

Factors Influencing the Ethical Conduct of Public Relations Practitioners in Commercial Banks in Namibia

Tawanda Zimanyi

Namibia University of Science and Technology
tawaziman@gmail.com

Rewai Makamani

Namibia University of Science and Technology
&
University of South Africa
rmakamni@nust.na
rmakamani@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines factors that influence the ethical conduct of practising Public Relations (PR) practitioners in commercial banks of Namibia. Such factors relate to the ethical behaviour of Public Relations professionals working in commercial banks. The factors include the presence of binding codes of ethics and conduct, individual moral compasses, pressure from top management, a sense of duty towards humanity, and knowledge of ethics and professionalism. This analysis reveals that PR practitioners face ethical challenges and dilemmas from the banks' dominant coalitions, ambiguous codes of ethics, speedy communication to the public necessitated by the news media, and the clash between the core values that inform the duty of PR professionals and those that prop up organisational culture. Ultimately, the challenges and dilemmas they confront in their work determines the way they conduct themselves ethically. The study conceives that PR practitioners are torn between upholding PR values that inform their duty and standing up for organisational values as advocated for by the dominant coalition. Ironically, PR practitioners are regarded as the ethical conscience of the commercial banks who, as per recommendations of the study, are expected to practise ethically and live up to their mandate of being custodians of ethical communication.

Keywords: Public relations; ethical conduct; law; moral reasoning

Introduction

This study examines the factors that influence the ethical conduct of PR practitioners practising in commercial banks in Namibia. The historical trends which associated Public Relations (PR) with lying, bluffing, spin-doctoring and all kinds of unethical practices lie in the one-way communication models that characterised the early years of PR (Grunig and Hunt 1984).

Notably, the four models of PR as proposed by Grunig and Hunt summarise the historical development of PR. Press agency was a one-way communication type of communication for information dissemination focusing on publicity for persuasion and attention (ibid). Further, the public information was another one-way model of communication for disseminating information from organisations to the public. The two-way asymmetrical model was an imbalanced model of

communication that was much inclined to the persuading of the public by organisations emphasising their own interest at the expense of the public's interest. Finally, the two-way symmetrical model of communication is more balanced in terms of creating mutual understanding and has led to the current definitions of PR (Skinner *et al.* 2007).

The most widely cited definition of PR perceives the concept as the management of communication between an organisation and its public (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). According to the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA), PR is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between the organisation and its public both internally and externally (Skinner *et al.* 2007). The proponents of PR as a field of study and as a management function maintain that PR professionals are the ethics counsellors of the organisation who counsel leadership and sensitise them to public perceptions and their impact on the organisation (Skinner *et al.* 2007).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) substantiate this claim by asserting that PR practitioners should be the conscience for their organisations and that PR as a corporate conscience should be the self-identity of PR practitioners. Furthermore, PR practitioners should deliver timely analysis and recommendations for the effective governance of the stakeholder relationships by enhancing transparency, trustworthy behaviour, authentic and verifiable representation, in the process sustaining the organisation's licence to operate (Newsom *et al.* 2010). PR practitioners have the role of introducing moral values and social responsibility into organisational decisions (*ibid.*). Therefore, PR practitioners should uphold integrity, transparency and honesty among other values, as they practise their profession.

A Historical Overview on Centrality of Ethics to Banking Business

The value of finance and the economy in general as linked to the commercial function of the banking industry can never be overstated. A healthy relationship between commercial banks and the population whose money and wealth they manage largely hinges on mutual understanding and sound relations that are promoted by the Public Relations practitioners. This mutual understanding and working relationship can only be fostered if there is trust and confidence in the way banks communicate with the public. However, not long ago the world's financial system nearly collapsed when this trust and confidence which clients had in the banks was breached. The financial crisis between 2006 and 2008 was a major blow to the fidelity, and trust between the financial institutions and their clients hit an obstacle.

According to the USA Federal Reserve Education (2012), in the autumn of 2008, American banking clients woke up to the collapse of three big financial institutions in the world economy; the Investment Bank for Lehman Brothers, the Savings and Loan Bank and the Washington Mutual. "The extensive web of connections among major financial institutions meant the failure of how one could start a cascade of losses throughout the financial system" (The USA Federal Reserve Education 2012: 35). The consequential fall of the banking industry had far-reaching effects that included the mortgage crisis and the falling of stock markets. This led to the ethical culture of banks being scrutinised. Research like the one titled: *Ethics in the Banking Industry: Identifying the industrial and external factors influencing the behaviour in the industry*, was done by Thiam (2015). Closer to home, the collapse of the SME Bank in Namibia led to the loss of nearly N\$175 million (Menges 2018). Many small businesses and clients who had money in this bank lost their hard-earned cash due to unethical conduct by the bank owners. It is against this backdrop that this research seeks to explore the ethical conduct of PR practitioners who are the link between the banks and the public that they serve. Their duty and mandate is to timely, accurately and truthfully communicate with the public about the financial health of the banks.

Selected commercial banks namely, First National Bank (FNB), Standard Bank and Bank Windhoek were used in the investigation. FNB was established in 1998 out of the union between Rand Merchant Holdings and Anglo-American (FNB 2018). Notably, in Namibia FNB is ranked the top commercial bank in terms of market share, capital adequacy and profitability. On the other hand, Bank Windhoek is ranked the second top commercial bank in Namibia boasting 36 years of trading experience and local roots (Bank Windhoek 2018). Standard Bank (2018), which was opened in this country in 1915 today operates more than fifty-one (51) branches and agencies. Significantly, all three commercial banks have expressed a commitment towards building relationships within the communities they do business with; hence, they have Public Relations or Communication Managers to spearhead such trust. Public relations, marketing communication, advertising and persuasive communication are all important areas in relationship building, and persuasion used in marketing communication aims to find ways to convincingly sell products to markets. Persuasion in advertising aims to believably inform audiences about products with the intent of selling them, just as persuasion used in public relations aims to give positive images to corporations, create mutual understanding and build trust among the public (Adebayo 2018).

Commercial Banks Codes of Ethics

The selected commercial banks have codes of ethics and conduct that spell out the values or principles that they cherish. Standard Bank has a policy document or code of ethics that spells out eight values that define its existence and operations. The values are summarised as eight broad principles namely: growing our people, serving our customers, constantly raising the bar, upholding the highest level of integrity, delivering to our shareholders, being proactive, working in teams and respecting each other (Standard Bank 2018). The bank expects all its employees to live these values by being fair, applying the bank's values and principles constantly, maintaining good corporate governance, sharing accurate information, recognising human integrity, being honest and avoiding conflicts of interest, and combating unethical activities and behaviour (Standard Bank 2018).

FNB (2018) has a policy document that seeks to promote ethical business practices and standards within its ranks and provide a benchmark for all behaviour in the organisation. The bank sees the code of ethics as a provider of clear parameters about acceptable principles among the bank's employees and it acts as an important reference point that facilitates greater empowerment and faster value-based decision-making (ibid). Interestingly, all the selected banks expect their employees by obligation to seek guidance in the face of arising ethical dilemmas and challenges. All employees must comply with the written words and spirit of the code of ethics (FNB 2018). FNB's (2018) values are summarised as 'I am Helpful, I am Effective, I am Ethical, I am Innovative, and I am Accountable'.

Bank Windhoek subscribes to the values of discipline, transparency, independence, accountability, responsibility, fairness and social responsibility (Bank Windhoek 2018). As a commercial bank that is wholly Namibian, it encourages, through its ethics code, a working environment in which loyalty, integrity and trust prevails (ibid). The core values that are the pillars of the bank are documented in books, online and displayed in the working corridors of the banks to act as constant reminders of their importance to all employees.

Perspectives on Ethics in Public Relations

Questions about ethics in PR have been asked by the public, scholars and the business world. Questions such as: Are there ethics in PR? Is ethical PR possible? Are PR practitioners professional? These probing questions have led to research being done on the factors affecting

the ethical practice of PR practitioners within organisations and PR firms. More inquiry has been done regarding the latter than the former. Undoubtedly, the presence of a code of ethics tends to encourage practitioners to uphold ethics in their work and when top management in PR firms and organisations are perceived as strongly supporting the upholding of ethical principles, practitioners are likely to practice ethically (Bowen 2007). In another analysis, Bowen (2007) asserts that although the current PR practise leans heavily on the code of ethics held by professional associations, membership remains voluntary, meaning some practise without belonging to an association.

Of significance is the fact that professional experience rather than academic study comes handy when PR professionals are faced with dilemmas, paying attention to ethics before crisis befalls the organisation and affects the PR practitioners' ethical conduct. Bowen (2007) concluded that being knowledgeable about the value systems of the organisation and knowing one's values you hold and espouse as an individual and as a PR practitioner will have a direct influence on moral reasoning and ethical conduct in the face of ethical dilemmas. Idid and Arandas (2016) found that professionalism and ethics have an influence on the professional values of PR practitioners, and in addition education and length of service both influence professionalism and ethical practice. Further surveys found that few PR practitioners have the educational background or theoretical tools needed to serve as PR professionals (Bowen 2008 as cited in Grunig 2014: 14). This is critical because according to Grunig (2014) most practitioners who participated in the survey thought that PR practitioners should act as a corporate conscience.

For practitioners to do that, they need to be deeply informed about the concept of PR and the theoretical framework under which it works. Therefore, PR and communication professionals have a mandate to define an organisation's character and values and to instil responsible behaviour in individuals and organisations if their role is understood. Thiam (2015) agrees with this claim by asserting that PR practitioners should enhance transparency and trustworthy behaviour with authentic and verifiable representation, thereby sustaining the organisation's licence to operate. On the other hand, Downe, Cowell and Morgan (2016) alluded that the actions of the company leaders can be important in promoting good conduct and fostering an ethical culture in any organisation. These findings have been from research done in different fields, but few have been done on banking, particularly the ethical conduct of PR practitioners working for banks in which many clients put their trust and faith as custodians of their money. Some research was devoted to ethical issues in the banking industry in general especially after the economic crisis or financial crisis of 2007-2008 that saw several trusted or ethical banks collapsing. This present investigation seeks to fill some of the gaps in ethical communication and conduct by PR practitioners in banks.

Birkan (2009) defines a dilemma as a problem in which one is faced with two or more choices all of which are objectionable for one reason or the other. In addition, Lieber (2003) asserts that to be a successful PR practitioner requires making intelligent, split-second decisions on situations laden with ethical dilemmas whether you are working for an agency, corporation, as a solo consultant or for government's public affairs. Providing truthful information, even when it does harm to the reputation of the organisation poses a dilemma to PR professionals. In addition, offering an authentic context is a challenge on its own because an ethical communication offers more than mere facts (ibid). Kirat (2014) asserts that PR ethics consist of values such as honesty, loyalty, social responsibility, respect, fairness, integrity and responsible and forthright communication. As such, these values are tested when PR practitioners advise company leaders on ethical issues. Values may clash or leaders may be contemplating violating company values.

Additionally, Birkan (2009) identified two problems in business; the acute dilemma- when one truly does not know what the right thing to do is and the acute rationalisation when one does know the right thing to do but fails to do it. Kang (2009) substantiated the work on ethical dilemmas faced

by PR practitioners by conducting a survey on ethical conflict and 65.7 per cent of the respondents said that they had experienced ethical conflict or ethical dissonance. Public relations practitioners do not work in a vacuum; they work for people, with the people and through the people. Consequently, they face challenges that a few writers and researchers alike have noted. Bowen (2007) points out that the greatest pressure of PR practitioners comes from the management's misunderstanding of the role of PR. They believe PR always works to represent the company in a positive light. This means lies, manipulation and propaganda would become the business of PR.

Implications for Ethical Theories on Fair Practices by PR Practitioners

Three theories of ethics namely, the ethical theory, the consequential theory and the deontological ethics theory provide insight into the behaviour of PR professionals. According to Daymon and Holloway (2002), a theoretical framework can guide one's research work. Simply put, a theory contributes to the greater body of knowledge when it is re-contextualised into a variety of settings (ibid). The validity, relevance, authenticity and credibility of research work should be backed by a theoretical framework. Its principles could be applied in one's research. For ethical issues, it could be especially valid if all three theories of ethics are used. In making ethical decisions, PR practitioners find themselves drawing principles from the three depending on the two conflicting values that they are faced with.

Ethical Theory

Public relations are not only about building and maintaining relationships between a company and its public. It is a profession that is punctuated with ethical dilemmas and challenges that can only be resolved if ethical knowledge is available to the practising PR practitioners. For PR practitioners to become the corporate conscience or counsellors, they must have a strong foundation of the theoretical knowledge that governs ethical behaviour in the practise of public relations. An in-depth knowledge of these theories is of paramount importance in making rational or ethical decisions in PR. Grunig (2014) asserts that ethical theories of PR provide the principles that PR professionals employ in moral reasoning and decision making, while Day (2006) says that ethics is all about the conflict between equally compelling values and the choices that must be made between them. In other words, when two elements of a value system collide, there is the need to call upon ethical principles to come out of the ethical dissonance.

Bowen (2008) identifies three types of ethics namely, meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. "Meta-ethics examines the meanings of ethical terms such as good, right, wrong, justice among others" (Grunig 2014: 14). This means that they are descriptive in nature, thus they give meaning to the ethical language. On the other hand, applied ethics are the link between the theory and the practice. Plaisance (2009) claims that applied ethics deals with the analysis of moral issues that punctuate both private and public life, while meta-ethics are descriptive, applied normative ethics are prescriptive. Day (2006) supports this claim by pointing out that normative ethics present rules and principles that should give boundaries to practising PR practitioners' behaviour. Many researchers, on ethical conduct and issues in the work of PR practitioners, have used the normative ethics as the theoretical framework for their research work. Plaisance (2009) identifies three branches of normative ethics as, consequential or teleological ethics, deontological or duty ethics, and virtue ethics. Bowen (2008) substantiates that these branches are helpful to PR practitioners when making ethical decisions or in moral reasoning.

Consequential Ethics

According to Grunig (2014), consequentiality holds that the consequences of one's conduct are the ultimate basis for any moral judgement about the rightness or the wrongness of an act. Further, consequential ethics branches into four; utilitarianism, egoism, altruism and hedonism. Bowen (2008) asserts that utilitarianism seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people or the majority. On the other hand, egoism denotes that an action is morally right if it produces favourable consequences to the individual. Grunig (2014) asserts that altruism seeks desirable consequences for everyone else except the moral agent, whereas hedonism, seeks to maximise pleasure and happiness at the expense of pain. What derives this theory is the desire to do good particularly on the part of PR practitioners in order to achieve self and public satisfaction.

Deontological Ethics

Grunig (2014) states that Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was the proponent of duty or deontological ethics that reject the significance of consequences in decision making. Kant believed the guiding principles should define rightness or wrongness of a moral act. Simply put, one has a duty to play regardless of the circumstances or consequences. Plaisance (2009) reinforces Kant's categorical imperative that states that one should perform an act on the condition that one agrees that everyone else be allowed to act likewise. In other words, there is no consideration for cultural relativism.

Virtue Ethics

Bowen (2008) asserts that virtue ethics describe the personality of the moral agent as the drive behind ethical behaviour. In other words, virtue or moral character comes under the spotlight at the expense of ethical duties, rules or the consequences of a situation. Day (2006) substantiates this claim by saying that an act is right if a virtuous person would carry out the same under the same circumstances. The PR practitioners who are virtuous would follow values that inform their practice such as fairness, honesty, integrity, loyalty among others. Researchers have found out that practising PR practitioners employ all three branches of normative ethics because they are prescriptive to ethical dilemmas that they face. Choosing which branch to apply in ethical decision making would be determined by the kind of challenge or dilemma.

Applicability of Ethics Theory

There are practising PR practitioners who would use consequential ethics in making ethical decisions, while others either knowingly or unknowingly would employ the duty or deontological ethics. As mentioned in the introduction, it would be hard for a practising PR practitioner to ascribe to only theory of ethics because the various situations they find themselves in could call for duty, consequence or virtue ethics. The findings of the research would however highlight the commonly applied ethics by practising PR practitioners in commercial banks. As part of the data collection, the researcher would seek to find out about the ethical theories that PR practitioners use when making ethical decisions. The research would establish the rationale behind choosing one theory at the expense of the others.

Methodology and Research Design

According to Adebayo (2015), research design articulates what data is required, what methods are going to be used to collect and analyse data, and how all of this is going to answer the research question. This study took a qualitative approach guided by the interpretive research

paradigm. Qualitative research was chosen because it is commonly used in PR and marketing communications research work. Qualitative research is an interpretive research approach relying on multiple types of subjective data and investigation of the peoples' situations in their natural environment (Daymon and Holloway 2002). Ethical issues require qualitative research which can explore and present various subjective perspectives of participants (ibid). Additionally, the study of ethical conduct requires a holistic approach because of the interconnected activities, experiences, beliefs and values of the people in terms of the context in which they are situated (Christensen *et al.*, 2011). Purposeful or purposive sampling was used in the qualitative research (Daymon and Holloway 2002).

Although it was a qualitative study, the research included all the PR professionals or communication officers, in the event of the absence of PR practitioners, in FNB, Bank Windhoek and Standard Bank being the selected Windhoek commercial banks. Purposive sampling was used to identify the professionals who have the experience and knowledge required for this research. Six communication practitioners including Public Relations managers, communications managers and communication officers were interviewed. Semi- structured interviews were used as research instruments and for triangulation purposes, a key informant interview was employed. The key informant was chosen based on the experience that she possesses in the Public Relations industry.

The study sample managed to provide enough data for thematic analysis that was used in data analysis. Data was presented and discussed according to themes that emerged from the data collected. The themes were discussed based on the research questions. This means that the data collected was grouped under the five research questions that the study had identified. Subsequently, the thematic analysis was complemented by ethical theories and the literature reviewed was corroborated. The study sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- i. What defines an ethical or unethical practising PR practitioner?
- ii. Which factors influence the ethical conduct of PR practitioners practising in commercial banks?
- iii. What are the current challenges that are being faced by PR practitioners practising in commercial banks that could influence their ethical conduct?
- iv. Which ethical dilemmas uniquely confront PR professionals in the commercial banks?
- v. What improvements can be made to the practise of the PR profession in commercial banks?

Data Analysis and Discussions

Participants' Understanding of Ethical and Unethical Conduct

The participants indicated that PR practitioners who align themselves with the highest standards of their code of ethics and conduct are ethical. One interviewee said, "general principles of ethical behaviour such as the focus of honesty, dignity, respect and human rights best describe an ethical PR practitioner" (Interviewee C, 12 June 2018). Chiefly, PR practitioners are paragons of ethical behaviour whose conduct in practice mandates them to be ethical counsellors of the banks (Grunig 2014). Furthermore, the respondents asserted that ethical conduct in commercial banks entails acting in the best interest of the organisation and all the stakeholders. Equally important, the participants said that ethical practitioners subscribe to the general moral principles of ethical behaviour such as truthfulness, integrity, fairness, transparency, respect, dignity and honesty among others.

It is important to realise that duty ethics give ethical PR practitioners in commercial banks a clear duty to perform regardless of the consequences of being fired by top management (Bowen 2007).

On the other hand, the respondents indicated that unethical PR practitioners do not comply with the binding codes of ethics and conduct within the commercial banks and of PRISA, the body that governs the ethical practise of PR professions under its wings. Similarly, the participants believe that the unethical PR behaviour of bribery, spin-doctoring, lying and compromising comes out of self-interest not from the desire to serve the good of the organisation, the public or the profession one stands for.

“There is a historical trend of associating public relations with all things unethical - lying, spin-doctoring and even espionage, bribery, distorting public communication channels and manipulative persuasion,” another respondent noted. In other words, amoral PR professionals are motivated by egoism that allows them to justify their moral actions as right as long as they produce favourable benefits or consequences (Jung *et al.* 2012). These self-seeking PR practitioners act unethically for self-aggrandisement or personal financial gain. Additionally, the respondents assert that unethical PR conduct is characterised by espionage, propaganda, distorting public communication channels and engaging in the manipulative persuasion of the public as opposed to faithful, honest, credible, undistorted public communication and straightforward persuasion (Thiam 2015). Both ethical and unethical conduct of PR practitioners is attributed to a few factors.

Factors Influencing Participants’ Ethical Conduct

Literature qualifies that the ethical behaviour of PR practitioners working in commercial banks does not happen in a vacuum. Research corroborates with the compelling evidence in literature that numerous factors play a part in the way PR practitioners conduct themselves. To begin with, participants indicated that the contractual obligation as described in the code of ethics within the commercial banks guide PR practitioners in moral reasoning and making sound ethical decisions (Thiam 2015). One respondent said, “the bank’s policies, PR codes of ethics and personal conviction influence how I behave as a PR practitioner” (Interviewee A, 12 June 2018). Secondly, the respondents assert that a strong personal and ethical compass is of paramount importance in guiding one to behave ethically. Arandas (2013) delves deeper by asserting that the character of the moral agent (PR practitioner) is the driving force behind the ethical behaviour rather than ethical duty, rules or consequences.

In addition, the participants believe that the practising practitioners whose moral compasses are always switched on can reason well and handle moral questions in their job well. Equally, the interviewees claim that organisational policies and the PRISA code of ethics and practice are helpful in determining ethical conduct. By the same token, the interviewees said that a PR practitioner’s good understanding of morality rules supreme in engaging in ethical decision making. Coupled with the presence of religious beliefs, knowledge of morals plays a significant role in determining ethical behaviour. Bowen (2007) further elaborates on this claim arguing that the ethical theory has it that people learn well-thought out moral reasoning by practise in the community (family, church, friends and society at large).

To put it differently, the respondents assert that PR practitioners with strong personal conviction, morals and integrity are in a better position to conduct themselves ethically in their work of communicating ethically. Knowledge of ethics in PR entails awareness of the significance of upholding integrity always. Grunig (2014) asserts that the of ethics subscribes to this line of thought and practice by substantiating that a virtuous character is part of character development that is only perfected through habitual practise, moral reasoning, repetitive moral behaviour and inculcation of the notion of good. In other words, the participants indicated that constant exposure to situations that call for the application or prescription of normative ethics influence the way PR practitioners in commercial banks deal with ethical situations. Thiam (2015) observes that in a like manner, the role of the organisational culture and the authoritative voice of top management

or the dominant coalition can never be overemphasised in directing ethical behaviour among PR practitioners in commercial banks. Important to note is that there are many challenges identified through the research that currently confront practising PR practitioners working in commercial banks in Namibia.

Ethical Challenges Facing PR Practitioners Practising in Commercial Banks

A myriad of ethical challenges that could easily sway PR practitioners into making unethical decisions are present in the working environment as alluded to by the interviewees. “Financial gain, [and] internal pressure from the employer challenges some of PR practitioners into compromising the ethical values they stand for”, said one interviewee (Interviewee B, 27 May 2018). Firstly, the respondents felt that the way in which the code of ethics are crafted poses a big challenge to the practise of ethical PR. Birkan (2009) reinforces this claim by asserting that the code of ethics that PR practitioners work with are not practically oriented to help the professionals apply their principles with ease. Similarly, the interviewees indicated that internal pressure from employers to represent the banks in only a positive light directly influences the way practitioners make their ethical decisions.

Jung *et al.* (2012) substantiate this claim by conceding that what PR practitioners are demanded or ordered to do sometimes contradicts the values of forthright communication such as transparency, honesty, trustworthiness and integrity among others. The participants said that PR professionals end up misrepresenting facts or misinforming the public to follow the commands or orders of top management. As an illustration, the respondents asserted that commercial bank directors’ and managers’ business decisions are motivated by the desire to rake in huge financial gains and profits even if it means sacrificing organisational integrity and compromising business ethics. A point most overlooked is that the values that inform the duty of PR practitioners are mostly compromised due to pressure from the dominant coalition (Lieber 2003).

Moreover, the interviewees said that PR practitioners in commercial banks are challenged by the advent of the new forms of media that enable the public they serve to make comments about the banks that they cannot speedily respond to in order to avoid reputation damage (Kirat 2014). In this case, the participants believe that crisis management or reputation management becomes almost impossible for the PR practitioner to undertake. Kang (2009) also notes that PR practitioners end up reacting to media comments with emotions rather than ethical principles. However, the interviewees alluded that PR practitioners should communicate how nice and ethical the banks are to the community they serve. In addition to the challenges, PR practitioners face ethical dilemmas that punctuate their work in commercial banks.

Ethical Dilemmas Characterising the Work of PR Practitioners in Commercial Banks

The respondents also noted that the ethical dilemmas confronted by practising PR professionals in commercial banks have a direct impact on the way they conduct themselves ethically. Like any other PR practitioners working in other fields, there is the clash of interests of the public and the organisation represented. Values of the organisation clash with the values that guide the practice of PR such as loyalty, fairness, respect, integrity and social responsibility. “Another dilemma is the need to emphasise the positive instead of the negatives that would be overwhelming in a particular situation”, said one respondent (Interviewee C, 27 May 2018). Bowen (2007) opines that PR practitioners in most cases are torn between serving the interests of the public with forthright communication and representing the commercial banks in a positive light even if it means compromising ethical values. To put it in a different way, PR practitioners find themselves in ethical dissonance (Bowen 2007).

Notably, the participants indicated that most PR practitioners practising in commercial banks do not work for independent PR agencies, rather, they are on the payroll of the banks. Inasmuch as they would like to subscribe to the values of PRISA, they have a contractual duty to serve the interests of the bank that employees them even if it means compromising ethical values. Similarly, the interviewees said that the PR practitioners become ethically numb when they are supposed to counsel the dominant coalition on ethical matters, yet they are subordinates of the top level of management in the organisation. Grunig (2014) echoes the same sentiments by maintaining that in an organisational culture, giving advice or counsel is easy when it is top to bottom not the other way around.

Equally, the respondents observed that it is morally mind-splitting or guilt-inducing for PR professionals to only highlight the positives of the banks that have negatives which the public should know about or already know about through social media. Lieber (2003) delves deeper opining that most PR practitioners will never tell the public that the bank is not performing well financially in fear of causing a client exodus to rival banks. In the end the public ends up losing millions of dollars, like the case of SME Bank stakeholders in 2017. Last but not least, the participants indicated that sometimes PR practitioners do not know exactly what the right thing is to do in a given ethical situation, or they do know what must be done but they fail to execute it (Day 2006). In the light of the aforementioned factors, challenges and ethical dilemmas surrounding the ethical conduct of PR practitioners, it is imperative to consider recommendations aimed at improving the way PR practitioners conduct themselves ethically.

Recommendations Aimed at Improving PR Practitioners Ethical Conducts

The foregoing indicates that the ethical conduct of PR practitioners can be improved by making and implementing recommendations based on the conceived factors, challenges and ethical dilemmas. Hence, it is recommended that organisational culture and the values that inform the duty of PR practitioners be aligned to avoid a clash of interests. Equally important, PR practitioners should be part of the dominant coalition in the commercial banks to enable them to give counsel to executives, directors and managers on legal and ethical matters that pertain to communicating with the public.

Downe, Cowell and Morgan (2016) challenge the dominant coalition of banks to consider Public Relations as part of the decision-making body of the organisations to make it easy for PR to play the role of the conscience of the organisation. In addition, PR practitioners should familiarise themselves with applied ethics and their application in order to help them execute their duties competently. Notably, practising practitioners should adhere strictly to the organisational and professional code of ethics to avoid compromising the values that inform their profession. In other words, integrity pays all the time. Moreover, the code of ethics should be made with accompanying enforcement articles that will help to monitor the ethical breaches or infringements by PR professionals.

Expressively, sanctions or penalties should be made the consequences of breaching or infringing the code of ethics. Lieber (2003) goes further to assert that such enforcement will act as a deterrent to would-be-unethical PR practitioners. Similarly, membership to the PR professional bodies like PRISA should be made mandatory or compulsory for every practising PR practitioner. Bowen (2007) believes that involuntary membership to professional bodies helps to nip in the bud unethical cancers that could ruin the integrity of the profession. Equally important, the code of ethics should be made with a practical orientation to make them user-friendly.

Conclusion

This examination of the factors influencing the ethical conduct of PR practitioners in commercial banks in Namibia utilised the thematic approach to analyse and reveal the major factors behind

the ethical and unethical conduct of PR professionals. The study revealed that binding codes of ethics, the work environment or organisational climate, the presence of a personal internal moral compass, a sense of moral duty towards humanity, knowledge of ethics and their application and experience in making ethical decisions largely determine the way PR practitioners in commercial banks conduct themselves. Notably, there are challenges that exacerbate the challenge for PR practitioners to practise ethically.

Organisational leadership and culture alienated to the core values of PR, ambiguously written codes of ethics and conduct, overbearing pressure from the dominant coalition, the advent of new forms of media and the daring task of executing the duty of being top management's ethical counsellors while being considered as subordinates, have a direct impact on the way PR practitioners behave. In addition to the foregoing, PR practitioners in commercial banks encounter ethical dilemmas that are mainly characterised by clashes of interest and values. Findings of the investigation further conclude that PR practitioners are torn between upholding the values of PRISA and those advocated for by the commercial banks.

In addition, PR practitioners in banks work under pressure from top management to represent the positives of the banks which have known negatives that are all over the social media. Despite the ethical challenges and dilemmas, PR practitioners in commercial banks can still practice ethically as expected of them by the public they serve. Consequently, several suggestions and recommendations were conceived by this study to improve the ethical conduct of PR professionals employed in commercial banks in Namibia. To begin with, commercial banks should align their business values with those of PRISA that inform the ethical duty of PR practitioners.

Additionally, PR professionals should be part and parcel of the decision-making body of the banks called the dominant coalition for them to more easily counsel managers, directors and executives on ethical communication issues. Further, PR practitioners must always adhere to the code of ethics that govern their practice and religiously familiarise themselves with the new developments in the field of PR that pertain to ethics. Correspondingly, the code of ethics of PRISA should have a practical orientation for easy use and application. Further to that, it should be made a prerequisite for all practising PR practitioners to subscribe to PRISA before they can be recognised as PR professionals in order to protect the integrity and standards of the Public Relations profession.

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