be evaluated on the basis of my organizational point of view or based on media response.

RQ2: What is the critique of the practitioners regarding the adoption and practice of professional values?

According to practitioners, the evolution of the profession was modest in the country at the start, but it has now developed into a significant persuasive commercial industry that inspires all essential stakeholders. The industry is widespread now, encompassing the public sector, the private sector, semi-government enterprises, and international corporations. Public relations have become a critical component of all entrepreneurs and other areas involving and interacting with the public. "Not enough importance is given to PR departments in

Pakistan as compared to other developed countries where media is active and plays a vital role in making and changing public perceptions," one of the practitioners shared his experience. One of them noted, "the job of public relations officer is thankless almost in entire Pakistan. When any news item against the organization publishes, or the desired news of management does not get attention in print media, they become angry without keeping the fact in their mind that the media-Men cannot be stopped to highlight the issues if there are any grey areas within organizations. Thus, this job is a very sensitive but thankless one" ([Mukhtar, Umer, & Shah, 2020](#)).

Practitioners criticized the practice of technician role in public relations in Pakistan as they believe it is a significant hurdle in the adoption of advocacy values to serve the public interest. The majority was of the view that PR scholarship required to be practiced as a management function to better advocate their clients and organizations while catering to the public interest. One practitioner said, "If we want to measure the impact of government strategies on the general public and want to adjust our programs within the boundaries of greater public interest. Then we have to adopt management role of PR to maximum potential to counsel our top management". Practitioners were of the view that carrying advocacy value is compatible, and the PR department needs better infrastructure in terms of a professional atmosphere. They also criticized the public relations subjects being offered by different communication studies departments across the country. They were of the view that public relations courses are offered in the English language while Urdu language media is more dominant. Thus, PR practitioners do not get any prior training of preparing PR material in the common Urdu language. Practitioners believe that though they always apply clear vision using communication grid while advocating their organizations, organizations do not believe in public relations policy related to the use of single-source as Principal Spokesperson. Due to having more than one spokesperson, this vision becomes blurry to communicate.

The majority of the practitioners believe it is very difficult to adhere highest standards of

honesty, accuracy, and truth being working in an unhealthy and unprofessional media scenario in Pakistan. They think that their organizations never provide them enough space to apply the highest standards of accuracy and honesty. Sometimes, they feel their dignity is at stake due to having direct contact with the boss with the media as bosses do not understand the reasons behind placing a PR bridge between them and the media.

Practitioners also criticized the lack of professional public relations institutions for enhancing their expertise in the field. One practitioner said, "Public relations is being taught as a course/subject in journalism departments in universities in Pakistan. Specialized degree programs in public relations are needed to launch. They enhanced their expertise by the hit and trail method. It would be better if some universities offer professional public relations courses for mid-career PR professionals to further enhance their expertise in the field".

Practitioners shared that their independence is also attacked by other sister departments within their organizations. Practitioners always objectively counsel their top management, but there are others who think that public relations are everybody's cup of tea. Top management becomes more confused when they provide an ear to such unprofessional advice. And at the end, in case of any PR emergency, practitioners' objective counsel and loyalty are questioned rather than accepting top management's own fault to value unprofessional advice from sister departments. Similarly, impractical boss publicity is also a major hurdle in securing maximum independence. One practitioner said, "How would you claim independence when most of the PR resources are wasted on boss publicity rather than using these for organizational promotion?"

Conclusion

The professionals in the field believe that PR functions best when there is mutual trust,

extensive communication, and reciprocal ties amongst institutions within a social system. This three-tiered role promotes the formation of social capital, which in turn results in the development of a thriving civil society. A throbbing civil society nurtures the public realm and so facilitates the sharing of a realistic political/democratic discourse that invests the potential of all internal forces. Media organizations serve as a catalyst for a dynamic alliance between the public realm and civil society. In Pakistan, public relations is still regarded as a new profession that, despite having been practiced for a long time, has not yet attained the status of a full-fledged profession in the country. As a result, practicing professionals experience a scarcity of information about the practical aspects of their profession. As a result, it was discovered that a lack of local research in the field of public relations impedes its growth as a profession because professions thrive when experts are well-trained and any emergent challenges are dealt with strategically. However, the majority of the public relations practitioners in the public sector in Pakistan understand the conceptions of professional values of public relations, and they tend to approach to adhere these professional values as per their capacity and professional skills. Although these practitioners face severe challenges to adopt better standards of advocacy, independence, loyalty, fairness, and expertise, yet they are widening their space within their organizations and in media, corridors to secure better standards of public relations professional values. Public relations is not as mature as a profession in Pakistan to ensure the highest standards of professional values. But future of the profession is bright with the increase of media clutter, and more trained professionals are needed. As per the results, the conditions of the PR industry-related adoption of professional values by PR professionals in Pakistan is not comparable with the western world, but it can easily be compared with any South Asian neighbor and any other Asian nation.

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