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1. Introduction

1.1 Research interest

In recent years, public relations profession has had a dramatic change due to digitization and the methods of public relations indexed to the traditional media have also taken their share of this change. On the one hand, social media has rapidly transformed the communication process of journalistic information gathering, some basic practices of public relations professionals to provide news, and of information audiences collect (Bowen, 2013, p.120), on the other hand, public relations has played ‘a pioneering role in the digital engagement of public via social network sites, such as Facebook or Twitter or social media sites’ (Bowen, 2013, p.119).

The benefits of digital tools and practices in PR activities are immense; allowing digital engagement for all sides than never before (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012), and interaction with publics without gatekeepers (Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004; Wright & Hinson, 2009), ‘more effective tool to directly influence the public attitudes and behaviors compared to the traditional media’ (Bowen, 2013, p.119), etc. ‘Quite often, however, they also pose moral problems’ (Einwiller et.al, 2021, p.1) and their institutionalization problems and the insufficient number of codes of ethics specific to digital PR practices have been recently raised as a concern (Zerfass et al., 2020).

Public relations scholars have long pointed out the ethical dimension of social media and online communication tools and practices, and the moral issues they have introduced (Phillips and Young, 2009; Jensen, 2011; Couldry et al., 2016; Gandomi & Haider, 2015; Newell & Marabelli, 2015; Yang & Kang, 2015), and some studies reached significant results that ethical concerns in the profession have multiplied and associating it with PR related digital and social media tactics (Zerfass, A., Verhoeven, P., Moreno, A., Tench, R., & Verčič, D., 2020; Meng, J., Kim, S., & Reber, B. 2022). Whereas digital tools and practices have imposed new ethical burdens on public relations, it is another phenomenon some scholars have already examined how pr practitioners perceive these new emerging ethical issues.

Recent research has shown that the ethical challenges have increased due to the use of several digital PR activities, such as using social bots, using sponsored content, exploiting personal data for big-data analyzes, as well as paying social media influencers (Einwiller et al., 2020), while another study reported that PR students see artificial intelligence and personal consumer data as

potential ethical problems for the PR industry (Global Communications report, 2018). Subsequently, one year later, the same study found that PR professionals believed the structure of content would not be perceived by publics in terms of paid, shared, owned, or earned media (Global Communications report, 2019).

Another point, scholars are keen on studying, is the type of resources to overcome ethical issues. Some scholars point out the inefficacy of the current ethical codes in terms of corresponding to digital communication. For instance, Terilli et. al (2009) with their study concluded the lack of ethical guidelines to govern social media. However, Bowen, on the other hand, suggests that general ethical principles of public relations are still applicable, but because of the structure of social media to combine many fast-moving and often unfamiliar forms of communication, more specific guidance is needed (Bowen, 2013). Further, a study found that "public relations ethics is not taught in most countries globally as an independent course" (Verčič et al., 2001, p. 509). It is significant because ethical training might be considered a first step for identifying ethical issues and dealing with them. Along with that, it was revealed in a study that those who received ethics training developed a more ethical assessment mechanism than those who did not (Gale, K., & Bunton, K., 2005). Finally, ECM study indicated that personal values and beliefs come first among practitioners when dealing with digital practices based on ethical issues (Zerfass et al., 2020). The second tool turned out ethical guidelines and the third was ethical codes.

Many studies have measured the perceptions of students on ethics over some parameters, such as the presence and intensity of ethical training in the curriculum and its effectiveness in practice, yet, few approach the subject through other factors, like digital PR practices students find unethical, their preparedness status to identify and to tackle moral issues, as well as ethical tools and their awareness towards codes of ethics.

Digital related duties and PR tactics, such as "social listening and analytics", "website analytics", "search engine optimization", "influencer identification/ management", "analytics/ business intelligence", "artificial intelligence", "conversational bots", "virtual reality" seem to increase 'exponentially' (Global Communications report, 2019). With the integration of the newly emerging digital tools and practices into the profession and the projections regarding the dimension of digitalization, it might be argued ethical issues and challenges will increase.

In an environment where the use of existing digital practices is expected to increase and the new one is on the way, the ability to carry out communication activities through these tools in the field is still not at the desired level: "Only a minority (43.8%) of communication departments

and agencies is considered mature when it comes to providing digital tools for support activities that are specific for communications” (Zerfass et al., 2021, p. 20). Nevertheless, PR students who will step into the profession in a few years can play an important role in the realization of these goals. To support this prediction consistently, students' familiarity with these practices, their ability to identify and overcome ethical challenges arising from these practices, and the preferred methods need to be found out. On the other hand, little empirical study exists, however, concerning Generation Z' perspectives on work and ethics, particularly in public relations. Given the primacy of the digital tools and technological skills of Generation Z over other generations, it is highly important to examine their aspects of how they assess the ethical condition of some dedicated communication tools and practices in the digital area.

According to a study, four different generations will be working simultaneously in the labor market in 2025 (StepStone und Universum, 2019). One of the common impressions on students is whether they are prepared for the conditions of the profession. Given that each generation has a different way to perform a job and approach a subject, it is very important to learn how young/prospective PR practitioners view ethics in PR in the context of digital technologies. Also, evaluated within the framework of today's ethical challenges, how ready young/prospective PR practitioners, who take part in digital natives, feel to cope with the moral issues in an online environment, might become another subject on the agenda of both research and professional associations.

The master thesis aims to investigate the perceptions of public relations students in Austria towards digital PR activities within the context of a moral approach. It will provide insights with regards to the dominance of perception of ethical problems originating from digital tools and practices of PR, the difficulty level of perceiving them, the resources to overcome possible moral issues and the state of being ready for them, and the importance of ethics in the face of these difficulties, and the level of awareness about ethical codes. The outcomes from the thesis are expected to extend the knowledge by enabling the aspects of students.

The perceptions of 165 students who are studying at universities and universities of applied science in Austria towards these topics will be measured in an online survey through 6 research questions created within the scope of the master's thesis. The size of the sample allows making the comparison only between semesters - younger vs higher semesters - and type of educational institutions - university and university of applied science. Ultimately, findings will be discussed

from theoretical and practical aspects, and some suggestions that are thought to contribute to the ethical development of students and the profession will be presented.

1.2. Research Questions

RQ1: How prevailing do young/prospective PR practitioners perceive ethical issues in digital practices of public relations?

RQ2: How ethically challenging do young/prospective PR practitioners perceive digital practices of public relations?

RQ3: If confronted with ethical challenges in digital practices of public relations, which resources do or would young/prospective PR practitioners use to deal with the ethical issues?

RQ4: How well prepared do young/prospective PR practitioners feel for dealing with ethical challenges in digital practices of public relations?

RQ5: How important are ethics to young/prospective communication practitioners when facing a moral issue in the course of performing their job?

RQ6: How aware are young/prosepective communication practitioners of ethics codes of the PR industry? (Code of Athens/Athener Kodex, Code of Lisbon/Lissabonner Kodex, Ehrenkodex des PRVA, PR-Online-Kodex des österr. PR-Ethik-Rats)

1. Literature review

2.1 Public Relations

2.1.1 The term public relations

Before going into the definition of public relations and what it encompasses, it will be mentioned the use of the notion in other languages, and the meaning it corresponds with due to being formulated. Although there is no consensus on its task, scope, and definition, many PR scholars have introduced different definitions. Similarly, its equivalent in different languages can be interpreted differently in terms of meaning.

The definition of public relations in different languages, such as “Germanic and Slavonic, denotes a slightly different phenomenon to the one it is generally assumed to mean in the public relations discipline in English” (Verčič, 2001, p. 376). For instance, in German, the notion of

public relations is translated as "Öfentlichkeitsarbeit" which implies "public work" (Moss, 2000, p 376). Emphasizing that there is no agreed definition of public relations, Hutton stated that "standard criticism of public relations definitions is that they tend to be focused more on the effects of public relations and/or the specific tasks that practitioners engage in, rather than on its fundamental purpose" (Hutton, 1999, p. 201)." Further, he approached the term differently by suggesting "managing strategic relationships" (Hutton, 1999, p. 211). From Bernays' side, "public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution" (Bernays, 1955, p. 3)

Furthermore, Harlow (1976) provides an explanation of the definition of public relations through the duties and benefits it undertakes between the organization, public, and stakeholders, and sees it as a management skill that allows each group to be understood by the other. A kind of profession that allows mutual interests and benefits to be melted in a pot, and offers innovative perspectives by utilizing "research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools." (p. 36)

The definitions of public relations associations are based on ethics and trust. Referring to the bridging function between interests and relations, IPRA, for example, sees the profession as decision-making management with communication methods built on these two criteria (IPRA, 2019).

2.1.2 The role of public relations

As a profession, public relations is provided with a broad range of roles. The Public Relations Association Austria explains as follows the duty and role of public relations:

"The task of a company's PR is the management of all types of communication between people, organizations, institutions, and the public outside (external PR) and within the company (internal PR). PR are mediators and interfaces between companies and the public. Public relations convey points of view and enable orientation to create and secure the political, economic, and social scope for the action of individuals or organizations in the process of public opinion-forming. The aim is always to disseminate true information to build and maintain public trust, goodwill, and credibility in a transparent manner." (PRVA)

Hutton's hierarchy of public relations' primary roles, functions, and tactics:

„Situational roles

persuader, advocate, educator, crusader, information provider, reputation manager

Primary functions performed

research, image-making, counseling, managing, early warning, interpreting, communicating, negotiating

Tactics/tools used

publicity, product placement, news releases, speeches, interpersonal communication, websites, publications, trade shows, corporate identity programs, corporate advertising programs, etc.”

(Hutton, James G., 1999, p. 211)

Although the above template, in which Hutton determines the field of activity of the profession, meets today's public relations, the roles practitioners have played nowadays and the tools they have employed have varied especially after the integration of the digital field into public relations, therefore the template needs to be updated.

2.2 Digitalization

“Since the late 1980s” (United Nations, 2021, p. 11), digitalization has become an essential part of our lives. Many scholars introduced different definitions regarding digitalization. For Kaplan et al. (2004), digitalization is the transformation of all aspects of the process in which society interacts with each other through digital technology. In general, digitization is the transfer of information, which had been conveyed by analog processes before, to digital processes (Picard, 2011). That is, processes have been automated along with the emergence of information communication technologies (Hess et al., 2016). In this process, information technology has assumed a role that strategically guides organizational activities and thus ensures the realization of business strategy (Morabito, 2016), reshaping and overturning the whole business model (Hess et al., 2016).

Looking at the dimension of digitization on the user side, “in the OECD area, 17% of students first accessed the Internet at or before the age of 6. In 2015, 43% of 15-year-olds spent between two and six hours per day online outside of school, up significantly from 30% in 2012. In Europe, the average individual allocated more than three hours per day to Internet usage in 2016, while on average people aged 14-24 spent a further 1.5 hours each day online.” (OECD, 2019, p. 1-2).

The figures reveal the extent that digitalization has reached today. In 2021, 4.9 billion people used the Internet, which corresponds to 63 percent of the world's population (International Telecommunication Union, 2021). According to OECD data, whereas almost all young people (95%) in the 16-24 age range used the internet daily, a significant increase from 80% in 2010, for those who fall into the 55-74 age bracket, the percentage of internet usage was 58 in 2019 (OECD, 2020). The amount of investment made in digital transformation on an annual basis is also remarkable. In 2020, spending on digital transformation globally reached 1.3 trillion U.S. dollars, an increase of 10.4 percent compared to the previous year; in 2022, it is projected to reach 1.8 trillion U.S. dollars, and by 2025, to 2.8 trillion U.S. dollars (Sava, 2022).

On the other hand, looking at which social media channels companies carry out their public relations activities, in Australasia and Europe, "public social networks such as Facebook, video-sharing sites such as YouTube, microblogs such as Twitter, blogs, and photo-sharing sites" (Macnamara, J., & Zerfass, A., 2012, p. 296) become influential. Based on the figures, it can be asserted that organizations that have not incorporated digitalization into their business processes yet will be affected most by "Digital Darwinism", and those that can keep up with digital transformation will survive in a competitive environment (Schwartz, 2001).

2.2.1 Digitalization process of the profession

Over the past two decades, the exchange technology has played a key role in societies' development (Castells, 1996, 2004) with its features enabling interaction and dialog between individuals (Benkler, 2007; Lessig, 2004). Therefore, it was inevitable for PR to adapt to digitalization, as almost all industries are influenced by digitalization (Jurisic & Kermek, 2011). As a result of digitalization, the information gathering, spreading and receiving process, and the interaction among reporters, public relations practitioners, and audiences have dramatically transformed. Digital tools ensure that pr professionals maintain their functions more efficiently and effectively, and interact more with all constituents of an organization by developing long relationships (Allagui and Breslow, 2016).

The outcomes of a study by the Pew Research Center (2008) are such as to unfold the scope of the transformation of the media environment and, correspondingly, of the public relations industry. Accordingly, for the first time in 2008, online settings surpassed offline ones, on the basis of resources through which people receive news. As another development that might be considered prominent on the path of the digitalization of the industry, the demand of young people for online versions of traditional news media has enhanced more than ever before. On the

one hand, the tendency of the masses to online news and social media has inevitably been part of the sector's shift, on the other hand, media relations strategies for traditional outlets had adapted to online practices.

For some scholars (Grunig, J. E., 2009), public relations practitioners have quickly incorporated social media, to which they have attached more importance than traditional media, into their pr activities as an innovative tool in public relations to establish an active relationship between an organization and the public (Bowen, 2013). Regardless of region, findings of a joint report (Trendstream, PRSA, and Korn/Ferry International, 2009) support relatively the claim with regard to the speed of adaptation to digital processes and the interest of the industry. Half of the public relations departments in the US dealt with digital communication, blog, and SNS.

As digital practices allow organizations valuable benefits, such as identifying their customers, spotting their needs and behavior, building emotional ties (Navarro et al., 2017); communicating directly with their stakeholders and publics (Kent, 2013; Linke & Zerfass, 2013; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2014); developing dialogs and relationships with stakeholders and publics (Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012); increasing organizational visibility and image (Gilpin, 2010; Yang & Kent, 2014); and influencing customer opinion on brands (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2013), expectations and interest of the industry toward the digital technologies' weight and the dimension of digital transformation have increasingly boosted.

Some academic studies have directed the focus to the ongoing digitalization process of the profession by addressing the perception of pr practitioners and their future forecasts. A study (Wright et al., 2009) examining the impact of social media on public relations practice revealed that most of the participants (73%) associated the change in the way their organization used blogs and social media. 61% was holding the same thought in the previous year's study. Watson (2010), however, reported in his study that the majority (65%) of the 328 organizations considered using social media more for some of their communication purposes, such as managing relationships with employees and other stakeholders. According to the findings of a more recent study (Global communications report, 2019) held with the attendance of 1,583 global communicators, 83% stated that digital innovations would significantly transform the profession. 2016 version of the report of the same institution had found that social media (75%) would be the driver of the future growth in the industry (Global communications report, 2016). And a more latest report (Zerfass et al. 2020) has precisely pointed out the dimensions of change

in public relations practices. 87.6 of pr professionals attending the survey see social media and social networks as more prominent in dealing with stakeholders, gatekeepers, and audiences. That was 10 % in 2007. Another important outcome from the study is that the expectations of practitioners for the importance of media relations with the traditional media remain quite low in particular for 2023 (31.5%).

Besides the increase in the use of social media in public relations practices, along with the ongoing digital transformation, new digital practices, such as “social network sites and public wikis, big-data analytics and profiling algorithms, and social bots and hybrid content”, have been utilized to maximize the efficacy of organization's communication in the last few years (Hagelstein et al., 2021). Some studies have also shed some light on the impact of these relatively new digital practices on the responsibility areas of public relations, ranging from the business of relationship management (Argenti and Barnes, 2009), to the roles and functions of communication leaders (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007), as well as for investor relations, advocacy, and stakeholder management (Wright and Hinson, 2015)

Adding a theoretical dimension to the phenomenon and addressing the issue more optimistically, Grunig (2009), however, argued that the public relations theory needed to guide practice would remain unchanged in the face of new digital practices and they would help practitioners around the world apply the generic principles of public relations before these digital tools had been dominantly employed in the industry.

It seems the speed and weight of digital transformation in the industry will make itself felt more, given the most important strategic issues in the industry. According to ECM 2020 survey, "dealing with the speed and volume of information flow", "exploring new ways of creating and distributing content (31.6%)", "matching the need to address more audiences and channels with limited resources (30.3%)", "coping with the digital evolution and the social web (29.8%)", and "using big data and/or algorithms for communication (28.3%)" are among the top priorities of the industry until 2022 (Zerfass et al., 2019, p.54).

2.2.2 The digital skills level in the industry

Generally, as in public relations, the issue of qualified human resources brought by digitalization in many industries is carefully emphasized in many pieces of research. Some scholars pointed out the impact of digital transformation and its practices on the profession and the struggle of practitioners to adapt to the changes (James, 2007, Macnamara, 2010, Robson & James, 2012),

and others ascribed the lack of employees with necessary skills to cope with the changes digital transformation have introduced (Fitch, 2009; Tench et al, 2013). In Statista's joint research with McKinsey, skill gaps and cultural differences emerging from digital transformation were highlighted as the leading challenges for organizations that have attempted digitalization in the period from 2020 to 2022 (Dhasarathy, 2020). The research sees the solution in making more efforts of organizations embarking on digital initiatives on this issue. Align with that, within the scope of a study of the PR Academy (2013), practitioners indicated digital communications (52%) as their top skill gaps. Besides, some scholars (Van Deursen and van Dijk, 2009) classified four sorts of digital skills to determine whether practitioners are well equipped to use digital technologies: "operational skills", "information skills", "formal skills" and "strategic skills".

While Weber (2007) drew attention to the fact that in the early stages of digitalization of the industry, communication is drastically moving towards the digital world, he warned that industry professionals should also keep up with this change, and those who are left behind this technology may stay out of the competition. Moreover, Grunig pointed out the structure of digital media which allows the profession to become “more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible” (Gruning, 2009, p. 1). However, he stated that the strategic use of digital media in the sector is not at a sufficient level due to the tendency to use digital tools the same way practitioners use traditional media practices. He suggested that the current institutionalization of the profession must be reconsidered through the lens of “behavioral, strategic management paradigm” instead of “symbolic, interpretive ones”. Similarly, referring to the significance of strategic use of digital tools, Key (2005) argued that the profession should pay attention to the process of target groups to gather and share information to better interact with them.

As reported by Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), digital practices were, on the one hand, considered one of the main drivers of job creation in the industry in the US, some scholars, on the other hand, came to the conclusion that along with digital, social and mobile media accounted for the top concern among practitioners in terms of incorporating them into daily work (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014).

A study conducted in 2018 identified three main factors which drive public relations to the change, respectively changing the media landscape (87%), new technology (82%), and access to data (77%) (Global Communication Report, 2018). In terms of the adaptation of professionals to this transformation, the study revealed that they need to gain new expertise in social media,

multimedia content development, and data and analytics (p. 6). Although digital tools and social media have been strategic requirements for the profession's future growth, European practitioners have relied on traditional media for a long instead of gaining digital skills and then improving them (Tench et al., 2013). Some scholars emphasized that the emerging digital media has impacted public relations practices dramatically (James, 2007, Macnamara, 2010, Robson & James, 2012) and the industry has difficulty finding digital-skilled practitioners to overcome the challenges originating from social media (Fitch, 2009; Tench et al, 2013).

The findings of Macnamara and Zerfass' study (2012) conducted with the attendance of 596 European practitioners and 221 from Australasia highlighted the level of digital media skills in public relations. Although the vast majority of the attendees from both areas claimed that they have an advanced or intermediate level of social media knowledge, yet, the authors argued that their knowledge level was overrated, depending on some lack of figures in the organization, such as "policies and guidelines on social media use by employees", "monitoring of social media content", "training and support", and "social media strategies in organizations". They also associated their argument with the ratings of social media specialists interviewed regarding the social media knowledge of PR professionals, as low to moderate. The study also found only 20% of organizations from Australasia and 23% of organizations from Europe hold a comprehensive social media strategy or policy and interestingly do provide no training for staff dealing with social media, respectively 67% and 73%.

Although European practitioners attach high importance to digitalizing some processes of their activities, such as stakeholder communications (87.7%) and investing in digital infrastructure (83.9%), "the level of digital maturity" in the profession is questionable (Hagelstein, 2021). Whereas nearly 44 % of pr agencies and corporate communication departments in organizations are at the level of digital maturity in terms of using digital tools in their practices, almost 40 percent are "digitally immature". Moreover, only a minority of them are considered fully mature in terms of digitalization. The general conviction is that "strategies and concepts for digitalizing stakeholder communications and internal workflows are lacking in many communication departments and agencies" (Hagelstein, 2021, p. 24).

2.2.3 Digital native

Associating the adapting to digital tools with a combination of solid cognitive, problem-solving, non-cognitive, and social skills, the OECD (2019) indicated that only a minority (13%) of individuals aged 16-65 in its area do not have basic cognitive skills, and just over three quarters

(30%) are qualified with a “well-rounded cognitive skillset”. Furthermore, although employees with low skills require more training to keep up with the digitalizing workplace, however, only 40 percent of them underwent training in 2018. Additionally, in the OECD area, 90% of students say they “enjoy using digital devices”. On the other hand, while the rate of internet usage among young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is 71 percent in 2020, this rate corresponds to 57 percent in other age groups (International Telecommunication Union, 2021).

Besides being considered digital natives and having the potential to keep up with the digital practices contrary to digital immigrants (Válek & Sládek, 2012), yet, Millennials need to be trained regarding the strategic and ethical use of digital tools (Miller Russell, 2007). A study indicated that there is a high expectation from graduates to equip themselves with all the basics of digital communication to set a step into the industry. KPMG (2015) and one year after Miller (2016) have more specifically identified some metrics required from graduates, such as improving productivity and relationships with all constituents of an organization, increasing innovation, and delivering cost efficiencies. As the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) advises that prospective PR practitioners make themselves familiar with emerging digital technologies, Gallicano (2013), acknowledges their digital skills, such that, states that they can digitally mentor their colleagues.

2.3 Ethik

2.3.1 Clarification of terms

Looking at the basic definition of ethics, Oxford Learning College associates ethics with the rules of action that have emerged as a result of the reconciliation of external and social processes and must be followed by members of a particular profession. Besides, historically, ethics are among the notions that many philosophers have addressed. Compiling Kant's approach to ethics, Bowen and Prescott (2015) argued that "ethics, for Kant, is a system of obligations one must abide by out of a sense of duty, regardless of what one might otherwise desire. This now dominant approach is known as deontology. On a deontological approach, ethics is about upholding that which is right, as opposed to bringing about that which is good. Where many other approaches to ethics understand morality in terms of positive or negative outcomes, Kant famously held that outcomes are morally irrelevant." (p. 38) In short, Kant advises that goodwill should be prioritized, no matter what the circumstances are (Alexander, L. 2020). Looking at the definitions closer to today, from point of Bishop, “ethics comprises complex ideas, applications,

and interpretations about not only what is right and wrong, but also why things are considered right and wrong” (2013, p. 636).

2.3.2 Public relations ethics

As with the definition of public relations, there is an ongoing debate about the scope and definition of public relations ethics. Elwood explains the matter as; “public relations is a field of multiple debates, including definitions of the profession and a theoretical base; no subject seems more fiercely debated than ethics” (Elwood, 1995, p. 8–9).

Some professional institutions explain the ethical understanding of public relations through the principles, beliefs, and values that professionals should follow (The Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). Nevertheless, Bentele (1992) brought the communicative behavior of organizations and PR practitioners toward their internal and external audiences or stakeholders to the forefront in this matter. Further, he argues that there must be a distinction between morality, practical moral action, and the underlying moral attitudes, and ethics, which represent the level of reflection and justification for this action.

Some scholars identify pr ethics as a personal phenomenon, referring to the application of knowledge, understanding, and reasoning when a dilemma between wrong- and right-doing emerges (Parsons, 2006), as ethics is a field that tackles “what is good and bad with a moral duty and obligation” (Hyde, 2011; p. 32). Similarly, Cheney et al. ascribe the significance of doing the right thing which professionals should consider in a particular circumstance when it comes to ethics (Cheney et al., 2011). However, Bowen (2008) refers to the moral feature of the profession in disclosing emerging issues to publics and the media, avoiding and solving conflicts. Arguing that it is important to see public relations practices through "the lens of moral philosophy", Bowen bases public relations on "utilitarian" and "deontological" (Kantian) approaches to support the profession to be considered an ethical pursuit. Nevertheless, L’Etang (2009) approaches the phenomenon differently. He argues that there is a dominant belief in the literature to address public relations ethics uncritically, and the interest of organizations does not correspond to "idealistic ethical communication practice" (p. 14).

On the other hand, there are many approaches in the literature that grasp the phenomenon of ethics from different aspects. For Bowen, “honesty”, “openness”, “loyalty”, “fair-mindedness”, “respect”, “integrity”, and “forthright communication” are regarded as values of ethics within the scope of public relations (Bowen, 2007, p. 1). In other respects, Tilley underlined the

complexity of the public relations ethics term, referring to the nonexistence of academic consensus on how to address the issue (Tilley, 2005).

2.3.2.1 The role of ethics in public relations

For Bowen (2008), ethics make up the key unit of public relations in the fulfillment of the public's expectations, such as ethical behaviors, transparent communication, and accountability from organizations. Considering the power of the impact of the public on the communication processes after the digital revolution, this issue gains more importance today. A study carried out by IABC Research Foundation with an attendance of 1,827 members concluded that the professionals take ethics seriously, taking into account its benefits to an organization (Bowen, 2006).

Bentele (2008) counts among the tasks of PR ethics the formulation or elaboration of values, norms and recommendations for action and the ability to come up with a sustainable argument in the event of a conflict of interest in relation to the responsibility towards the client and the responsibility towards the public.

2.3.2.2 Ethical challenges in the industry

Historically, public relations is associated with unethical practices such as lying, spin-doctoring, and even espionage (Bowen, 2007). Most of the arguments grasp public relations as an unethical discipline because the practice itself creates manipulation and propaganda. Some critics claim that public relations have structurally a lack of ethics and go further that the influence of public relations threatens truthful journalism (Bowen, 2007). However, some studies have reached the opposite conclusions, claiming that PR actors act with a more moral sense than the general adult population (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009; Plaisance, 2014). Yet, scholars from the public relations side acknowledge that ethics poses some challenges to the pr as the profession, on the one hand, holds heavy responsibilities, and, on the other hand, is expected to influence the public (Bowen, 2013).

A survey (Zerfass et al., 2012) with the participation of roughly 2,000 communication professionals in Europe reached some outcomes supporting the concerns above. The findings concluded that more than half of the participants, six out of every 10, had encountered at least one moral challenge in 2011, and 35 % of all respondents even experienced more than one. Furthermore, the results point out the increase in moral challenges. More than half of the

respondents come to the inference that challenges had increased in five years. Given the fact that the opportunities and the use of digital practices have increased in the public relations discipline, the growing ethical concerns might be associated with the effects of the digital area. The survey investigating the reason for the increase in the industry found a significant correlation between social media communication and the growing moral challenges. Approximately three-quarters indicated that social media burdens new moral challenges to practitioners. In conjunction with that, Bowen emphasized that the rapidly changing digital communication environment ‘only heightens the ethical imperative for accuracy, honesty, and full disclosure’ (Bowen 2013, p. 131).

In an online survey (Zerfas et al., 2020), among 2,324 practitioners across Europe, the number has even increased by 11.5 % compared to the findings of the survey conducted in 2012. Whereas 64.8 % of respondents had experienced a moral challenge within a previous year, 46.5 % had been confronted with two or more. Another interesting outcome is that the number of those reporting no moral issue they had faced in their daily work has dropped by 8.1.

A study conducted by the USC Center for Public Relations (CPR, 2006), in 2018, with attendance of 1,001 public relations practitioners, 53% from the USA and 47% from different countries as well as 168 American students, reveals a somewhat same scenario, but it provided a promising outcome for the future of the industry. 50% of all professionals indicated that the industry in their country bears an unethical image. Half of the students stated very or somewhat unethical. However, when it comes to the yearly changes with regards to the ethical appearance of the industry, 46 % of professionals agreed that business in their countries has become more ethical over the past five years. For the future prognosis of the status, 67% of international professionals predicted that the industry in their country will become more ethical over the next five years. Arguing that ethics is a criterion for newcomers entering the PR industry, the study concluded that for 75% of students, ethics in the industry are important in shaping their future careers. From the perspective of the students, 69%, the industry will become more ethical in the coming years. Only 14% are not on the same page (The USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 2018).

A quite recent study also revealed that more than half of the professionals who participated in the study, have encountered moral challenges in a year, additionally, 32% of them experienced multiple times (Meng et al., 2022). The same study also remarks on another interesting outcome related to the age average. The youngest and oldest age groups encountered ethical challenges

less than other age groups. Although public relations is an area where there is a high probability of encountering ethical difficulties as a profession, efforts to find solutions and put an interpretation on this issue may vary. According to another study based on a survey conducted in Austria, more than one-third of the agencies and slightly more than half of the organizations surveyed indicated that ethical issues were discussed occasionally and 9% of agencies and 27% of companies did not find PR ethics as an issue (Wiener G. F. & Einwiller S., 2016).

2.3.2.3 Primary responsibility of practitioners in terms of ethics

Assessing the responsibility of the function through the frame of utilitarian analysis, Bowen (2008) argues that the profession looks out for "the interest of the greater good" and, hence, "benefits society as a moral good". Therefore, public relations practitioners are also obligated to act within the moral responsibility in establishing a bridge between organizations and publics.

As ethical behavior contributes to organizations in several ways, such as its effectiveness and reputation, etc., allowing to establish "authentic, long-term relationships with publics" (Bowen et al., 2016), PR actors, as image-builders, should know the effect of their behaviors on the stakeholders because their interpretation within the context of ethics and norms might affect the image of an organization (Bentele, 2015). Förg emphasizes the power of the morality of the profession, saying no practitioner can escape from it, because the fear of loss of image is the strongest motivation for PR practitioners to deal with the morals and ethics of PR. (Förg, 2004).

Besides, some PR scholars highlight that professionals play a key role in the process of ethical decision-making (Bowen, 2008; Neill, 2016), others (Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, 2001; Neill and Drumwright, 2012) consider practitioners' role as an "ethical conscience" because they argue they, also, serve in matters of ethics counseling in organizations.

While there is an affirmation of the responsibilities and role of the profession and practitioners within the context of ethics in the literature, there are some negative impressions about the way of newcomers' doing-business and their attitudes towards the nature of work in public relations industry. Also, the findings of some academic studies based on the attitudes of students and experienced practitioners on the theme differ. Many agency managers regard graduates as disappointed because 'the most important target is themselves in all aspects of life, including time management' (Porter Novelli, 2008, p. 10). Similarly, whereas one manager says no longer employs recent graduates, because of a lack of work ethic (Hollon, 2008), another manager states

newly graduated practitioners believe ‘work should be fun and that dues-paying is for suckers’ (Porter Novelli, p. 2).

It is a well-known claim that public relations practitioners commonly express dissent against unethical forms of decision. Yet, a survey of 808 Public Relations Society of America members found that a little more than half of all practitioners indicated that they would always take a stand against unethical decisions (Berger & Reber, 2006). Most importantly, the survey revealed that young practitioners were less likely to talk with management about a decision posing trouble compared to other age categories, and they were more likely to do nothing by staying silent against poor organizational attitudes. Furthermore, practitioners who have fewer than 10 years of experience were less likely than their colleagues to talk with management about an indecent decision. Berger and Reber (2006) commented on the findings followingly; “the lack of will among young practitioners and early-career practitioners to rock the boat is understandable. They are working to curry favor with their superiors and build a career. They, therefore, do not want to make trouble through dissension.” (p. 197)

Supporting Berger and Reber’s findings, a study of millennial public relations agency practitioners concluded that most of the practitioners tended to avoid an issue rather than take a stand (Curtin et. al, 2011, p.13). On the contrary, findings show that Millennials attach importance to transparency and clear ethical rules and expectations.

Some scholars (Einwiller & Wiener, 2016), on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach to the issue, taking into account different factors and separate interests of different actors. Einwiller elaborates her argument, giving an example of the complexity of the status practitioners face; "For PR practitioners who act communicatively on behalf of their employer, ethical challenges can arise at various points, such as, information is requested from journalists and their stakeholders in a critical company situation, but disclosure of this information is not in the interests of the company, or when clients of a PR agency ask for PR services which are incompatible with the norms of the profession” (p. 5). As it can be understood from this, how practitioners will act in any scenario may depend on the conditions they are in.

On the one hand, the resources to deal with the ethical challenges vary, on the other hand, some particular factors such as individual characteristics (micro-), organizational structures (meso-), and socio-political contexts (macro-level factors) can also lead a practitioner to unethical behavior. For instance, agency practitioners may be pressured more by their clients than those working in private or non-profit organizations (Drumwright Murphy, 2004). Align with that,

Plaisance (2011) specified several factors undermining people's moral reasoning, for instance, "story of the self, personality, integration of morality into the self, moral ecology, and moral skills and knowledge" (p. 96).

Fitch (2003) found, majority of the students thought their client organization or employer were the primary responsibility. The rest of the participants put the organization first, but they consider some social obligations with it too. A nationwide survey concluded that for 39% high ethical standards were their top consideration in choosing an employer (Green, 2006). Additionally, 79% stated that they tended to work for a company, which attaches importance to social responsibility, and 56% would not work for a socially irresponsible company (Cone, 2006). Similarly, an international survey revealed two years later that 88% of Millennials wanted to work for a company or an organization whose social responsibility values match with theirs, and 92% of respondents from the U.S. said that they would resign their job if company values run counter to theirs (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2008).

A study (Wachtler, 2012), conducted in Austria exhibited explicitly several factors causing ethical problems. According to the findings, the main reasons for the ethical problem in the PR industry are counter-business practices with the media (75%), economic dependency (72%), respectively political and commercial (41%) and pressure from above that prevents ethical behavior (20%). Besides, the majority of PR practitioners (76%) agreed that corporate communication should be carried out in a balance between the institution and society in terms of responsibility. In addition to that, another study (Global Communication Report, 2018) carried out between PR professionals and students concluded that nearly all professionals 95% take a negative stance when it comes to working for some organizations, individuals, or governments for ethical reasons. This rate is 82 percent for students. Arguing ethics is a criterion for newcomers entering the PR industry, the study also concluded that for 75% of students, ethics in the industry are important in shaping their future careers.

2.3.2.4 The level of preparedness in the profession for ethical challenges

In addition to the responsibilities of carrying out the communication activities of an organization, practitioners are also attributed to the obligation of giving ethical and responsible advice to organizations. Interpreting that upon the new media, Valentini (2015) sees it as a prerequisite to assess "the nature of the digital communication practices of organizations" for which professionals hold communication activities. Such an assessment, where only the responsibility

is attributed to public relations practitioners, should also include the practitioners' readiness and experience for ethical challenges arising from digital communication activities. The findings of studies on this matter differ. Most of the PR actors (71% agency and 78% in organization) stated they were somewhat or fully prepared to deal with ethical challenges (Global Communication Report, 2018). On the students' side, however, it turned out fewer (57%) were on the same level compared to professionals. The level of readiness of the students participating in the survey for ethical challenges and their education levels for ethics are also similar. Nearly the same percentage of the students (58%) said they underwent ethics training during their studies. Further, little more than three-fourths (77%) revealed to be prepared to manage social media at work.

The comparative results of a study conducted in New Zealand and Israel reach more direct conclusions (Toledano et al., 2016). Whereas the percentage of practitioners from new Zealand who says they received enough training to overcome ethical issues originating from social media communication of organizations was almost 54, few from Israel took such courses. Research on Millennial PR professionals' views regarding ethics found most of them felt unprepared to provide consultancy about ethical issues. Yet, they did not forecast to confront ethical dilemmas (Place, 2019). Contrary to that, another study reached different results (Kim and Johnson, 2009). Although a vast majority of Millennials (82.4%) said to be confident in ethical decision-making, however, in the eye of most employers (65,8), newcomers were not good at making ethical decisions. A relatively more recent study identified that they considered themselves to be highly aware of ethics, but their managers said they have an average ethical awareness (Todd, 2014).

2.3.3 Ethical issues in digital practices of public relations

In the public relations discipline, the increase in social media usage and other forms of digital communication has continued (Wright & Hinson, 2017) and they contribute to strategic communication (Freberg, 2019). As it is a well-known truth that organizations desire to communicate with individuals or groups, also known as stakeholders, that are expected to make a contribution to organizations' wealth-creating capacity or activities, and to influence their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, the interests of these stakeholders, however, may run counter to those of the organization (Post et al., 2002). Practitioners who are expected to be loyal to organizations they work for may have moral challenges by the time they communicate with the organization's stakeholders, especially on social media or other forms of digital communication (Hagelstein et. al, 2021). For example, while consumers attach enormous

importance to their privacy and expect their data to be protected, an organization's interest is to boost its profit, and, therefore to utilize personal data for microtargeting purposes (Hagelstein et al. 2021).

From the beginning of the use of computer-based technologies to the wide use of recent digital technologies among states, media, public relations, audiences and stakeholder etc., scholars have uttered several concerns originated from their usage; such as the dangers of databases of information being exploited by government agents (Burnam, 1984), the power that quantification and technology hold to seize the control over people's lives (Postman, 1993), the eventual shape that networked technologies would take (Stoll, 1995).

Among public relations scholars, Judd (1995) was one of the pioneers to address potential ethical concerns of technology over Rawls' theory of justice. Afterwards, other scholars have warned about a lack of disclosure in social media and its damage (Sweetser 2010); similarities of ghost blogging to speechwriting and its ethical consequences (Gallicano, Brett, and Hopp 2013).

More recently, ethical concerns among scholars have been dimensioned by the development and differentiation of digital technologies. As Schauster and Neill (2017) directed the attention to "native advertising", "the unethical form of earned media which makes paid strategies blur, consumer privacy, and "digital ad fraud", White and Boatwright (2020) warned about user information and data generated over social media and its use by public relation practitioners for their communication purposes without approval.

Over a decade, people have been informed through micro-blogs or social media before traditional media have covered a story (Wright and Hinson, 2010). Micro-blogs or social media, considered a tool for the spread of unverified information pose several challenges in terms of media ethics (Wright and Hinson, 2010). Besides, Holter (2010) identified in a study, in which 70 million blogs were traced, that most of the blogs did not have objectivity. He argued most bloggers might lack media ethics or codes of ethics. Researching the use of blogs and social media within the framework of public relations practices, Bowen (2010) found that most companies in the Fortune 500 prefer social media and blogs rather than their websites to interact with their target audiences. This situation may have consequences for practitioners such as changing the forms of messages and loss of control of the media (Bowen 2010). Jensen (2011) discussing blog ethics, argues that commercial payments and gifts to bloggers affect the transparency of bloggers' writings ethically. Wright and Hinson (2010) concluded that social media and blogs had been questioned year by year. The percentage of the participants who said

such media should include honesty, truthfulness, transparency, and ethics increased up to 50% from 41%. Furthermore, a study pointed out that “loss of control over messages” and “image building” in social media were the growing concern for most PR practitioners from Australasia, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Macnamara, & Zerfass, 2012).

Looking at the theme from the assessments of PR practitioners for the consumer or more accurately those obtaining information through such technology, there is no clear picture in which practitioners agree on the long-term effect of communication technology on receivers (Global Communications Report, 2019). 61% of 1,583 PR actors indicated that consumers would interact more with communication technologies and information obtained through these technologies, nevertheless, they would be misinformed. Students, on the contrary, viewed the status somewhat more optimistically. Nearly three-quarters of 378 students predicted more engagement and 43% misinformation for the future. On the other hand, the majority of professionals stated that public would “become more polarized” (p. 35), and a little more than half of the students indicated the same concern. Supporting these results, Wright et al. (2009) concluded that traditional media is more reliable than some sort of online media, such as blogs and social media, in terms of "accuracy", "credibility", "telling the truth", and "being ethical".

According to the results of a more detailed study of the frequency and source of ethical challenges, 60% of respondents agreed that digital practices pose ethical challenges (Meng, 2022). Paying social media influencers was seen as the most problematic in terms of ethics, followed by using bots and mining audiences’ personal data through big data analyses respectively. Other concerns were “using sponsored social media posts”, “sponsored articles on news websites” and “motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts”.

Approaching the issue in a different way and extending the spectrum by reviewing communication technology in six journals primarily dedicated to public relations, Duhé (2015) reached concerning results in terms of the academic area. Only four articles out of 321 mentioned moral concerns. From the point of Valentini, however, this lack of research on moral issues is problematic, as the influence of digital technologies and specifically social media can vary by posing risks and damage the social relation between an organization and its stakeholders (Valentini, 2015). As a few studies approach the views of the students based on the fact that ethical challenges have recently varied and increased through digital communication

opportunities, it is highly important how students perceive some digital tools and practices which they will use in the future to perform their tasks.

2.3.3.1 Sponsored content

Sponsored content is brand-produced material that has a similar form and qualities compared to the original content (American Press Institute, 2013; Boerman, Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; Riordan, 2014; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012); is hybrid by its nature, requiring more cooperation between the media organization and brand than older forms of traditional advertising or marketing (Bowen et.al, 2017); being used to achieve strategic goals (Bivins, 2009), and to create a positive consumer experience (Campbell, Cohen, & Ma, 2014).

Sponsored content has been one of the communication tools employed for years (Balasubramanian, 1994), however, along with the boost of digital technologies and online communication channels, it has been in great demand. According to a study (Zerfass et al., 2019), 53% of the communication departments and agencies share sponsored content on social media. However, the changing media landscape has brought some challenges with itself, and has made it difficult that audiences can identify and evaluate sponsored messages (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Riordan, 2014).

Furthermore, as the use of sponsored content by brands and media outlets is becoming more popular globally (Shannon et.al), these circumstances drag the news industry to some changes in its business model and traditional advertising keeps irritating readers and users (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Therefore, the boundaries between strategic communication, advertising, and journalism are unrecognizable. In these fields, journalists have approached especially sponsored content critical because of its less relevance with traditional journalism despite its media context (Poutanen et al., 2016).

Such a reliance of pr practitioners on digital media has resulted in digital content being questioned in terms of ethics, and, as a result of this, professionals have faced charges of not being ethical (Lahav, 2016). Ikonen et al. (2017) associate ethical concern with two reasons in this regard; lack of standards, and transparency or disclosure, however, it is a complex issue, because it is not evident the amount of disclosure to ensure transparency. Besides, it is necessary to consider authenticity and respect for the message (Baker & Martinson, 2001).

Audiences are often not able to indicate whether the story they read was editorial or branded content, although there are clear labels (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). It is also not easy to

disclose a sponsored content because of the quick structure of shared messages (Synder, 2011). A study (Global Communication Report, 2018), looking at if the different types of media are distinguishable, found that 64% of pr practitioners believe that consumers will not identify between paid, earned, shared and owned media. For five year-projection, 60% says consumer will even not pay attention to the difference. That percentage among students is 65.

As some professional codes of ethics are not always applicable to the complex media form of sponsored content and the distinction between editorial and commercial content is not apparent, there is a need to reconsider codes of ethics (Hallahan, 2006; Howe & Teufel, 2014). A study analyzing 40 codes of ethics with regards to professions dealing with sponsored content detected the complexity of codes of ethics to address the transparency of sponsored content (Bowen et. al, 2017). They also found most of the codes are vague to deal with transparency and the separation between commercial and editorial content, and only eight guidelines are applicable to sponsored content properly. Furthermore, it might be confusing for students to rely on which ethical codes are suitable for particular content.

2.3.3.2 Social media influencer communication

Most organizations have collaborated recently with social media influencers to influence their targeted audiences as one of the major tools of strategic communication. Therefore, transparency is a key to ethical issues arising from this relationship (Hagelstein. et.al, 2021). Regarding social media influencers as third-party actors that have a strong bond with social media users and influence them through posting content by acting as a journalist in the way an organization desires, Enke and Borchers argue that they have a lack of journalistic quality standards and ethics (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Whereas transparency is perceived by some scholars as the main factor to deal with the unethical relationship between a company and influencers who might abuse stakeholders' decisions (Lahav & Roth-Cohen, 2016), Hagelstein et.al (2021) orientate the focus to authenticity which is another problematic issue in influencer communication.

2.3.3.3 Corporate influencers

Aside from social media influencers, companies have noticed the benefit of placing their employees as corporate influencers and they are expected to share some content via their social media accounts in the name of a company they work for, and some companies have already

started corporate influencer programs (Brockhaus et al., 2020; Marten & Kirchmeier, 2018), even though they are not so impactful compared to social media influencers as they are close to the client organization (Enke & Borchers, 2019). To eliminate transparency concerns resulting from corporate influencers, the liaison between an organization and corporate influencers has to be disclosed (Hagelstein et.al, 2021). As one of the other possible moral issues, unauthenticity may arise in the case in which the organization's goals and employees' opinions conflict with each other. On the other hand, this may pose a problem for audiences to distinguish between the personal opinions of corporate influencers and the standpoints of an employer (Hagelstein et.al, 2021).

2.3.3.4 Public wikis

Of popular online sources, public wikis can contribute to a company or conversely damages it in the mean of reputation (DiStaso et al., 2012). To avoid any reputational damage, it is highly important that companies closely track entries in public wikis, without editing because it is seen as unethical (DiStaso & Messner, 2010, p. 19). For instance, Wikipedia has taken action against editing by issuing a policy (DiStaso, 2013), and, as a consequence, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations has made a statement towards avoiding editing entries on Wikipedia (CIPR, 2019).

In terms of understanding how frequently some entries are edited on Wikipedia, DiStaso's survey, among communication professionals in 2013, can give some insights. According to the findings, 34 % of participants had directly applied to such a method on Wikipedia for their organization or client, and another 14 % had used Wikipedia's 'Talk' pages to request edits (DiStaso, 2013).

2.3.3.5 Social bots

Besides other digital tools and practices posing moral issues regarding truthfulness and authenticity, social bots are also one of them (Hagelstein et.al, 2021). Simulating a human identity and being used for manipulative purposes as computer programs (Woolley & Howard, 2016), social bots make it difficult to recognize the difference between humans' and bots actions on the internet (Guilbeault, 2016), and, therefore, most users confuse bots with humans.

2.3.3.6 Big data

Information data collected for organization and government desires, as "the oil of the information economy" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 16), has been transforming publics. While the aims of the use of big data in an organization differ, many researchers address the possible benefits of big data. Some scholars have seen big data as the future priorities (Loebbecke and Picot, 2015), which can increase the effects of strategic communication and advance corporate communication (Wiencierz, & Röttger, 2017). Colleoni (2013) suggested that big data may allow an organization to evaluate the impact of PR strategies online to ensure the corporate social responsibility agendas and social expectations of stakeholders are in line with each other. Some scholars (Kent and Saffer, 2014) argued that it can be a strategic tool of PR, nevertheless, they cautiously approached the use of big data for crisis communication management.

Big data, which 'denotes huge volumes and streams of different forms of data from diverse internal and external sources and their constant processing' (Wiesenberg et al., 2017, p. 96), bears both opportunities and challenges for strategic communication (Hagelstein et.al, 2021). It is acknowledged the profits of advanced data collection and data mining methods to organizations in generating more sufficient and way better targeted strategic communication solutions, big data, however, pose at the same time numerous challenges (Yang & Kang, 2015). As it threatens individuals' privacy and the public sphere, there must be a balance between the interests of private communication and transparent public communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). In addition to that, strategic communication professionals attach enormous importance to big data, unpleasantly, they take consumer privacy into account on a minimal level (Yang and Kang 2015 p. 90).

2.3.3.7 Profiling and targeting

Apart from enabling the potential to microsegment individuals, big data bears also other most desirable opportunities such as profiling and targeting of audiences (Yang & Kang, 2015). It is also a growing trend to distribute tailored messages to not only current but also potential customers, consumers, and other stakeholders (Valentini, 2015). But, of course, it results in moral issues because of personal data privacy (Barbu, 2014). Through profiling and targeting, not only the collection of data from unaware individuals is problematic as privacy concerns, but also to generate new personal information through predictive analytics as well (Mai, 2016). In response to growing concerns, a study conducted by Pew Research Center demonstrates a significant finding. The study revealed that 79 % of adults in the U.S. worried about what

purposes companies used their data for and 81 % even said the potential risks resulting from data collection were way too much compared to the benefits (Auxier et al., 2019).

To gain a general overview regarding the issue, the outcomes of the European Communication Monitor survey (Zerfass et al., 2020) conducted by the with an attendance of 2,324 communication professionals in 44 European countries found that for 67.6 %, using bots is extremely challenging for the purpose of generating feedback and followers on social media in terms of ethics. Further, big data, social media influencers, and sponsored content were associated with ethical concerns. The majority of them regard profiling and targeting audiences and editing entries in public wikis as less problematic than others.

2.3.4 Resources for dealing with ethical challenges

According to the Austrian Ethics Council for Public Relations, PR ethics has been a topic in PR research since the late 1980s. However, there is a notion in the PR sector that outdated forms of ethical codes still retain their validity in the face of new developments. Wiener & Einwiller (2016) emphasized that some authors are adapting classical ethics to the field of PR and that many of the approaches lay the burden for ethical action on public relations practitioners.

In the case that practitioners come across moral challenges, there are some different resources that they can utilize to assess the status emerging from interests conflict between their organization or client and the stakeholders (Hagelstein et.al, 2021). These resources can consist of individual values and beliefs (micro-level), ethical guidelines of the organization (meso level), and ethical codes professional associations generated (macro-level) (Bentele, 2015).

A number of studies (Brown et al., 2005; Schauster, 2014) found that practitioners saw organization leaders as one of the main ethical sources in dealing with ethical issues. Schauster and Neill (2017), furthermore, considered ethics training as the key component of solving an unethical case, along with ethical leadership. According to findings of another research on Millennials, codes and courses that are expected to serve as a guide in dealing with ethical challenges should match market realities (Lee & Cheng, 2011). A recent study (Meng et al., 2022) revealed that for most of PR professionals (88%), organizational guidelines of ethics were the most important resource to overcome ethical issues. The second most referred resource was ethical codes of professional associations (76.5%) and personal values and beliefs accounted for the least relevant.

2.3.4.1 Ethical codes

In the literature, several different approaches dominate concerning the efficiency and validation of the ethical codes, especially towards new developments. Whereas some scholars regard ethical codes as a way for strategic communication professionals to achieve and fulfill dedicated goals, likewise, facilitating social understanding (Bowen, 2010), helping to make more responsible organizations, citizens, and governments (Bowen, 2011), and enhancing organizational effectiveness (Grunig, 2000), other scholars approach ethical codes as not useful to seasoned public relations practitioners (Lee & Cheng, 2011), meeting the client's needs rather than a broader commitment to social responsibility (Ki & Kim 2009), and largely symbolic mechanisms to aid professionalization (Noordegraaf 2011).

Addressing the issue in more general terms, Parsons (2006) argued that the profession has not agreed if codes of ethics are necessary, although they are regarded as a contract regulating professional behaviors. Others clarified that they have no impact on ethical decision-making (Sims and Keon, 1999), and serve as something which can enhance the reputation of an organization unlike controlling unethical behavior of practitioners (Fawkes, 2014). Walle (2003) citing the examples of CIPR and PRSA, stated that these two institutions recommend avoiding conflicts, however, there is no code on how to act in conflicts between social good and organizational behavior, as well as personal and public interests.

Furthermore, codes of ethics have been criticized for not applying to the new technologies or the changing industry practices (Bowen, 2004), being unenforceable (Wright, 1993), too vague to offer specific guidance (Kruckeberg, 1993), or irrelevant compared to corporate culture (Sims & Brinkmann, 2003). Although the scope and content of ethics are largely determined by associations operating in this field and aiming at transforming the profession into an ethical structure, the members are expected to act within the framework of these rules, according to a study on PR ethics in Europe indicated that only a minority (29 %) of the surveyed communication professionals used a professional code of ethics to deal with moral problems (Zerfass et al., 2012).

In her study examining the perceptions of ethics of public relations students, Fitch (2013) found that codes of ethics were seen to be of limited value. Some students participating in the focus group criticized the PRIA code of ethics as to form and substance for addressing risk management and reputation issues rather than socially responsible practice. On the one hand, a study (Wachtler, 2012) from Austria came to some positive conclusions regarding the

functionality of codes. Almost three out of four practitioners indicated that codes of ethics assist them in ethical behaviors. Yet, in their study, Ikonen et al. (2017) revealed the inefficiency of the current codes of ethics to deal with unethical circumstances resulting from sponsored content.

2.3.4.2 Ethical training

Since the 1970s, there has been increasing attention to the value of teaching ethics (Derek C. Bok, 1960). Projects have identified appropriate goals for teaching professional ethics, including (1) developing analytical skills; (2) introducing ethical theory; (3) developing moral reasoning; (4) inculcating fundamental values; and (5) cultivating character (Jennings et. al 1994). Hagelstein et.al (2021) see ethics training or classes during university studies or after graduation as an important way to strengthen the resources that help tackle moral challenges. In addition, The Commission for Public Relations Education notes professional ethics consist of the personal ethics of each professional in the industry, thus public relations education should include ethics in each content (CPRE 2006, p. 4). The Chartered Institute of Public Relations emphasizes the importance that ethics can be better comprehended by students if the curriculum of educational institutions addresses the outcomes of public relations activity. (CIPR 2010, p. 7).

According to a study (Gautschi and Jones, 1998), students who completed an ethics course recognized ethical issues quite better than students who did not complete such a course. Also, Pratt (1991) found that it is highly important for public relations practitioners to take ethics education in order to improve ethical standards and practice in public relations. In a study with advertising and public relations professors, Harrison (1990) reached a significant result regarding the importance of studying ethics for students.

The findings of Gale and Bunton (2005) are also promising to gain better insight in terms of understanding the effectiveness of ethics training. They found that 86% of the graduates who completed an ethics course agreed that studying ethics made them more aware of ethical issues in the professions, while 38.6% of the graduates who had not taken such a course agreed. 52.0 % of the alumni who completed an ethics course were on the same page that they comprehend professional standards and codes of ethics better thanks to studying ethics. The study concluded from this finding that practitioners who underwent an ethics course were significantly more likely to indicate they had adopted ethical reasoning skills they gained during their education. The other significant outcome of their study is that ethics courses assist graduates to advance tools for reasoning through ethical dilemmas. Almost three-quarters (70.1%) expressed their

opinion in this direction. According to the scenario that emerged as a result of the study is that graduates who received media ethics instruction apply what they learned in the classroom to their careers. Gale and Bunton concluded that thanks to ethics courses graduates gain higher levels of ethical awareness and ethical leadership, and they were more likely to perceive personal and professional ethics as indistinctive (2005). Haefner (1997) argued that courses in media ethics give students a unique opportunity to develop a moral character that will carry them through personal and professional dilemmas. Similarly, Zerfass et al. (2020) found in a survey that communication ethics training was suggested as a potential solution for dilemmas regarding ethical issues. Yet, the truth is that 40.4% of European practitioners do not have any educational background in ethics.

Besides, some scholars reviewed teaching methods and ethics instruction to reveal whether students acquire the necessity of perceiving the ethical issues and dealing with them in their working life. Christians and Lambeth (1996) noted a significant increase in discussion of ethical issues in independent media ethics courses and other courses. However, they added that there is little evidence to document their effectiveness. Similarly, a survey (Shannon and Berl, 1997) indicated that there is no significant difference in terms of ethical attitudes between students who underwent an ethics course and those who had not. Along with that, some authors documented little evidence that students developed long-term ethical values through formal ethics training in college courses (William R. Wynd and John Mager 1989), (James Weber 1990), (James R. Davis and Ralph E. Welton 1991). Yet, Surlin (1987) found that a media ethics course positively influenced students to create a value system, nevertheless, he underlined that students' values did not correspond to ethical long-term behavior. Tilley et.al (2011) found higher education limitedly influenced ethical decision-making and suggested that the ethics curriculum has to be reconsidered. Bowen revealed in a study held with the cooperation of the International Association of Business Communicators that most practitioners (70%) did not study ethics at university and almost one-third of them (30%) did not mention ethics in their university studies, also 40% read just a few articles (Bowen 2006).

In an international study (Erzikova 2010), scholars pointed out a geographical divide concerning ethics education between the U.S. and Europe. While the U.S. educators stated that ethics education should deal with developing socially responsible professionals (Erzikova 2010), European educators, in return, saw ethics courses as less likely to assist students to make ethical decisions. Other researchers (Austin & Toth, 2011) who incorporated educators' aspects regarding the matter into the center of their studies, found that for students, textbook scenarios

are useless to address how complicated ethical decision-making in the industry, according to educators. Therefore, they argued that the public relations curriculum should contain ethics training consisting of “real-world scenarios that students may encounter” (p. 512). Hutchison (2002) claimed, on the other hand, that the majority of public relations textbooks conveyed ethics to students over just one chapter and their content was composed of a mix of law and ethics.

2.3.4.3 Professional experience

Some studies base public relations practitioners’ and business professionals’ level of ethical standards upon their age (Gale and Bunton 2005). Underpinning this finding, Bowen reported in his study that practitioners mostly learned about ethical issues through professional experience rather than academic study (Bowen 2007, par. 25). This can be understood from the findings that practitioners with less experience can be less prepared for ethical issues. Similarly, Paterson et al documented that young practitioners have a lower standard of ethical beliefs compared to older business professionals (Paterson et al., 2001). Place (2019) reached the outcome with his study that PR practitioners believe that they gain moral development depending on time and experience.

Furthermore, a study, surveying 860 employees of 19 PR firms, revealed that practitioners working in firms with ethical parameters were significantly more likely to exhibit ethical behavior (Ki et al, 2012).

2.3.4.1 Personal values and beliefs

Some scholars value personal ethics more than the code of ethics because they argue that they function better and are more direct guidelines by referring to the complex structure of the code of ethics (Bowen, 2004a; Parkinson, 2001). Kruckeberg (2000), additionally, suggests if practitioners act ethically then no enforcement is needed for the codes of ethics. Furthermore, Waters (2014, p. 15) addresses individual ethics and he believes that they will lead a practitioner as a guideline to what needs to be done. Tilley (2005) pointed out the association between public relations and personal ethics, underlying that personal values underpin their task as ethical consultants. Beyond, a study by Einwiller and Wiener (2016) with industry leaders draws attention to the importance of individual ethics and personal character in terms of digital tools: “Due to laws that are not yet fully developed or that do not exist sufficiently for the digital sector, practitioners are required to have strong individual ethics and personal character – even more so

than when dealing with classic media – in order to avoid a lack of transparency and manipulation of recipients” (p. 8).

On the other hand, there are different approaches in the literature towards personal ethics. Since public relations always has to be brought into line with the view of the organizational management or the client and that of other team members, individualistic ethics fall short and must be underpinned by system-related ethics (Förg 2004: 107). Bentele (1992) also considers an interweaving of individual and institutional or organizational ethics to be necessary. Also, Fitch (2013) points out the effectiveness of personal ethics: “Their personal ethics would also assist in making career choices. They decide to work in a company because they share the same beliefs and desires...they just see themselves as fitting into that company.” (p.9)

According to European Communication Monitor (Zerfas et al., 2020), most communication practitioners rely on personal values (86.1 %) to deal with ethical challenges. Besides, codes of ethics are the least important for the surveyed participants. On the Austrian side, the findings are;

- Ethical codes of practice of professional associations: 43.0%
- Ethical guidelines of my organization: 70.2%
- My personal values and beliefs: 87.2

2.3.5 Codes of ethics

Most of the ethical codes, which are considered to hold (Abbott, 1983) cultural forms ensuring professionals act societally responsible, emerged from the needs of professional bodies to fulfill social customs (Yeoman and Tench, 2014). Along with that, some scholars (Limor et al., 2014) justified the need for ethical codes, which the profession should set up and keep up with, as follows; social recognition of the profession and its status, introduction of the profession, and determination its difference from others, as well as approval which allows the profession to exclude any of the practitioners in case of violation of ethical guidelines. Although the dominance of professional organizations on ethical codes is taken into consideration, yet, some organizations have attempted to formulate their codes of ethics as they might have considered associations' one as "the lack of enforcement" and "effectiveness" (Ki et al., 2012).

A study conducted on the views of practitioners also drew attention to the importance of ethical codes for the profession. Almost all of the participants (92%) agreed the profession needs ethical codes (Global Communication Report, 2018). Nearly 60% recommended turning the reins over to an independent organization. Bowen (2008), on the other hand, argues that although the efficacy of ethical codes has been proven in terms of goodwill, they serve as a roadmap for behavior devoid of the general moral framework. Given that online communication also opens up a new type of communication space that raises new ethical questions, reformulates old ones, and even possibly sharpens them (Greis, 2001), that transformation may require ethical guidelines which fit online communication (Bowen, 2013; Whitehouse, 2010), because online communication practices are less institutionalized and rarely tracked by current codes (Zerfass et al., 2020).

2.3.5.1 Code of Athens

Being the first international code of public relations ethics, the Code of Athens is argued to influenced current codes by some scholars (Bowen, 2007; Wright, 2006). It makes its members obligatory to respect for human rights, as well as intellectual, moral and social needs (Wright, 2006).

Generally, the Code of Athens;

- imposes many professional and social missions and commitments on practitioners, and emphasizes the prestige and reputation of the profession.
- encourages PR professionals to build trust in their relationship environment
- advises to raise the awareness that professionals represent the profession and to avoid behaviors that are incompatible with the profession.
- recommends taking action and moral evaluations in the case of arising ethical issues, prioritizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- suggests an environment of dialogue be established and all parties are enabled to express themselves.
- advises not to be subsided into silence and to communicate by prioritizing loyalty and honesty in times of crisis.
- recommends that accuracy and confidentiality be based on digital communication
- warns to refrain from activities that can be considered manipulative methods or techniques, such as social bots, and sponsored content

2.3.5.2 Code of Lisbon

Code of Lisbon, which is known European Code of Professional Conduct in Public Relations as well, was adopted in 1978 (Prethikrat, p. 1). It recommends to be taken an action and to be made moral considerations by putting the universal declaration of human rights in the foreground.

Code of Lisbon includes; public interest, respect for freedom of expression and press, avoiding practices and methods that do not comply with the rules, transparency in public relations activities, respect for the rules of other professions in interprofessional cooperation or interaction, avoiding conflicts of interest and practices that prevent audiences to perceive, establishing professional trust and protecting information confidentiality, disclosure of material and moral interests, taking professional reputation as a basis in the performance of the task and complying with the rules in all circumstances.

2.3.5.3 Ehrenkodex des PRVA

Generally, having binding rules and emphasizing the democratic social order in the practice of the profession, the PRVA code of ethics suggests, having a social mission and obligations, and qualifications required by the profession, sustainable communication among media partners, audience sensitivity in all paid communication activities, ethics and transparency in online communication, avoiding promises tied to other media actors, and the dissemination of information that would cast doubt on its accuracy, fair competition, information and document privacy, keeping ethical principles at the forefront of the practice of the profession, and protecting the professional reputation and acting in this direction.

2.3.5.4 The Online Code of Conduct of the PR-Ethics Council

Being formulated between 2015 and 2016, this ethic code was generated as a result of extensive research with the contributions of PR practitioners (PR Ethik Rat, 2018). The Austrian PR Ethics Council (PRVA) has specified eight guides for online and social media communication: “Fairness – use the power of communication with care”, “respect – respect the users’ personalities and opinions”, “responsibility – assume responsibility for the content of a statement as a communicator”, “moderation – define clear rules for discourse”, “clarity – define rules and guidelines as orientation for the employees of a company”, “transparency – disclose role as

communicator and the motivation”, “courtesy – use the right tone”, “privacy – treat personal matters personally, and confidential matters as confidential” (PR Ethik Rat, 2018, p. 7).

2.3.5.5 Content Marketing Code of the Austrian PR Ethics Council

Being drafted between 2019 and 2020, this code include five basic principles for content marketing (PR-Ethik-Rat, 2021). The five basic principles are consisted of “Fairness (not abusing communicative power)”, “Respect (respecting the independence of journalism)”, “Responsibility (responsibility cannot be shifted)”, “Transparency (disclosing the motivations of the communicator)”, “Self-determination (enabling self-determined action)”

Based on the results of a study (Spatzier, 2014), ethical and moral ideas do not correspond to a normative ideal, there is a need to clarify what public relations ethics means, and that can be observed from the awareness level of various public relations ethical codes. The outcomes can be seen as worrying in terms of awareness and implementation of ethical codes. While 31% only know them by name, 11% have never heard of any of them, and 57% know at least one PR code of ethics, also in terms of content. Besides, only a small proportion of PR professionals use codes of ethics in their day-to-day work.

The fact that students take courses on ethics may be another factor in the increase in awareness of ethical codes. A study (Gale & Bunton, 2005) found a significant result between studying ethics and an increase in awareness of codes of ethics among PR practitioners. Half of the participants reported that taking a course related to ethics made them better informed accordingly.

As the existence of codes of ethics concerning communication activities conducted through digital tools and practices or adaptation of existing ethical codes towards the digital area are quite new, it is likely that the level of the students' perceptions and assessment for the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of these codes might remain low.

2. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire instrument

Within the scope of the study, an online questionnaire composed of 14 questions was employed in German. While nine questions were generated to examine the tendency of students, the rest five questions were about the demographic features of students. Most of the questions were

mandatory and closed-ended questions. Only one question and related items were drawn from European Communication Monitor (ECM) 2020 study. In result section, both findings will be compared and presented. The rest of the questions were derived from the literature. The survey instruments included nominal and ordinal response scales.

The survey questionnaire explored six factors: (1) the current level of prevalence to perceive ethical issues in digital practices of public relations among students; (2) the challenging degree of perception of digital practices of public relations ethically; (3) resources to tackle the ethical issues originating from digital practices used; (4) the degree of being prepared for dealing with ethical challenges from digital practices utilized for the aim of public relations activities; (5) the significance of ethics in the face of a moral issue; (6) the awareness of ethics codes of the PR industry.

3.2 Sample and data collection

Interestingly, little is known about how students assess digital practices of public relations in terms of ethics, and there are just a few empirical studies that address the issue from the lens of students. Therefore, the sample of the study consists of bachelor's students in communication science in Austria, who may become prospective PR practitioners, and who are already working in the field. As the current study deals with digital practices, and young people enjoy digital tools and social media more than any age group, students who are under the age of 34 were selected as the sample of the study. To be able to compare the sample, students were split into two groups which are “younger semesters” and “higher semesters”, as well as “university” and “university of applied sciences”. Those who are among 1.-2. and 2.-3. semesters account for younger semesters and students who are among 4.-5. and 7 or higher fall into higher semesters. The study's sample neither consist of a random sample nor represent the population, as it is not possible to representative sample and the population parameters are not known. Therefore, findings does not represent the total population of students.

The questionnaire was distributed online through SoSci Survey and went through a necessary test for the safety of the dataset and its own. Afterward, the survey structure on the online platform had the supervisor confirmed. The survey was live between February 25, 2022, and April 30, 2022. Different methods were followed in delivering the questionnaire to the target audience. Reaching out to the sample through institutions and educators was determined as a priority target to increase the number of attendance. Accordingly, 160 educators were emailed.

Besides, the survey link was posted on social media accounts of which students a member are. Before the survey began, participants had been informed about the survey was carried out within the scope of a master thesis, and their personal information and data would be secure.

In total 261 respondents started the survey and 165 of them completed it. Average time to complete the survey is 4.35 minutes. Those who could not be identified as a part of the target group and those who are over 34 years old were excluded from the dataset. The young/prospective PR practitioners in the sample were mostly between 18-24 years old (86,6 %, n= 143), followed by 25 – 34 (13,3 %, n= 22). 58 students are in the first year of education, 50 students among 3.-4. semesters, 36 students in among 4.- 5., 21 students 7 or higher. A vast majority of the attendees of the survey composed of Females. Of 165 participants, 77,5 % was female (128), and 19,9 % was male (33). Four participants indicated their gender as divers. Only 29 students hold experience (25 females, 3 males, 1 divers).

While 94 students are studying at the university of Vienna, 23 students indicate they attended to the survey from the university of applied sciences upper Austria, 23 students at the university of applied sciences Joanneum, 11 students from the university of applied sciences St. Pölten, five students from the university of applied sciences Wiener Neustadt, four students from the university of applied sciences FH Wien, two students from Paris Lodron Universität Salzburg, and one student from the university of applied sciences Burgenland. Additionally, two students were not identified at which institute they are studying. No students from the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein and the University Of Klagenfurt have attended the survey, even though the survey link was shared with educators.

3.3 Analyses

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program was employed for data analysis. In addition to descriptive analyses, results have been tested for statistical significance with T-test on the basis of semesters and the type of educational institutions, and statistically significant results are presented. Along with that, Pearson correlation and Kendall rank correlation were used to analyze the relationships between variables. Comparisons between ECM and the current study's results were presented descriptively based on their average. Additionally, the used methods were stated in the footnotes.

Since there is not a large enough number of participants in gender and experience categories to allow any statistical analysis in the distribution between groups, these categories were not included in the analysis.

3. Findings

4.1. The prevailing level of perception of ethical issues

In order to better reveal the level of students' perception of ethical problems arising from the use of digital applications, firstly, the familiarity of the participants with these applications, which have become a part of daily life, such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, was identified. A vast majority of the respondents (88% scale points 4 and 5) have a good or very good knowledge of social media. Of 165 participants, only five indicated to have a lack or little knowledge of these digital practices. Looking at the distribution between younger and higher semesters, however, of 108 young semesters, 89% are familiar with these social media applications at a good or very good level. Among higher semesters, their familiarity is 10% less than their peers. In comparison between educational institution types, the vast majority of young/prospective PR practitioners from universities of applied science (95%) and 83% of those from universities have deep or good knowledge in this regard.

The following question sought to find out the knowledge level of students regarding digital tools and practices, such as social bots, big data, and sponsored content, employed in the field. In contrast to the above findings, it is remarkable that the knowledge level drops drastically when it comes to those which were used in public relations. It turned out that almost one-third of attendees (31%, scale points 4 and 5) has a deep or good knowledge. Nearly one-third of students (30% scale points 1 and 2) either know nothing or have limited insight about these digital practices which have resulted in a drastic change in the dynamics of the industry last decades. Only 26% of young and 40% of high semesters are well or good- equipped with these practices. The level of knowledge between the types of educational institutions is nearly similar to each other (31% university students, 32% university of applied science students). Additionally, no statistically significant difference was detected between "semesters" and "the type of educational institutions" according to the T-test results.

Through the next question, respondents were inquired to rate on a five-point scale some controversial activities taking place digitally in terms of their ethical challenges posing to the

field. Two out of every three students (68%) considered using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media extremely or very challenging ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.08$, $n = 113$). Three out of every four young semesters (71%) and nearly two thirds of higher semesters (63%) assessed this tactic as ethically wrong. The second digital practice which was found extremely challenging or challenging by students is to use normal-looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites. 62% of young/prospective PR practitioners held moral concern about sponsored content ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.19$, $n = 102$). Two out of every young semesters (69%) and nearly half of higher semesters (49%) reported moral concern about sponsored content. Respectively followed them, motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts (52%; $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.26$, $n = 85$), editing entries about the organization on public wikis (48%; $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.4$, $n = 80$), and exploiting audiences' personal data by applying bigdata analyses (45%; $M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.98$, $n = 74$).

On the other hand, paying social media influencers to communicate favorably, and profiling and targeting audiences pose ethically no problem for over one-third of students (39% and 38%, on a scale “ethically not challenging at all” or “ethically not challenging” respectively).

According to T-test, young semesters and higher semesters differ significantly from each other only in terms of using normal looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites (**Table 1**). That is, the young semesters associated the usage of normal-looking sponsored content more with ethical concerns than the higher semesters. Besides, some significant differences specific to “using normal looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites”, “motivating employees to spread organizational messages on their private social media accounts”, and “editing entries about the organization on public wikis” between students from the university and those who study at university of applied science have been identified (**Table 2**). Remarkably, it was observed that most of the young/prospective PR practitioners studying at universities of applied science found all digital tactics of the PR industry ethically not challenging except the use of bots and sponsored social media posts. That is, young/prospective PR practitioners from universities indicated concerns more about digital practices of PR given to them than those from universities of applied science.

Table 1

Ethical issues in digital practices of public relations across semesters

Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit				T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit			
						Standardfehl	95%
F	Signifikanz	T	df	Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	er der Differenz	Konfidenzintervall der Differenz

										Ober Untere e
Exploiting audiences' personal data by applying bigdata analyses	Varianzen sind gleich	.000	.995	.969	163	.334	.156	.161	-.162	.474
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.966	112.963	.336	.156	.161	-.164	.476
Profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests	Varianzen sind gleich	1.660	.199	-.604	163	.547	-.116	.193	-.498	.265
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.583	103.486	.561	-.116	.200	-.513	.280
Using normal looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites*	Varianzen sind gleich	4.043	.046	3.175	163	.002	.602	.190	.228	.977
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			3.052	102.226	.003	.602	.197	.211	.994
Motivating employees to spread organisational messages on their private social media accounts	Varianzen sind gleich	.888	.348	.966	163	.335	.200	.207	-.208	.608
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.947	107.819	.346	.200	.211	-.218	.618
Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media	Varianzen sind gleich	.029	.864	.166	163	.869	.029	.177	-.319	.378
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.170	121.756	.866	.029	.172	-.312	.371
Editing entries about the organisation on public wikis	Varianzen sind gleich	3.664	.057	1.560	163	.121	.356	.228	-.094	.806
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			1.493	100.955	.139	.356	.238	-.117	.828
Paying social media influencers to communicate favourably	Varianzen sind gleich	1.854	.175	.272	163	.786	.058	.215	-.366	.483
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.267	108.015	.790	.058	.219	-.376	.493

* Significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

Table 2

Ethical issues in digital practices of public relations across the type of educational institutions

		Levene-Test der		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
		Varianzgleichheit								
		F	Signifikanz	T	df	Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfeh	95% Konfidenzintervall	
								ler der	der Differenz	
								Differenz	Untere	Obere
Exploiting audiences' personal data by applying bigdata analyses	Varianzen sind gleich	.531	.467	-2.498	163	.013	-.383	.153	-.686	-.080
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.478	137.779	.014	-.383	.155	-.689	-.077
Profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests	Varianzen sind gleich	.058	.811	-1.845	163	.067	-.342	.185	-.707	.024
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.842	141.037	.068	-.342	.185	-.708	.025
Using normal looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites *	Varianzen sind gleich	2.994	.085	-2.456	163	.015	-.457	.186	-.824	-.090
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.401	130.355	.018	-.457	.190	-.833	-.080
Motivating employees to spread organisational messages on their private social media accounts *	Varianzen sind gleich	.004	.950	-3.560	163	.000	-.688	.193	-1.070	-.307
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-3.556	141.324	.001	-.688	.194	-1.071	-.306
Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media	Varianzen sind gleich	.083	.774	-1.014	163	.312	-.173	.170	-.509	.164
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.007	138.461	.316	-.173	.172	-.512	.166
Editing entries about the organisation on public wikis *	Varianzen sind gleich	.295	.588	-2.451	163	.015	-.535	.218	-.967	-.104
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.415	134.544	.017	-.535	.222	-.974	-.097
Paying social media influencers to communicate favourably	Varianzen sind gleich	.013	.908	-1.715	163	.088	-.354	.207	-.762	.054
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.722	144.022	.087	-.354	.206	-.761	.052

* Significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

According to the results from ECM (2020) and the current study, ethically the most problematic digital practice of public relations for both students and PR professionals is social bots (respectively 68% and 68%, scale points 4 and 5) (**Table 3**). Whereas students reported the usage of normal-looking sponsored content (62%), corporate influencers (52%), and editing entries about the organization on public wikis (48%) were ethically more challenging than PR practitioners did (respectively 54%, 41%, 27%), PR professionals concerned more about the exploitation of audiences' personal data by applying big-data analyses (58%), and paid social media influencer communication (55%) compared to students. Additionally, profiling and targeting audiences based on age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests was rated by both students and PR professionals as ethically less problematic digital practice of public relations than others. Generally speaking, it can be mentioned that there is a common concern among the participants that most of the digital applications used in the field cause ethical issues. On the other hand, it was observed that students reported higher rates of moral concern than professionals about the given categories.

Table 3
Moral concerns between young/prospective PR practitioners and PR professionals on digital communication tools

	Young/prospective PR practitioners	PR professionals
Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media	3.88 (1.08)	3.89 (1.21)
Exploiting audiences' personal data by applying bigdata analyses	3.24 (0.98)	3.61 (1.23)
Paying social media influencers to communicate favourably	3.09 (1.31)	3.51 (1.27)
Using normal-looking sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites	3.57 (1.19)	3.47 (1.26)
Motivating employees to spread organisational messages on their private social media accounts	3.39 (1.26)	3.06 (1.34)
Profiling and targeting audiences based on their age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests	2.99 (1.18)	2.75 (1.31)
Editing entries about the organisation on public wikis	3.30 (1.4)	2.70 (1.25)
Five-point rating scale ranging from 1 = 'Ethically not challenging at all' to 5 = 'Ethically extremely challenging'.		

*Retrieved from Hagelstein, J., Einwiller, S., & Zerfass, A. (2021). *The ethical dimension of public relations in Europe: Digital channels, moral challenges, resources, and training. Public Relations Review, 47(4)*, (p.7)

Although there is an increasing interest in digital applications, the ethical challenges they pose, however, have been revealed in many studies. The fourth question aims to find out the difficulty level of identification of the ethical challenges arising from digital PR applications among students. On the one hand, over a half of the attendees (55%, n = 90) reported having difficulty or extreme difficulty, on the other hand, only 18% responded as not very difficult or not difficult. For 53% younger semesters and 58% higher semesters it is very difficult or difficult to determine ethical challenges resulting from digital practices employed for PR targets. On the side of the type of educational institution, a similar scenario emerges. Most of young/prospective PR practitioners both from university (55%) and university of applied science (54%) found them difficult to detect. Additionally, no statistically significant difference was detected between "semesters" and "the type of educational institutions" according to the T-test results.

Considering the knowledge level of the participants reported above, young/prospective PR practitioners should address ethical challenges more originating from digital practices by looking at some real-world cases taking place in the profession.

4.2. Ethically challenging level of perception of digital practices of PR

Respondents were asked to rate some given pr activities on a scale in order to find out which one comes first in terms of their degree of difficulty. While combating misinformation was the most rated response by young/prospective PR practitioners (87%, n: 144) as very challenging or challenging, conducting PR work for companies that manufacture potentially harmful products (e.g. tobacco, weapons) came after it with an 82% rating score. Additionally, two out of every participant (66%, n = 109) found it challenging or very challenging to balance the interests of clients/employers on the one hand and the public, on the other, on a case of crisis. Only over half of participants (52%, n = 86) agreed that dealing with issues arising from the use of digital PR practices is a challenging or very challenging task. Young/prospective PR practitioners both from younger semesters and from university reported more concern about the difficulty of handling digital PR practices caused issues than their peers from higher semesters and university of applied science (Table).

Another significant difference was found between the university and the university of applied science in regards to dealing with issues arising from the use of digital PR practices. According to T-test, there is a significant difference between young semesters and higher semesters when it comes to fair weighing the interests of both employer and public. However, no significant difference has been found in terms of type of educational institution (**Table 4**).

Table 4

Challenging level of PR activities across semesters

		Levene-Test der		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
		Varianzgleichheit								
				Signifika		Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz	
		F	nz	T	df				Untere	Obere
Combating misinformation	Varianzen sind gleich	.168	.682	-.909	163	.365	-.131	.144	-.416	.154
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.905	112.803	.367	-.131	.145	-.418	.156
Dealing with issues arising from the use of digital PR practices	Varianzen sind gleich	.047	.829	.317	163	.752	.046	.145	-.240	.331
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.313	109.751	.755	.046	.147	-.245	.336
Balance the interests of clients/employers*	Varianzen sind gleich	2.613	.108	-2.005	163	.047	-.323	.161	-.641	-.005
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.072	125.024	.040	-.323	.156	-.632	-.014
Conducting PR work for companies that manufacture potentially harmful products	Varianzen sind gleich	.860	.355	-1.062	163	.290	-.182	.172	-.521	.157
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.088	121.895	.279	-.182	.168	-.514	.149

* Significant at the $p \leq 0.05$

4.3. Resources to deal with ethical issues

It is observed that tools for tackling an ethical issue vary among participants. 82% of young/prospective PR practitioners indicated to rely on their personal (professional) experience most. Followingly, codes of ethics and personal values and beliefs were assessed by participants as the second most employed resources for dealing with ethical challenges (79%). Interestingly, it turned out that students considered ethical training as the less useful tool compared to other resources (71%). Only three participants mentioned additional different resources against ethical challenges; the legal situation in Austria, attentiveness, survey results, and statistics on public opinion.

Although personal (professional) experience turned out to be the first resource young/prospective PR practitioners relied on, however, for younger semesters (81%), ethical codes of practice of professional associations are the first choice to deal with ethical challenges. As a first ethical tool, 86% of higher semesters favoured personal (professional) experience which was secondarily important for younger semesters. While this category was followed by personal values and beliefs (82,4%), and codes of ethics (77,2%) for higher semesters, the category of personal values and beliefs was important at the third level for younger semesters. It can be suggested that higher semesters tended relatively less to external resources compared to their personal ones. On the other hand, young/prospective PR practitioners from university (80%) mostly turned to personal (professional) experience, however, their peers from university of applied science (85%) found personal values and beliefs more efficient. Besides, results generally indicated that tools young/prospective PR practitioners employ vary by showing a nearly close distribution. Additionally, no statistically significant difference was detected between "semesters" and "the type of educational institutions" according to the T-test results.

4.4. Preparedness to overcome ethical challenges

Another factor in coping with ethical challenges might be related to whether students feel ready for this situation. As a result of the question posed to measure this, a significant part of the students (42%) is taking an abstaining stance on this issue. In addition, only 47 out of 165 students felt prepared or fully prepared (28%). Almost one out of third (29%) said they were unprepared for such a task. The case between semesters, is, however, that higher semesters (39%) were more confident about dealing with ethical challenges than their peers from lower semesters (23%). Between universities and universities of applied science, no difference was detected. Only a small percent of young/prospective PR practitioners from both sides said they felt prepared. Additionally, no statistically significant difference was detected between "semesters" and "the type of educational institutions" according to the T-test results.

4.5. Importance of ethics in the face of a moral issue

To find out the importance of ethics for students, a question suggesting picking just one factor according to significance level was deployed. Of the surveyed students, 55 participants (33%) prioritize their moral values in digital PR work. Besides, 51 respondents stated that they abide by interests of the target groups of communication. Only four students go by their personal

interests. Another interesting result is that young/prospective PR practitioners attached less importance to the interest of their client or employer (14%) than the interest of public (19%).

Additionally, comparison between semesters and the types of educational institutions indicates different results. While ethical values are the most preferred category among higher semesters and university students, for both younger and university of applied science students, the interests of the target groups. Beyond, no statistically significant difference was detected between "semesters" and "the type of educational institutions" according to the T-test results.

4.6. Awareness level regarding codes of ethics

Considering the frequency of marking these answers, it was observed in general that students either did not know the codes at all or were not familiar with the content. The best-known PR code is the code of conduct for digital communication (PR-Online-Kodex des österr. PR-Ethik-Rats). 79% know it by name and its content (n=130), but only 40% (n=66) were aware of the content. The fact that the awareness of the codes for digital communication among students is at a high level can be interpreted as guiding them in solving the ethical problems that will arise from digital communication in working life. Ehrenkodex des PRVA was the second best known code with 61%. However, in terms of content, only 30% of young/prospective PR practitioners were familiar with it. Over half of the students (59%, n= 98) reported that they knew the code of Lisbon by name or content. Ultimately, code of conduct for content marketing and code of Athens were the least known code among students (53%, n= 87; 52%, n= 86). The release date of the code of conduct for content marketing (2021) is quite new, therefore, it may be less well known. It might pointed out that PRVA needs to do more work on this issue. Beyond that, in general, the threshold of awareness of young/prospective communication practitioners from university of applied science of ethical codes is quite low compared to others.

T-test indicated some significant differences specific to awareness level regarding the code of Athens, code of Lisbon, and code of conduct by the Austrian Ethics Council for Public Relations between students from the university and those who study at university of applied science have been identified (**Table 5**).

Table 5

Awareness level regarding codes of ethics across type of educational institution

Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit	T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit
--------------------------------------	-------------------------------------

									95%	
		Signifikan				Sig. (2-	Mittlere	Standardf	Konfidenzintervall	
		F	z	T	df	seitig)	Differenz	ehler der	der Differenz	
								Differenz	Untere	Obere
Code of Athens *	Varianzen sind gleich	3.711	.056	-2.551	163	.012	-.250	.098	-.444	-.057
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.638	156.352	.009	-.250	.095	-.437	-.063
Code of Lisbon *	Varianzen sind gleich	.068	.795	-2.132	163	.034	-.224	.105	-.432	-.017
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.164	149.052	.032	-.224	.104	-.429	-.019
Ehrenkodex des PRVA	Varianzen sind gleich	.148	.701	-.935	163	.351	-.123	.132	-.384	.137
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.943	146.303	.347	-.123	.131	-.382	.135
Code of Conduct by the Austrian Ethics Council for Public Relations *	Varianzen sind gleich	1.852	.175	-2.668	163	.008	-.316	.119	-.550	-.082
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-2.656	139.650	.009	-.316	.119	-.552	-.081
Code of Conduct for Content Marketing	Varianzen sind gleich	1.786	.183	-1.701	163	.091	-.191	.112	-.413	.031
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.738	151.931	.084	-.191	.110	-.408	.026

4. Discussion and Conclusion

To begin with, the research demonstrated that the majority of the students do not have a good grasp of the practices used in the PR field, while many practices lead to ethical concerns. However, of the tools and practices given within the scope of the survey, the use of social bots turned out to be the most challenging in terms of ethics. Beyond that, sponsored content and motivating employees were seen as very problematic.

Dealing with ethical issues arising from the use of digital PR practices is the least challenging pr activity. However, combating misinformation is the most challenging one practitioners address to solve. In general, the most preferred resource to overcome ethical issues is personal

(professional) experience and ethical training is the least important tool. While the majority of the participants are not prepared for facing a challenge and solving it, moral values come first for many participants in digital PR work. Ultimately, code of conduct for digital communication introduced by the Public Relations Association Austria is the most well-known code among young/prospective PR practitioners. In addition to that, the code of Athens is perceived as the least known.

RQ1:

The first research question dealt with how prevailing young/prospective PR practitioners perceive ethical issues in digital practices of public relations.

Introduced a general comment on the first research question, it turned out that young/prospective PR practitioners perceived most of the PR' digital tactics with moral issues, even though they indicated not to be familiar with digital tools and practices of PR, and they have difficulty identifying ethical challenges occurring in the digital environment of the profession. Even, they are better at determining some ethical issues than practitioners who participated in ECM' 2020 survey.

RQ2:

Within the scope of second research question, it was addressed how ethically challenging young/prospective PR practitioners perceive digital practices of public relations. According to the result, young/prospective PR practitioners consider digital activities challenging at a high level, however, by comparison with other activities, it is less challenging.

RQ3:

The third research question asked which resources young/prospective PR practitioners use to deal with the ethical issues, if confronted with ethical challenges in digital practices of public relations. Although the functionality of existing resources in overcoming ethical challenges has become a phenomenon measured by many studies, however, there are few studies that measure these resources in the face of digital communication. In line with this, young/prospective PR practitioners were enquired to assess some resources employed to tackle ethical challenges in a crisis, such as codes of ethics, ethics training, personal or professional experience, and personal values and beliefs. Nevertheless, they tend to rely on more personal values and beliefs

RQ4:

The forth research question was how well prepared young/prospective PR practitioners feel for dealing with ethical challenges in digital practices of public relations. The answer to this research question is in the direction that most of the students do not feel fully ready yet for such a difficult task.

RQ5:

Another research question within the scope of the study was how important ethics are to young/prospective communication practitioners when facing a moral issue in the course of performing their job. Young/prospective communication practitioners put the parties' interests ahead of ethics in the case of facing a moral issue.

RQ6:

The last research question was about the awareness level of young/prosepective communication practitioners of ethics codes of the PR industry. Their awareness level towards codes of ethics introduced by the profession turned out high by name and content, nevertheless few had insight about their content.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Forrester Research reported that three out of four internet users spent their time on social media in 2008, increasing 56% compared to 2007 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With the interregional digital gap closure, these numbers have increased exponentially every year, as presented in the theory section above. While this is the case, adopting social media and generating relevant strategies have been vital for PR professionals to reach publics (Cismaru et al., 2018). However, Tench et al. (2013) concluded that the level of digital skills of PR actors from the Europe region remained modest. Considering this situation through Resnik's (2002) concept of digital fluency, which refers to the fact that although people have the skills to search for information on the internet and how to use certain platforms, they do not have technological skills in strategy development, many professionals draw a profile that is far from digital fluency.

This study concluded first, that although the majority of young/prospective PR practitioners knew social media applications for online communication to a well or good degree, yet, the number of respondents who have a good or very good command of PR digital practices dropped strongly by 57% compared to them. The results indicate that young/prospective PR practitioners need to become more familiar with these practices in an environment where the industry has

been rapidly digitizing and professionals have been expected to keep up with this change. In addition, one of the reasons for this might be that the traditional methods of public relations still predominate in education curricula.

As the use of digital technologies in daily life and ways of doing business has increased, the benefits of digital applications such as "information exchange", "seeking sources", "correct errors", as well as "establishing interconnectivity" between audiences have become more important (Garrett & Jensen, 2009). Under these circumstances, many professionals have utilized first their traditional media experience and methods for digital communication, however, digital practices promise a lot of opportunities for PR profession (Grunig, 2009).

The priority strategic issues on the agenda of communication professionals until 2022 were "to deal with the speed and volume of information flow", "to explore new ways of creating and distributing content", "to address more audiences and channels with limited resources", "cope with the digital evolution and the social web", and "use big data and/or algorithms" (Zerfass, 2019). Yet, to maximize the effectiveness of pr activities through digital practices, the intersection between ethics and these methods should be taken into account (Byrum, 2017). However, many studies have identified ethical issues regarding the use of these practices. The existing study measuring students' attitudes has reached high rates of moral concerns in categories of using bots for feedback and followers, normal-looking sponsored content, corporate influencer, and editing wikis. Contrary to the thoughts that professional ethics perceptions are not yet formed, "young/prospective PR practitioners" are more concerned about the use of certain practices in the industry in terms of ethics than the professionals participating in the ECM 2020 survey.

One interpretation might be that today's digital practices of PR pose some different forms of moral concerns, nevertheless, it is not easy to identify them as the result demonstrated. They might be right about the difficulty of detecting them because new moral issues occur in a fast-changing environment (Stoeckle, 2018; Schauster and Neill, 2017). Interestingly, less young/prospective PR practitioners reported moral concerns regarding big data use, and profiling and targeting of audiences than expected, even though they do not incorporate privacy and acceptance from audiences into the communication management process (Wiesenberg, 2017).

Considering the knowledge level of the participants reported above, young/prospective PR practitioners should address ethical challenges more resulting from digital practices by looking at some real-world cases taking place in the profession. PR experts generally face various ethical

challenges depending on the sector of organizations they work for or provide consultancy to, the corporate culture, the political structure of the countries they are in, the dynamics of the sector itself, etc.

Additionally, according to the results of recent studies in the public relations literature based on ethics and digital resources used in the sector, PR professionals have faced different sorts of ethical challenges and their frequency has increased year by year. Nevertheless, they implicitly associated the increase with digital practices, and have not made a comparison between ethical challenges. This might be important, as the digital transformation is on organizations' and the profession's agenda for better communication, as highlighted in the literature.

However, the respective study indicated that young/prospective PR practitioners were less worried about the difficulty of moral issues originating from digital tactics of PR compared to others. This might be interpreted either by the fact that most of them have no experience yet or the way that ethical issues might not be included in the curricula of their studies. On the one hand, it can also be explained by a few studies that make exemplary comparisons on this subject. It is recommended future research should deepen this issue. Besides, most of the respondents found it difficult to identify moral issues resulting from digital PR tactics, yet, they are not as ethically challenging to deal with as other issues to be. One reason might be that either most of the students have not attended any ethical course, or the course they took does not cover entirely ethics, instead, are being reduced to some units regarding ethics. As a study found a significant result between attending ethics courses and identifying ethical issues among alumnes (Gale & Bunton, 2005). While today's stakeholders and public are now questioning the ethical performance of organizations more, there are some instruments to avoid ethical problems for PR experts. Among these instruments, which one is more effective has been the subject of many studies. However, with the arise of the internet and the new developments it brought to the profession, it has been frequently discussed that codes of ethics for old ethical issues are not applicable to today's one, as highlighted in the literature (Bowen et al., 2006; Kruckeberg, 1993).

Another highly addressed resource which PR professionals rely on in the literature is ethical training. However, the adequacy and scope of the education given in the face of ethical issues is another phenomenon (Haefner, 1997). On the other hand, Lee et al. (2012) found some organizations and colleges did not provide training to PR practitioners with regard to ethics.

Even though ethics can be understood as “an external set of rules” (Fitch, p.12 2013), personal values have been considered equal to public relations (Tilley 2005) and more direct guidelines (Bowen, 2004a; Parkinson, 2001). Besides, a study (Fitch, 2013)revealed that ethics were associated with something personal, social, and professional by students. This study found that young/prospective PR practitioners ranked these resources on a high level when it comes to ethical issues in the digital sphere. Nevertheless, personal related resources were more important to them than external.

As it is known, ethical difficulties can be dimensioned as a result of dramatic changes. Some studies reached some results associating the readiness or skills of students for dealing with ethical challenges in the face of changes with experience or training. Accordingly, more than half of the students were confident about adapting to dramatic change and dealing with ethical dilemmas at work, referring to their educational background (Global Communication Report, 2018). However, the result of this study have revealed that young/prospective PR practitioners felt unprepared for such a task which has emerged as a result of digital practices. Along with that, considering that the profession should offer ethical consulting services (Neill, 2016) and “ethics counsel will be a critical skill for the future” (Global Communication Report, 2018), educators should address ethical issues more and enrich the course content with case studies so that students can gain confidence in this matter.

As stated in the literature, many ethical difficulties may arise from the use of digital practices in the field. Also, with the increase in the dominance of digitalization in the profession, it might become more difficult to exhibit ethical behavior, as the frequency of ethical issues has increased yearly (Zerfass et al., 2020; Meng, et al. 2022). In parallel with this assumption, Wiener & Einwiller (2016) concluded with their study based on PR practitioners' opinions that one of the greatest ethical challenges in the profession is considered digitalization and the diverse economic opportunities associated with it. Therefore, some researchers have recommended applying digital tools in an ethical manner, caring for others' privacy (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014). Nevertheless, this assumption might overlook the economic pressures digitalization has laid on practitioners. In addition to that, the importance of ethics for PR professionals may change in the face of other factors such as economic, personal, and employer interests.

The duties and roles of PR practitioners are a frequent topic of discussion in the literature. While some attribute social values, others (Koehn, 1994, p. 15) prioritize customers. However, the clause of the code of Athens claims that public and client interests should be balanced: “To act,

in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties involved; both the interests of the organisation which the practitioner serves and the interests of the publics concerned” (IPRA, 2009, p.2)

If it is necessary to conclude about the importance of ethics based on how public relations ethics is perceived by students, in a study, most of them associated ethics with the negotiation process between professionals' responsibilities on the axis of stakeholders, customer/employer, and society (Fitch, 2013). This inference is more or less similar to Austin and Pinkleton's assessment of PR professionals' roles (Austin, & Toth, 2011). For them, PR actors establish a connection between an organization and those who are in association with it, such as employees, investors, and customers.

The current study indicates that, in digital PR work, other factors such as personal, social, and economical might be more important than moral values. However, it is not clear in what direction these tendencies will proceed in working life. Therefore, other options may dominate more. Codes of ethics introduced by professional associations are acknowledged by some scholars that they foster responsibility, profession, reliability, and well-intention in the industry (Bowen, 2008). Therefore, it is believed that PR experts employ these codes. In addition to the examination of the effectiveness of ethical codes by many researchers, the awareness of the codes expected to provide solutions to ethical problems at the level of practitioners also emerges as another phenomenon.

Some studies have already revealed that codes of ethics are barely or not known among PR professionals (Spatzier, 2014). Generally speaking, most of the codes of ethics introduced by the profession are not known well among young/prospective communication practitioners. Respondents identified just several codes of ethics as known by name or regards content. Either most of them know them by their names or they have no idea about what they are. The fact that some codes are not known exactly or in terms of content indicates more cooperation between universities and associations that introduce ethical codes.

Taken all together, the fact that students both put their education at the end as a reference on ethical issues and that they find it difficult to identify ethical challenges within the framework of their education indicates that ethical training does not provide them with the necessary equipment in this regard.

5.2. Practical implications

Many studies point out the importance of ethics education in the development of students' pre-professional ethical understanding and their professional ethical behavior in working life (Burke et al, 1998). According to observations on the curriculum of educational institutions on their websites, only four institutions in Austria offer course content on ethics. The rest either do not have any courses regarding ethics or are presented within the course content of general public relations. Also, it is not known exactly whether these include ethics for digital communication. Considering that “each of these practices has its own special ethic” (Koehn, 1994, p. 8), profession-specific ethics should also be addressed before newcomers enter the profession. Similarly, the Commission on Public Relations Education has long called educators and education institutions that “professional ethics must not only be integrated into all coursework in public relations but must also be given priority as a discrete component of the public relations curriculum” (CPRE, 2006, p. 23). Further, outcomes from the current study highlight the importance of Hagelstein et al’ call that “Structured training programs and ethics courses in graduate programs are needed to enhance practitioners’ ethical knowledge” (2020, p. 1)

In addition, organizations, trainers, and professional organizations should undertake a mission to develop newcomers' understanding of ethics in the profession, as ethics can be embraced at work by providing ethics training (Bowen, 2004, Lee and Cheng, 2012, Neill, 2016). The scope of courses can be equipped with “real-world examples as powerful teaching tools” (Gallicano and Kelli, 2016, p. 92) and “past campaigns and practices” (McInerny, 1997, p. 47), as well as unethical cases originating from digital PR practices.

Several studies (Valentini, 2015, p. 175; Erjavec & Kovacic, 2010; Kim et al., 2001) have indicated that publics cannot distinguish sponsored content from news, therefore, they become misinformed. To reach audiences and stakeholders, the appetite for online and digital practices has increased in the profession, and it tends to keep going (Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 73; Global Communications Report, 2016, p. 6). In addition, studies indicate that the dominance of classical media is decreasing. In this case, it can be interpreted that ethical problems originating from the digital field will increase in the sector. Considering the prognoses that the use of this and similar applications will increase even more within the field (Zerfass, 2019), this situation may become more evident in the coming phase.

Considering the familiarity of students with digital applications and the fact that they will gain strategic communication skills over time, it can be argued that they will transform the dynamics of the sector. Apart from these, results indicate more cooperations between educational

institutions and professional association PRVA to raise awareness of students on codes of ethics, to prepare them for dealing with ethical issues and for identifying them.

5.3. Limitations

Besides this study offers promising implications for scholars, educators, PR actors, and public relations associations examining the aspect of students on digital PR practices in terms of ethics, it has also some limitations. To begin with, the survey sample does not rely on a representative sample, because the population parameters are not known. Therefore, the findings do not allow to make generalizations about all students in Austria. In addition, the absence of participation from two educational institutions can also be seen as a research gap. Furthermore, results do not allow to make some demographic implications, such as gender, experienced and inexperienced, due to the inconsistency of the distribution between groups.

Subsequently, outcomes are based on responses from the survey, not real perceptions of students. Survey questions and responses may have remained limited to some particular aspects or may have had a directing structure. Some students should have been also interviewed to get their actual aspects. For example, students identified more ethical problems related to the use of some digital tactics of PR, however, deeper insights are needed to find out why they reported some practices are more problematic than others in terms of ethics.

Ultimately, although, observations made are that most institutions do not provide a separate course on ethics, the survey questions do not seek out finding information about whether any ethics course is provided to students or not, and whether they are satisfied with the extent of ethical courses if exist. This is important because students indicated that they rely on other resources more when they face any ethical issue on a digital outlet. There is no information based on the opinions of the students, apart from the interpretive inference, regarding the reason for the ethical training to be at a lower level than the others.

Suggestions

- This study focuses on only students in Austria, future studies should examine how students from other countries approach the theme.
- Future researchers can replicate and update this study by including other digital practices used in the field, such as artificial intelligence and upcoming developments.
- Future studies may include master students and alumnis in the sample and examine the subject from a wider perspective.

Also, it should be borne in mind that students' answers are based on inferences over the facts they have not yet encountered and experienced. How they approach an ethical problem that they will encounter in practice may vary according to the multiple interests of parties and theirs, because “ethical perspectives can change quickly in this evolving digital communication environment” (Meng et al., 2022, p.12).

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6. **Appendix**

7.1. *Abstract*

7.1.1 *Abstract (English)*

Recently, digitalization has been one of the most talked-about topics in public relations literature and the profession. It is argued that “..... digital communication and social media has tremendously reshaped public relations practice since the emergence of various digital tools and platforms” (Meng et al., 2022, p. 3). Digital tools and practices employed mostly in the profession are sponsored content, social media influencer communication, public wikis, social bots, and big data (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

It has been discussed by scholars and practitioners in recent years whether the use of such practices for communication targets causes ethical issues. And yet, there are few studies on how students who grew up with digital tools, even born into digitalization, evaluate these practices from an ethical perspective. The master thesis deals with this question first, then expands the spectrum of ethics, ranging from resources to overcome digital practices-based ethical issues, to their preparedness status for tackling them, as well as their identifying level of ethical issues and awareness of particular codes of ethics.

The attitudes of 165 students who are studying at universities and universities of applied science in Austria towards these topics were measured in an online survey through 6 research questions created within the scope of the master's thesis.

Results indicates;

- Although the level of knowledge of the students on digital tactics used in the sector is relatively low, they identify high levels of ethical elements in almost all of them, except for two digital practices, paying social media influencers, and profiling and targeting audiences.
- They even find some practices more ethically problematic than PR experts who participated in the ECM 2020 survey.

- More than half of the students find it difficult to identify ethical challenges and overcome ethical issues arising from PR activities carried out through digital practices in the online area. However, this task is as not difficult as compared to PR activities for companies that produce potentially harmful products, finding a balance between interests of clients/employers and public in a crisis, and combating misinformation.
- Although personal experience is prioritized, preferences show that young/prospective PR practitioners consider many resources in dealing with ethical issues.
- Only less than a third feel ready for such a difficult task.
- Only one-third of young/prospective PR practitioners prioritize moral values in their online communication activities. Although the other options are lower than this item which indicates the importance of ethics, in general, the majority of the students put interests above moral values.
- The level of awareness of the students towards ethical codes in the profession by content is low, generally, they either know it by name or have never heard of it.

The results can be interpreted as that ethical training is insufficient to prepare young/prospective PR practitioners to deal with market conditions, especially ethical problems arising from digital PR tactics, and to identify ethical challenges and issues. Results, also, call for transferring ethical guidelines to students and reviewing ethics education in a way that will include the importance of ethics and its implications for long-term communication goals, and equip and encourage students to deal with general ethical challenges, not just online sources. More cooperation between professional bodies and educational institutions is needed.

Addressing the issue from the perspectives of young/prospective PR practitioners, who are called digital natives, offers many benefits for scholars, educators, organizations, and professional associations.

7.1.2 Abstract (German)

Die Digitalisierung war in den letzten Jahren eines der meistdiskutierten Themen in der Öffentlichkeitsarbeit. Es wird argumentiert, dass „die Rolle der digitalen Kommunikation und der sozialen Medien die PR-Praxis seit dem Aufkommen verschiedener digitaler Tools und Plattformen enorm verändert hat“ (Meng et al., 2022, S. 3). Digitale Tools und Praktiken, die hauptsächlich im Beruf eingesetzt werden, sind gesponserte Inhalte, Influencer-Kommunikation in sozialen Medien, öffentliche Wikis, soziale Bots und Big Data (Hagelstein et al., 2021).

In den letzten Jahren wurde von Wissenschaftlern und Praktikern diskutiert, ob die Verwendung solcher Praktiken für Kommunikationsziele ethische Fragen aufwirft. Dennoch gibt es nur wenige Studien darüber, wie Studenten, die mit digitalen Tools aufgewachsen sind, sogar hineingeboren wurden, diese Praktiken aus ethischer Perspektive bewerten. Die Masterarbeit befasst sich zunächst mit dieser Frage und erweitert dann das Spektrum der Ethik, das von Ressourcen zur Bewältigung digitaler praktikenbasierter ethischer Probleme über ihren Bereitschaftsstatus zu deren Bewältigung bis hin zu ihrer Identifizierung von ethischen Problemen und dem Bewusstsein für bestimmte Kodizes reicht der Ethik.

Die Einstellungen von 165 Studierenden, die an Universitäten und Fachhochschulen in Österreich studieren, zu diesen Themen wurden in einer Online-Befragung anhand von 6 im Rahmen der Masterarbeit erstellten Forschungsfragen gemessen.

Ergebnisse zeigen an;

- Obwohl der Wissensstand der Studenten über in der Branche verwendete digitale Taktiken relativ gering ist, identifizieren sie in fast allen ein hohes Maß an ethischen Elementen, mit Ausnahme von zwei digitalen Praktiken, der Bezahlung von Social-Media-Influencern und der Profilerstellung und Zielgruppenansprache.
- Sie finden manche Praktiken sogar ethisch problematischer als PR-Experten, die an der ECM 2020-Umfrage teilgenommen haben.
- Mehr als die Hälfte der Studierenden findet es schwierig, ethische Herausforderungen zu erkennen und ethische Probleme zu bewältigen, die sich aus PR-Aktivitäten ergeben, die durch digitale Praktiken im Online-Bereich durchgeführt werden. Diese Aufgabe ist jedoch im Vergleich zu PR-Aktivitäten für Unternehmen, die potenziell schädliche Produkte herstellen, die in einer Krise einen Ausgleich zwischen den Interessen von Kunden/Arbeitgebern und der Öffentlichkeit finden und Fehlinformationen bekämpfen, nicht schwierig.
- Obwohl persönliche Erfahrung priorisiert wird, zeigen Präferenzen, dass junge/angehende PR-Praktiker viele Ressourcen im Umgang mit ethischen Fragen in Betracht ziehen.
- Nur weniger als ein Drittel fühlt sich bereit für eine so schwierige Aufgabe.
- Nur ein Drittel der jungen/angehenden PR-Praktiker priorisieren moralische Werte in ihren Online-Kommunikationsaktivitäten. Obwohl die anderen Optionen niedriger sind als dieses

Item, was auf die Bedeutung der Ethik hinweist, stellt die Mehrheit der Schüler Interessen im Allgemeinen über moralische Werte.

- Das Bewusstsein der Studierenden gegenüber ethischen Kodizes im Beruf ist inhaltlich gering, sie kennen sie in der Regel entweder beim Namen oder haben noch nie davon gehört. Die Ergebnisse können so interpretiert werden, dass ethisches Training nicht ausreicht, um junge/angehende PR-Praktiker darauf vorzubereiten, mit Marktbedingungen umzugehen, insbesondere mit ethischen Problemen, die sich aus digitalen PR-Taktiken ergeben, und um ethische Herausforderungen und Probleme zu identifizieren. Die Ergebnisse fordern auch die Weitergabe ethischer Richtlinien an die Schüler und die Überprüfung der Ethikausbildung in einer Weise, die die Bedeutung der Ethik und ihre Auswirkungen auf langfristige Kommunikationsziele einschließt und die Schüler ausrustet und ermutigt, sich mit allgemeinen ethischen Herausforderungen zu befassen, nicht nur online Quellen. Eine stärkere Zusammenarbeit zwischen Berufsverbänden und Bildungseinrichtungen ist erforderlich.

Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Thema aus der Perspektive junger/angehender PR-Praktiker, die als Digital Natives bezeichnet werden, bietet viele Vorteile für Wissenschaftler, Pädagogen, Organisationen und Berufsverbände.

7.2. The features of generation Z

As students amount to mostly Generation Z, it is highly important to introduce their features, attitudes, and tendencies towards working life. Surpassing Millennials in the nearest future as the most populous generation (Bloomberg News, 2018), Generation Z attaches importance to learning opportunities to improve their skills and tends to learn via online platforms, such as online tutorials, according to the survey of Deloitte (2018) with an attendance of 1,531.

There are, however, some concerns about professional ethics because they have little job experience. Therefore, employers will have to teach Gen Zers regarding work ethic. Apart from that, they have strong ethics as same as companies and they need to convince Gen Zers that their job is consistent with their ethics and values (Deloitte, 2018).

Achievement is one of the most important priorities for them and their tendency for a career within traditional hierarchies is low (Schroth, 2019). As they were born with technology, it is a part of their lives, and they use it in every activity (Lenhart, 2015). According to a survey (Dimensional Research, 2018) with an attendance of 12,000 high school and college students in

17 countries, almost all have used technology as part of their formal education and the majority say that social media can be a valuable tool in the workplace.

7.3. Further Results

Table 6

The difficulty of identifying ethical challenges arising from the use of digital PR practices across semesters

		Levene-Test der		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
		Varianzgleichheit								
				Signifikan		Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz	
		F	z	T	df				Untere	Obere
Level of identification of ethical challenges	Varianzen sind gleich	1.486	.225	-1.272	163	.205	-.191	.150	-.488	.106
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.320	126.508	.189	-.191	.145	-.477	.095

Table 7

The difficulty of identifying ethical challenges arising from the use of digital PR practices across the type of educational institutions

		Levene-Test der		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
		Varianzgleichheit								
				Signifikan		Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz	
		F	Signifikanz	T	df				Untere	Obere
Level of identification of ethical challenges	Varianzen sind gleich	3.961	.048	.303	163	.762	.044	.146	-.244	.333
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.316	158.359	.753	.044	.140	-.233	.322

Table 8

Challenging level of PR activities across the type of educational institutions

		Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
								95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz		
		Signifikanz				Sig. (2-seitig)		Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	Oberer Unterer
		F	z	T	df					
Combating misinformation	Varianzen sind gleich	1.132	.289	.902	163	.369		.126	.140	-.150 .402
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.927	154.190	.356		.126	.136	-.143 .394
Dealing with issues arising from the use of digital PR practices	Varianzen sind gleich	4.351	.039	-.525	163	.601		-.073	.140	-.350 .203
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.547	158.735	.585		-.073	.134	-.339 .192
Balance the interests of clients/employers	Varianzen sind gleich	2.693	.103	-.319	163	.750		-.050	.158	-.362 .261
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.331	156.841	.741		-.050	.152	-.352 .251
Conducting PR work for companies that manufacture potentially harmful products	Varianzen sind gleich	8.005	.005	1.848	163	.066		.305	.165	-.021 .631
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			1.970	162.834	.051		.305	.155	-.001 .611

Table 9

Resources to deal with ethical issues across semesters

		Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
								95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz		
		Signifikanz				Sig. (2-seitig)		Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	Oberer Unterer
		F	z	T	df					
Codes of ethics	Varianzen sind gleich	.012	.913	-.073	163	.942		-.011	.153	-.313 .291

	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.074	118.688	.941	-.011	.151	-.310	.287
Ethical training	Varianzen sind gleich	5.454	.021	1.545	163	.124	.258	.167	-.072	.587
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			1.429	92.288	.156	.258	.180	-.100	.616
Personal (professional) experience	Varianzen sind gleich	2.697	.102	-1.740	163	.084	-.260	.149	-.554	.035
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.861	136.977	.065	-.260	.140	-.536	.016
Personal values and beliefs	Varianzen sind gleich	1.189	.277	-.480	163	.632	-.085	.178	-.436	.266
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.498	126.639	.619	-.085	.171	-.424	.253

Table 10

Resources to deal with ethical issues across the type of educational institutions

		Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
								95%		
								Standardfehler der Differenz		
								Konfidenzintervall der Differenz		
								Untere Obere		

and beliefs	Varianzen sind nicht gleich	1.983	161.40	.049	.321	.162	.001	.640
		6						

Table 11

Preparedness level of dealing with ethical challenges in digital PR practice across semesters

		Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit				T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit				
		F	Signifikanz	T	df	Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz	
									Untere	Obere
Preparedness level of dealing with ethical challenges in digital PR practice	Varianzen sind gleich	2.290	.132	-1.152	163	.251	-.172	.149	-.467	.123
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-1.102	100.855	.273	-.172	.156	-.482	.138

Table 12

Preparedness level of dealing with ethical challenges in digital PR practice across the type of educational institutions

		Levene-Test der Varianzgleichheit				T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit				
		F	Signifikanz	T	df	Sig. (2-seitig)	Mittlere Differenz	Standardfehler der Differenz	95% Konfidenzintervall der Differenz	
									Untere	Obere
Preparedness level of dealing with ethical challenges in digital PR practice	Varianzen sind gleich	5.401	.021	1.542	163	.125	.222	.144	-.062	.507
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			1.604	158.391	.111	.222	.139	-.051	.496

Table 13

Awareness level regarding codes of ethics across semesters

		Levene-Test der		T-Test für die Mittelwertgleichheit						
		Varianzgleichheit								
				Signifikan		Sig. (2-		Mittlere	ehler der	95% Konfidenzinterva ll der Differenz
		F	z	T	df	seitig)	Differenz	Differenz	Untere	Ober
Athenener Kodex	Varianzen sind gleich	5.066	.026	1.686	163	.094	.173	.102	-.030	.375
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			1.804	137.27 9	.073	.173	.096	-.017	.362
Lissabonner Kodex	Varianzen sind gleich	.513	.475	-.058	163	.954	-.006	.110	-.224	.211
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.059	119.64 0	.953	-.006	.108	-.221	.208
Ehrenkodex des PRVA	Varianzen sind gleich	.040	.841	.553	163	.581	.076	.137	-.194	.345
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.553	114.25 5	.581	.076	.136	-.195	.346
PR Online Kodex des PR Ethik Rats	Varianzen sind gleich	.453	.502	.796	163	.427	.099	.125	-.147	.346
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			.776	106.29 4	.439	.099	.128	-.154	.353
Content Marketing Kodex des PR Ethik Rats	Varianzen sind gleich	.733	.393	-.104	163	.917	-.012	.117	-.243	.219
	Varianzen sind nicht gleich			-.102	106.94 4	.919	-.012	.120	-.250	.225

7.4. Questionnaire

Online-Befragung zu digitalen PR-Praktiken

Sehr geehrte Teilnehmer*innen,

in dieser Befragung, die ich im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit durchführe, geht es um digitale PR-Praktiken und deren mögliche ethische Herausforderungen. Dabei gibt es keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten, alles was zählt ist Ihre persönliche Meinung. Die Beantwortung der Fragen nimmt maximal 10 Minuten in Anspruch.

Alle Angaben werden streng vertraulich behandelt, anonymisiert ausgewertet, ausschließlich für wissenschaftliche Zwecke verwendet und nicht an Dritte weitergegeben.

Bitte lesen Sie sich die folgende Datenschutzmitteilung durch und klicken Sie danach auf „JA“, wenn Sie an der Befragung teilnehmen möchten.

Diese Befragung wird im Zuge der Abfassung einer wissenschaftlichen Masterarbeit an der Universität Wien erstellt. Die Daten werden auf Grundlage der gesetzlichen Bestimmungen (§ 2f Abs 5 FOG) erhoben und verarbeitet und können von der Lehrveranstaltungsleitung bzw. von dem/der Betreuer/in bzw. Begutachter/in der wissenschaftlichen Arbeit für Zwecke der Leistungsbeurteilung eingesehen werden. Die erhobenen Daten dürfen gemäß Art 89 Abs 1 DSGVO grundsätzlich unbeschränkt gespeichert werden.

Es besteht das Recht auf Auskunft durch den/die Verantwortlichen an dieser Studie über die erhobenen personenbezogenen Daten sowie das Recht auf Berichtigung, Löschung, Einschränkung der Verarbeitung der Daten sowie ein Widerspruchsrecht gegen die Verarbeitung sowie des Rechts auf Datenübertragbarkeit.

Wenn Sie Fragen zu dieser Erhebung haben, wenden Sie sich bitte gern an den Verantwortlichen dieser Untersuchung: Bekir Sitki ÖNDİN (a11721031@unet.univie.ac.at), Student/in der Studienrichtung Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft an der Universität Wien.

Für grundsätzliche juristische Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der DSGVO/FOG und studentischer Forschung wenden Sie sich an den Datenschutzbeauftragten der Universität Wien, Dr. Daniel Stanonik, LL.M. (verarbeitungsverzeichnis@univie.ac.at). Zudem besteht das Recht der Beschwerde bei der Datenschutzbehörde (bspw. über dsb@dsb.gv.at).

Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit nehmen, an dieser Befragung teilzunehmen.

1) Wie gut kennen Sie sich mit digitalen Anwendungen für die Onlinekommunikation aus, also mit Social Media Anwendungen wie Instagram, Twitter, Youtube etc.?

1 „gar nicht“ --- 5 „sehr gut“

2) In der PR-Arbeit werden viele digitale Anwendungen und Praktiken eingesetzt wie z.B. Social Bots, Big Data, Gesponserte Inhalte. Wie gut kennen Sie sich mit digitalen Anwendungen und Praktiken aus, die in der PR- Arbeit eingesetzt werden?

1 “gar nicht” ---- 5 “sehr gut”

3) Wie ethisch herausfordernd oder problematisch finden Sie die folgenden digitalen PR-Praktiken?

1 “ethisch gar nicht problematisch” ---- 5 “ethisch extrem problematisch”

o Auswerten der persönlichen Daten von Zielgruppen mit Hilfe von Big-Data Analysen

- o Profiling und gezielte Ansprache von Zielgruppen auf der Grundlage von Alter, Geschlecht, ethnischer Herkunft, Beruf oder Interessen
- o Verwendung von gesponserten Beiträgen in sozialen Medien und gesponserten Artikeln auf Nachrichten-Websites, die wie reguläre Inhalte aussehen
- o Motivieren von Mitarbeitenden Unternehmensbotschaften auf ihren privaten Social-Media-Kanälen zu verbreiten
- o Einsatz von Bots zur Generierung von Feedback und Followern in sozialen Medien
- o Bearbeitung von Einträgen über die eigene Organisation in öffentlichen Wikis (z.B. Wikipedia)
- o Bezahlen von Social-Media-Influencern für positive Kommunikation

4) In der Wissenschaft und Praxis nimmt das Interesse an digitalen PR-Praktiken zu, allerdings besteht die Sorge, dass durch deren Einsatz auch einige ethische Herausforderungen entstehen.

Basierend auf Ihren persönlichen Erfahrungen und Ihrer Ausbildung, für wie schwierig halten Sie die Identifizierung von ethischen Herausforderungen, die durch den Einsatz digitaler PR-Praktiken entstehen?

1 „gar nicht schwierig“ ---- 5 „sehr schwierig“

5) Auf einer Skala von 1 „gar nicht herausfordernd“ bis 5 „sehr herausfordernd“, für wie herausfordernd halten Sie folgende Tätigkeiten in der PR-Praxis?

- Bekämpfung von Falschinformationen
- Umgang mit Problemen, die sich aus der Nutzung digitaler PR-Praktiken ergeben
- Faires Abwägen der Interessen von Auftrag-/Arbeitgebern einerseits und Öffentlichkeit andererseits im Fall einer Krise
- Betreiben von PR-Arbeit für Firmen, die potenziell schädigende Produkte herstellen (z.B. Tabak, Waffen)

6) Angenommen, Sie würden sich ethischen Herausforderungen in der digitalen PR-Praxis gegenübersehen, auf welche der folgenden Ressourcen würden Sie zurückgreifen, um die ethischen Herausforderungen zu bewältigen?

Jeweils Skala 1 „nein, sicher nicht“ ----- 5 „ja, ganz bestimmt“

- o Ethik-Kodizes der PR-Branche
- o Ethik-Trainings (z.B. aus Studium)

- o Meine persönliche (Berufs-)Erfahrung
- o Meine persönlichen Werte und Überzeugungen
- o Sonstiges

7) Wie gut sehen Sie sich für den Umgang mit ethischen Herausforderungen in der digitalen PR-Praxis vorbereitet?

1 "gar nicht vorbereitet" -----5 "sehr gut vorbereitet"

8) Durch was würden Sie sich bei Ihrer digitalen PR-Arbeit vor allem leiten lassen?

Bitte wählen Sie eine der folgenden Antwortmöglichkeiten.

- o Meine moralischen Wertvorstellungen
- o Meine persönlichen Interessen
- o Das Interesse meines Auftraggebers oder meines Arbeitgebers
- o Die Interessen der allgemeinen Öffentlichkeit
- o Die Interessen der Zielgruppen der Kommunikation

9) Welche PR-Ethik-Kodizes kennen Sie namentlich und / oder inhaltlich?

Jeweils

- * nicht bekannt
- * kenne ich nur dem Namen nach
- * kenne ich auch inhaltlich

- o Code of Athens/Athener Kodex,
- o Code of Lisbon/Lissabonner Kodex,
- o Ehrenkodex des PRVA,
- o PR-Online-Kodex des österr. PR-Ethik-Rats
- o Content-Marketing-Kodex des österr. PR-Ethik-Rats

10) Haben Sie berufliche Erfahrung im PR-Bereich? Wenn ja, wie viele Jahre haben Sie bereits Erfahrung im PR-Bereich gesammelt?

- O nein, ich habe noch keine Erfahrung im PR-Bereich
- Ja, ich habe Erfahrung von ...
- O weniger als einem Jahr
- O 1-2 Jahren
- O 3-4 Jahren

O mehr als 5 Jahren

11) Sie sind ...

- ☐ Weiblich
- ☐ Männlich
- ☐ Divers

12) In welchem Hochschulsesemester befinden Sie sich zur Zeit?

- ☐ 1.-2.
- ☐ 3.-4.
- ☐ 5.-6.
- ☐ 7 oder höher

13) An welcher Hochschule oder Universität studieren Sie?

14) Wie alt sind Sie?

7.5. Some details regarding educational institutions

- **University of Wien:**

Department: Journalism and Communication Science

<https://studieren.univie.ac.at/studienangebot/bachelor-und-diplomstudien/publizistik-und-kommunikationswissenschaft-bachelor-mit-aufnahmeverfahren/>

Study places: 2.295

Course:

- Theory and practice of social media communication A

<https://ufind.univie.ac.at/de/course.html?lv=220022&semester=2022S>

- Theory and practice of social media communication B

<https://ufind.univie.ac.at/de/course.html?lv=220020&semester=2022S>

- Communication Ethics

<https://ufind.univie.ac.at/de/course.html?lv=220026&semester=2022S>

Note: There is a lecture on ethics and a theoretical reading seems to be carried out. It doesn't seem to cover digital practices or social media.

Curriculum:

https://senat.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/s_senat/konsolidierte_Bachelorcurricula/BA_Publizistik_und_Kommunikationswissenschaft.pdf

- **The university of applied sciences upper Austria:**

Department: Communication and Knowledge Media

Study places: 30

Not: No course content related to ethics was encountered. It may also be given only in context under another course.

Curriculum:

https://www.fh-ooe.at/fileadmin/user_upload/filelist/stg/hagenberg/docs/fhooe-kwm-infoblatt.pdf

- **The university of applied sciences Joanneum:**

Department: Journalism and Public Relations

<https://www.fh-joanneum.at/journalismus-und-public-relations/bachelor/>

Study places: no information

Course:

Social Media Communication, Medientheorien und Medienkritik

Not: There is no course content on ethics has been found. It may also be given only in the context under another course.

Curriculum:

<https://www.fh-joanneum.at/journalismus-und-public-relations/bachelor/im-studium/studienplan/>

- **The university of applied sciences St. Pölten:**

Department: Marketing & Communication

<https://www.fhstp.ac.at/de/studium-weiterbildung/digital-business-innovation/marketing-und-kommunikation-bachelor>

Study places: 60

Course:

Digital Marketing & Social Media

Note: There is a course on digital applications, but no course content on ethics has been found. It may also be given only in the context under another course.

Curriculum:

<https://www.fhstp.ac.at/de/studium-weiterbildung/digital-business-innovation/marketing-und-kommunikation-bachelor/studieninhalte#/>

- **The university of applied sciences Wiener Neustadt**

Department: Journalism & Corporate Communications (German)

<https://www.fhwn.ac.at/studiengang/journalismus-unternehmenskommunikation#study-insight>

Study places: 25

Note: Ethics is covered in a single course content

Course: Medienethik

Curriculum:

<https://www.fhwn.ac.at/studiengang/journalismus-unternehmenskommunikation#curriculum>

- **The university of applied sciences FH Wien**

Department: Corporate Communication (English)

<https://www.fh-wien.ac.at/en/study/bachelor/corporate-communication/>

Study places: 34

Note: Ethical content is included in the content of another course.

Course: Fields of Corporate Communication (PR & Internal Communication, Ethics, Marketing & Advertising, Market Research)

Curriculum:

<https://www.fh-wien.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/bachelor-corporate-communication-infofolder.pdf>

Kommunikationswirtschaft (Deutsch)

<https://www.fh-wien.ac.at/studium/bachelor/kommunikationswirtschaft/>

Study places: 68

Not: Ethical content is included in the content of another course.

Course: Fields of Corporate Communication (PR & Internal Communication, Ethics, Marketing & Advertising, Market Research)

Curriculum:

<https://www.fh-wien.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/bachelor-kommunikationswirtschaft-infolder.pdf>

- **Paris Lodron Universität Salzburg**

Faculty:

<https://www.plus.ac.at/studium/studienangebot/bachelor-und-diplomstudien/bachelorstudien/kommunikationswissenschaft-2/>

Note: There is a course that specifically addresses the social and individual challenges of digitalization.

Course: Medienfrustrationen. Wenn Digitalisierung für Gesellschaft und Individuum zur Herausforderung wird

https://online.uni-salzburg.at/plus_online/wbLv.wbShowLVDetail?pStpSpNr=581873

Curriculum:

<https://im.sbg.ac.at/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=87766000&preview=/87766000/87766448/kg7a31sbIBttsmOJ.pdf>

- **The university of applied sciences Burgenland**

Department: Information, Media & Communication

<https://www.fh-burgenland.at/studieren/bachelor-studiengaenge/bakk-information-medien-kommunikation/>

Study places: 50

Course: Social Media, Data Analytics, Digital Media, Digitalisierung

Note: There are intensive digital media courses, but no course on ethics has been encountered.

Curriculum:

<https://www.fh-burgenland.at/studieren/bachelor-studiengaenge/bakk-information-medien-kommunikation/lehrveranstaltungen/#c13534>