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Public relations practitioners' attitudes towards the ethical use of social media in Portuguese speaking countries

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ABSTRACT

Based on Toledano and Avidar (2016) method and questionnaire statements, and inspired by its theory, this paper focuses on studies about internet-related public relations from an ethical standpoint. As such, this study's objective is to assess the attitudes of public relations practitioners (PRs) while using social media professionally, identifying some ethical issues and the implications of their perceptions, by means of a quantitative study supported by an online survey. A questionnaire, which included thirteen attitude statements related to transparency, authenticity, truthfulness and respect for competition, plus five demographic questions, has been applied to PRs from Portugal and Brazil. Research questions include concerns about PRs' attitudes towards ethically acceptable or non-acceptable online public relations practices and the influence of socio-cultural environments, namely, of countries' human freedoms respect and levels of transparency in PRs' ethical attitudes. Results show no significant differences between practitioners from Portugal and Brazil. Portuguese and Brazilian PRs share common cultural attributes that might explain similar perceptions around professional ethics. As for ethical dimensions, authenticity and transparency are not vehemently defended in both countries.

1. Introduction

Research on internet-related public relations has been improving in recent years, with an increasing number of published articles (Duhé, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012). Despite the possible outdated of Ye and Ki's study (2012), it seems safe to state that online public relations research still lacks applied theoretical framework (symmetry and dialogic theories are still predominant), in-depth qualitative studies are scarce and there is a concentration of studies on the use of digital platforms rather than a critical analysis of its effects and ways to improve the medium.

Furthermore, most of the research conducted so far has attempted to provide recommendations to practitioners on how to take advantage of these technologies to help organisations build relationships, solve problems, and enact socially responsible goals. Rational arguments include the need for ethical behaviour (e.g. Brown, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012), seen as a notable concern of social media research in public relations (Duhé, 2015).

Bearing this lack of reflective research, this study is a contribution to the understanding of internet-related public relations from an ethical standpoint considering pr practices in different cultural environments and, in particular, in the Portuguese speaking cultural context. This paper does not intend to present a discussion about the ontology of ethics and ethical behaviour (e.g. Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2016, p. 5), but to shed light on the perceived importance of this kind of behaviour while using social media in public relations practice of different countries. Ethics is, as such, considered specifically among perceptions of communication

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practices previously selected by [Toledano and Avidar \(2016\)](#). For the purpose of this article, social media include profiles in social media networks (such as *facebook*, *instagram*, *twitter*, among others); channels in online video platforms (like *youtube*, *vimeo*, and others) and weblogs.

The article is organized as follows: literature review on social media and public relations and online public relations ethics; characterization of Portugal and Brazil's transparency and human freedoms respect for the understanding of cultural and social environments and their possible influence on ethics perception by public relations professionals; and description of both countries public relations consultancy's market and internet use. These countries have a common history and are both part of the "Lusophone cultural context" because of their Portuguese-speaking language matrix. Still, different geographical and cultural processes may make them socially distinct. Results are presented and discussed using data collected from applied surveys and existing theoretical contributes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and public relations

Social media and online platforms integration into organisational communication strategies has been intensively discussed over these past years. Social media research is even considered as one of the most prolific for communication studies despite its limited intellectual diversity and somehow a theoretical nature ([Osch & Coursaris, 2014, 2015](#)). The focus of research has shifted from a normative standpoint related to more symmetrical and dialogical communication theoretical approaches (e.g. [Brown, 2009](#); [Duhé, 2012](#); [Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#); [Kent & Taylor, 1998](#); [Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003](#); [Wright, 2001](#)) towards rational arguments about benefits, limits and structural prerequisites of online strategies (e.g. [Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011](#); [Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012](#); [Treem & Leonardi, 2012](#)) and empirical studies about online practices (e.g. [Gilpin, 2010](#); [Einwiller & Steilen, 2015](#); [Kim, Park, & Wertz, 2010](#); [Men & Tsai, 2012](#)).

Although the literature (e.g. [Diga & Kelleher, 2009](#); [Wright & Hinson, 2015](#)) and cross-national studies (such as ECOPSI ([Tench et al., 2013](#)) and ECM ([Zerfass et al., 2014](#))) indicate that practitioners demonstrate awareness and knowledge of social media and its principles, organisations generally fail to make efficient and effective use of the potential for two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue, that may be seen as "one of the most ethical forms of communication", allowing to separate truth from falsehood, requiring honesty and equality between objects ([Kent & Taylor, 2002](#); p. 22). There are difficulties in dialogic engagement, mutuality of commitment and interest, since organizations tend to have a predetermined outcome, raising questions of continuity, trust and authenticity. Thus, online platforms are failing their dialogical and symmetrical potential (e.g. [Kent & Taylor, 1998](#); [McAllister-Spooner, 2009](#)). Media are, first of all, techno-social systems: the "technological level of artefacts" enables and constrains "a social level of activities that create knowledge" to be "produced, diffused and consumed with the help of the artefacts" ([Fuchs, 2014](#); p. 37).

In the last years, it has been acknowledged that, technically, social media offer many opportunities to engage with internet users, supporting communication, sharing content and promoting dialogue, but they are not automatically dialogical since organizations may not convey the features of mutuality, propinquity, empathy or even commitment ([Kent & Taylor, 2002](#)). Social media may promote "quick, fast, instant conversations" and keep "relationships at a more superficial level" ([Goldstraw, 2015](#); p. 354), but not all organisations want or must use it. Some organisations do not have the resources or the adequate structures to engage; others do not have a branch or a culture to promote dialogic communication; also, dialogue may not be the best way of communication for some organisations ([Young, 2015](#)) or the risk may be too high. Besides "social media is not an adequate media relations tool to use in isolation, but should be utilized as part of a mixture of communication methods" ([Goldstraw, 2015](#); p. 355). Even so, "social media cannot be managed by avoidance" nor all organisations must have a social media profile, but "systematic monitoring" of its social media mentions is mandatory because of risks social media "poses for the management of corporate identity" ([Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016](#), p. 36). Finally, the use of social media is affected by the kind and nature of organisations, their power structure, and "contradictory continuities and discontinuities" ([Fuchs, 2014](#); p. 43) that shape each social and cultural environment where organisations operate.

The potential and the way social media tools are used in the communicative realm and in public relations practice have caught the attention of several scholars with more or less optimistic approaches ([Valentini, 2015](#)). Despite criticism, a more recent study developed with Israeli PRs highlights that, since 2010 and with the economic crisis of traditional media, the blogosphere tends to be used by PRs as a channel to showcase matters on specific areas, such as: lifestyle, entertainment, cosmetics, tourism and culture. Bloggers are willing to cooperate with PRs in exchange of financial and social compensation, abdicating of their independence and accepting PRs' control over weblog content ([Lahav & Roth-Cohen, 2016](#)). Comparing [Kent's \(2008\)](#) conclusions with [Lahav and Roth-Cohen's \(2016\)](#) and following diffusion of innovations theory ([Rogers, 1962/2003](#)), PRs and bloggers may currently be more prone to accept the change in practice provoked by weblogs. Yet, this acceptance poses ethical concerns that are still lacking discussion.

2.2. Social media and ethics

As previously stated, social media are mostly studied in the context of their uses, particularly in media relations, and in ascertaining their dialogical potential. Ethical questions remain absent from most studies reviewed ([Duhé, 2015](#); [Vercic, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2014](#)). Some exceptions are: the cross-national discussion about ethical behaviour of PRs using social media developed in New Zealand and Israel by [Toledano and Wolland \(2011\)](#) and by [Toledano and Avidar \(2016\)](#); the case studies and ethical principles guidelines systematics proposed by [Bowen \(2013a, 2013b\)](#) and the same author's and colleagues qualitative study

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