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The Influence of Self-Efficacy in Ethical Consideration and Decision-Making Processes: Views from Malaysian Public Relations Practitioners

Abstract

The study explores factors influencing PR practitioners' ethical consideration in decision-making process. In line with the theoretical approach of self-efficacy, practitioner's performances emanate from individual self-efficacy aligned with organization culture and objectives. Thus, self-efficacy inspires individual behavior based upon their belief and capacity to execute or perform actions essential to produce expected results. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with Malaysian PR practitioners, questions were based on a set of collected and collated reviews of the literature as well as guided by responsible advocacy theory and self-efficacy theory to facilitate the interview process. Data from the interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. Findings of the study indicate that organizational interest, goals, and business focus, corporate politics, boss-influenced clients or stakeholder pressure and practitioners' personal values were influential factors affecting practitioner's ethical and decision-making dispositions. Further findings showed that the level of discretions practitioners processed in decision-making process is based on a combination of internal factors like organization business focus and external factors like client needs and pressure. Given that practitioners are bounded by organization laws as employees; it is recommended that independent bodies be put in place other than national public relations associations to serve as a regulator over unethical practices and protection of practitioners against corporate powers.

Keywords: Self-Efficacy, Public Relations, Decision making, Ethical considerations, Professionalism

Introduction

In recent times, organizational scandals, financial misappropriation, closures of renowned business has stimulated interest in ethical behavior of entities globally (Khokhar & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2017). The Malaysian aviation industry experienced several air mishaps, particularly the MH370 passenger plane that has been missing to date (Zafra & Maydell, 2018). In

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the wake of the sudden disappearance of the aircraft, information surrounding the incident was not forthcoming from the airline thus leading to speculations and rumors. As a result, lack of timely information and communication negatively impact the roles, function, and dispositions of Public relations (PR) as well as their decision-making responsibilities.

Performing essential PR functions become challenging especially for practitioners operating in complex multi-cultural and polarized environment like Malaysia (Zafra & Maydell, 2018). Societies with deep rooted cultural values, layers of norms and beliefs have peculiar social order in which the ruling class or those in position of authority demand and expect a great deal of acceptance to top management decision making processes from subordinates and employees (Hasan, 2015a). As a result, communication in a multifaceted, culturally sensitive, and bureaucratic environment often go through systematic layers of approval resulting in delayed communication and hindering PR roles and involvement in ethical decision making processes (Cardwell, Williams & Pyle, 2017).

The various approaches taken in the analysis and understanding of ethical challenges and opportunities largely depend on the credo of assumption and actions undertaken by the organization or individual concerned. This has also led to increase in social scientific research on behavioral ethics of organizations in which PR is not an exemption (Okkonen, 2017). In today's business environment, gaining and maintaining competitive advantages have become core attributes of corporate existence (Hakkak & Ghodsi, 2015). Against the backdrop of practitioner's ethical disposition, the link between self-efficacy and actions, conduct, choice, and decision of Malaysian PR practitioners begs the question, what are the factors that influence decision-making frame of PR practitioners? Thaler and Helmig (2016), Charoensap, Virakul, Senasu and Ayman, (2019) stated that ethical leadership behavior of organizational managers enhances employee's attitude towards attainment of organization goals. Some actions and decisions adopted or taken by practitioners may be perceived as unethical. As such, discussions surrounding practitioners' self-efficacy are essential in understanding perceived unethical actions and assumptions often attributed to the PR profession.

Accordingly, research findings suggest that if PR practitioners must advance the course of their organization, they must participate and be involved in decision making of the organization and not merely following orders from the top management (Mykkänen & Vos, 2015). However, existing research on PR in Malaysia largely focuses on issues such as professionalization of PR in light of low competency (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008), influence of education on ethical values and professionalism (Idid & Arandas, 2016), role performance and preference for experience over academic qualification (Chin, Kho, Tey, Wong & Yew, 2017), loyalty to management/boss versus code of ethics of the profession (Haque & Ahmad, 2017), advocacy role of PR as leeway into management (Haque & Ahmad 2017; Idid, Ahmad & Souket 2020).

Most studies on PR in Malaysia fall short of exploring the reasoning behind practitioner's choice and interest in decision making process. Rather, greater attention has been focused on PR roles, professionalism, and ethical expectation of practitioners. Similarly, Carter, Nesbit, Badham, Parker and Sung (2016, p.2) noted that with over 3000 studies focusing on self-efficacy and work-related performance across academic discipline including communication, the locale of majority of these studies are not conducted in work related settings. Therefore, this paper particularly seeks to explore the ethical disposition of Malaysian PR practitioners given the choice and decisions they have to make or take in their capacity as PR practitioners.

Studies have shown that empowerment increases practitioner's responsibilities and improves employee performance (Yang & Wei 2017). While the role of leaders and members of the organization are essential to achievement of organizational goals (Choi, Kim & Kang, 2017). On the other hand, self-efficacy improves employee performance by enabling them to decide on appropriate choice of action to ensure organizational performance (Bandura, 1999; Cetin & Askun 2018). However, Malaysian PR practitioners are expected to strictly follow directives and instructions as employees of the firm. Ethical choices and expected outcome are guided by practitioner's competency which emanates from self-efficacy (Kim, & Beehr, 2017). As a result, how self-efficacy influence practitioners' conduct, choice, action, and activities in the organization, as well as practitioners' involvements in decision making are pertinent issues to be considered in the study.

Ahmad and Idid (2015, p.12) argued that Malaysian PR practitioners are cautious in their action, activities and roles within the organization. The cautious action of Malaysian practitioners is attributed to organizational bureaucracy leading to practitioners' inevitable slow response to crisis situations. This notion corroborates Abdullah & Threadgold, (2008, p. 286) early argument that professionalism in Malaysian Public Relations has not been received or accepted by managerial echelon of the organization due to the quality and competence level of practitioners. Abdullah's argument validates the notion that strategic management connotes the involvement of PR in decision making in order to assist in managing the action and behavior of the organization. Thus, Malaysian practitioners are simply implementing management directives.

Although Ki, Kim and Ledingham (2015) stated that practitioners play integral role in organization's relationship management with various publics. However, PR profession continues to struggle for professional recognition due to negative perception of PR as spin doctors (Asunta, 2016; Molleda, Moreno & Navarro, 2017) and characterization of the profession as lacking professional legitimacy (Manley & Valin, 2017).

Equally, Browning (2018) argued that the urge to build relationship with stakeholders emanate from underlining interest of the organization. As a result, practitioner's choice to comply with management directives or align with organization culture and veer from code of ethics reflect practitioner's disposition irrespective of their proficiency and expectations to desist from practices that impede their profession (Haque & Ahmad, 2017). Likewise, management in pursuance of organizational interest set an agenda for practitioners to follow and as such, ethical decision making becomes a subjective indicator for performance because practitioners are duty bound to adhere to organization directive (Lane, 2018). Theoretically, excellence theory advocates for PR participation in decision making (Thurlow et al., 2017). However, in power distance society like Malaysia employees are expected to be loyal to the authority (i.e., the top management). As a result, organizational goals supersedes practitioners self-efficacy. Practitioners in Western countries are empowered to participant in strategic management (decision making), however practitioners in power distance society like Malaysia are less empowered to participate and non compliance with management directive is viewed as dissident voices.

Given the inevitability of workplace conflict, contingency theory of accommodation explains that organization in the way it does due to the situation facing the organization at a given time (Cheng, 2020). While the theory focuses on organization's actions, how practitioners should act or react to the management's decision to handle ethical consideration is ambiguous. This is because subordinates in a culturally polarized society are not expected to chal-

lenge leadership (Yusof, & Esmaeil, 2017; Idid, Ahmad, & Souket, 2020), thus allowing little room for decisions being made by PR practitioner. By the same token, practitioners are often incapable of advising organization management on ethical issues because they are not part of the top management. Hence, the nucleus of this research is concerned with the reasoning, contentions, or factors influencing PR practitioners' ethical consideration in decision-making processes give that practitioner as experts in the field and representatives of the firm are expected to act in the interest of the organization.

Review of Literature

Ethics and Self Efficacy

Ethics in public relations has gained significant attention from scholars and practitioners since the era of Lee and Bernays (Edgett, 2002). Various organizations have their own set of rules, culture, and protocols that are spelled out to facilitate the operation and functioning of such organization (Klein, Mahoney, McGahan & Pitelis, 2019). Consequently, organization culture, business focus, corporate politics, and power structure determine the location and function of PR as well as practitioners choice to uphold ethical standards or comply with organizational directives for job security (Fawkes, 2012).

Similarly, Fawkes (2018) posits that ethical advocacy prompts practitioners to reflect their professional values and behaviors in the job. However, L'Etang (2006) argued that ethical advocacy failed to recognize power imbalance that exist between practitioners as individual and organization as a body. On this premise, individuals' perception of their ability to execute a specific task describes self-efficacy of practitioners in carrying out their functions (Bandura, 1977; 1991; 1997; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Subsequently, Bandura's self-efficacy postulation stress that techniques for enhancement of self-efficacy like vicarious experience or modeling, verbal persuasion, affective or physiological arousal, as well as enactive mastery or personal attainment can influence individual ethics through the social learning process (Bandura, 1982). As such, individual practitioner can vividly learn standards of organizational behavior by partaking in organizational action through direct modeling or verbal persuasion, thereby strengthening their behavioral and motivational pattern to become more confident in their abilities and act on behalf of the firm (Bandura, 2006). More like the organization itself, practitioners also have goals and objectives to pursue. Thus, in pursuance of these goals, self-efficacy induces practitioner's feeling of proficiency to perform and achieve individual goals (Gusau, Abdullah, Hasan & Tamam, 2018).

Enthusiasm and confidence to perform a specific task raise a sense of control a person has in a given situation. Furthermore, Bandura (1999) stressed that agentic individual act intentionally and proactively and then evaluate their performance to gain deeper understanding of their action for better performance. Research shows extensive evidence of positive and significant relationship between self-efficacy and work-related performance (Machmud, 2018). However, critics argue that utilization of artificial settings and processes instead of actual job or work related setting particularly organizational setting hinders performance related efficacy (Carter et al. 2016). Practitioner's aspiration to be involvement in management decision making is hampered by lack of mastery of strategic competence (Gusau, 2017). As such, attitudinal professionalism, ethical competency, and autonomy of the profession lie on self-development of practitioners which is aided by self-efficacy.

Grunig, (2014) asserts that ethics and professionalism highlights the consequences of organizational action. Practitioner's assessment of work culture and organizational ethics makes them aware of management agenda, business goals and potential pressure to meet organization goals (Braithwaite, Herkes, Ludlow, Lamprell, & Testa, 2016). As a result, a work environment that allows employees to question management decision and managers conduct through open communication helps in preventing unethical conduct in the organization (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Macnamara, 2016; 2017; Robinson & Thelen, 2018). However, Grunig, (2014) opined those practitioners who view their social role as practically realistic will work for any organization that employs them. This is because they see their roles as value-free and view issues subjectively and objectively in their capacity as managers. On the contrary, Hove and Paek (2017) suggest that PR ethics and practitioner's loyalty are not merely choosing which moral rule to follow or only weighing up alternatives. Instead, they involve a series of evaluation and controls which is subject to debate in light of organizational power structure and organization ethical inclination. Equally, Miller (1946) cited in St. John and Pearson (2016) held that a PR person or PR people must help the organization by teaching values that enables efficient operation. Although St. John and Pearson (2016) argued that Miller's assertion did not explicitly advocate that PR should be conscience of the corporation. Instead, he advocated that individuals or person in control of the corporation should provide PR with a conscience because involvement of PR in management makes them part of the dominant coalition team. Hence, the first research question is posed below.

RQ1: What are the factors that influence the ethical disposition of Malaysian PR practitioners?

Corporate Culture

The extent to which PR practitioner can challenge corporate authority and policies has not been clearly define or conceptualized although scholars advocate for dialogue in the event of internal or external conflict of interest (Reed, 2018). Considering the fact that he who pays the piper calls the tune denotes that management determine practitioner's efficacy because practitioners as employees must adhered to management directives. Wilson (2016, p. 5) stated internal control mechanisms limit practitioner's abilities and power. As a result, practitioners are less likely to be part of the dominant coalition because of management constraints. According to Balaji, Jiang, Singh and Jha (2020, p.2) organizational culture is acknowledged as a determinant of employee's behavior in an organization. The accepted approach to this effect is the creation of a cohesive culture outlook that is built on organization needs which intern facilitates employees' ethical behaviors (Swanepoel, Botha & Rose-Innes, 2015). Thus, management is entrusted with the creation goal-driven culture to legitimize managerial prerogative (Parasuraman, Murshamsul & Radzi, 2015). Nevertheless, Younis and Elsaid (2019) noted that management as the creator of organizational culture does not secure or grantee ethical conduct or actions. In other words, organizational culture may be a cover for unwholesome practices and imposition of ideas and interest by management on employees of the firm (Wilson, 2016).

Conversely, Newman, Round, Bhattacharya, and Roy (2017) observed that organizational culture or organizational laws are often used to ensure employees behaviors because it is designed to enable employers control employees actions and interaction within the organization. Thus, management can deal with internal issues like lateness to work, infighting, and abuse of

privilege by employees by developing acceptable principles for employees and constituents to follow (Newman et al. 2017). This also ensures collective loyalty of internal stakeholders to align with organization business perspective (Metwally, Ruiz, Metwally & Gartzia 2019).

The relationship between corporate ethics and personal ethics is visible in application given the fact that individuals and firms may have different or opposing interest and expectations. Deciphering what is wrong or right by an individual or organization denotes that ethics can be perceived differently by different people (Adelstein & Clegg, 2016). Organizations establish and uphold their own rules, ethics, and behavior and so any other interpretation or conception of ethics is excluded from the firm's interpretation of ethics (Adelstein & Clegg, 2016). As a result of this, the ethical climate of a firm is determined by its management. Thus, the behavior and ethical orientation of an organization affects the ethical values and action of employees (ElGammal, El-Kassar & Canaan Messarra, 2018).

Corporate ethics and personal ethics are interwoven because they are both moral principles that propel behaviors and breach of either of them attracts repercussion (Soni, 2020). While corporate or business ethics can be imposed on practitioners as employers, personal ethics or values emanates from accumulation of experience over time. The application of ethics becomes a choice appropriately expressed when it suits the interest of individuals or organization (Krajcsa', 2018). Given that management of the organization is saddled with the task and formal authority to manage the affairs of the organization, their decision, values, behavior, and conduct strongly influence employees (Parasuraman et al. 2015). For this reason, failure to uphold ethical standards and maintain acceptable business practice has been attributed to failure of big corporations although individual misconduct also contributes to corporate scandals (Kia, Halvorsen & Bartram 2019). For instance, falsifying reports, deceptive advertising and sensationalized media reports, black propaganda, corporate scandal, and immoral acts by firms has been attributed to top management of the organization (Salin, Ab Manan, Kamaluddin, & Nawawi, 2017), because they set the tone for such act in pursuance of corporation agenda or individual gain (Dibra, 2016).

Research findings indicates that role modeling by top management of the organization positively impact employees work ethics (Krieg, Ma & Robinson, 2018) and as such, organization management/managers must actively showcase their personal and professional ethics in order to influence the behavior of their employees (Osibanjo, Akinbode, Falola, & Olu-dayo, 2018). This is because employee's perception of management ethics and values reflects on their actions when carrying out duties. Likewise, Kuo and Tsai (2017) assert that top management and managers of organization must not only define rules and regulation for employees to follow, instead they must visibly inculcate acceptable behavior to their employees and reflect it in their actions. Griffin, Kruger and Maturana, (2017) argued that the link between personal ethics and corporate or business ethics lies in the fact that decision based on personal ethics are often overlooked because they are personal choices. Hence, corporate ethics must begin from the top (management) because practitioners as employees of the organization are more likely to emulate the dominant ethical practice displayed by managers and management of the organization (Badrinarayanan, Ramachandran & Madhavaram, 2019). Therefore, the second research question is stated below.

RQ2: How do corporations influence practitioners conduct, choice, action, and activities in the organization?

Public Relations in Malaysia

Prior to corporatization and privatization policies introduced in the early 1990s, PR in Malaysia was largely a government oriented activity (Idid, Ahmad, & Souket, 2020). Over the years, the profession has experienced rapid growth and changes due to socio- cultural, political, and economic factors. The institute of public relations Malaysia (IPRM) is the umbrella body of PR in Malaysia and is saddled with the responsibility of promoting the interest of practitioners and the profession in the country (Adnan, 2018). Although PR practitioners are spread across private, public and non-government organizations, not all of them are registered members of the IPRM. In addition, there is no national registry for practicing practitioners in the country (Adnan, 2018). Similarly, membership of IPRM is not compulsory, instead, self regulation in terms of observing and maintaining ethical standards of the profession is expected of all PR professionals in the country.

IPRM has established standards, code of ethics and conduct for members as well as guideline for players in the Malaysian PR industry. While practitioners are expected to be fair, honest and maintain high standards of truth and integrity, research indicates that Malaysian practitioners are more loyalty to their organization and employees than the code of ethics of the profession (Haque & Ahmad 2017). While the code of professional conduct is acknowledged as guide, loyalty and adherence to organizational laws and culture is customary for Malaysian practitioners (Shaari & Kaur, 2012).

Religion and culture are inherent in the practice of PR in Malaysia. These two elements help in understanding the values and attitude of practitioners particularly in an environment that is hierarchically centralized (Macnamara, 2004). A systematic exercise of power ensures that all activities within the organization conform to management desires and subordinate must respect social hierarchy. As such, decision making follows bureaucratic arrangement and this is supported by citizens respect for religious and social authority (Sani & Shah 2018). As a result, the gap between decision makers and subordinates is wide and this explains why Malaysian practitioners are not involved in decision making and are more likely to exchange ethics for organizational laws (Domm 2015). Malaysia as a multicultural society has several religious faith like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in practice even though Islam is the official religion of the country. However, press freedom and practitioners involvement in decision making is still a tall order and far-fetched.

Although responsible advocacy advocate for freedom of the press and all communication and communicators without restriction or censorship (Zarefar, & Sawarjuwono, 2021), freedom of the press in Malaysia is subject to government stipulations. Although, internet and social media has increased civil activism, still government control over media is very firm in the country (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). This is largely attributed to underlining power distance culture that has existed even before her independence (Domm 2015). Subsequently, practitioner's position and expected function permits ethical persuasion needed to establish trust and relation building (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2002). However, in Malaysia practitioner's allegiance and role is anchored on the value of PR within the organization. This is rightly so because practitioners are more likely to adhere to corporate laws and culture because it appeals to them rather than be viewed as dissidents (Ariff, Hashim, Taha, & Salleh, 2019).

According to Crinis and Parasuraman (2016, p.4) the realm of employment laws in Malaysia is dominated by management unilateralism at the workplace. As a result, manage-

rial rights allow employers and by extension management to decide and implement decisions that benefit the organization. Such practice may raise question as to whether employers should use their managerial prerogative to the extent of disregarding the rights of employees in order to secure business and financial gain (Parasuraman et al. 2015). The inclusion of managerial privilege in organization structure and laws in a contractual manner becomes a manipulative tool to control and limits employee's right to challenge unethical management decision in workplace (Crinis & Parasuraman, 2016). On this premise, the action or inactions of Malaysian practitioner's emanate from the culture and business goals of the organization instead of self efficacy and ethics of the profession.

The complex nature of business competition often exposes practitioners to ethical dilemmas thus making them vulnerable to compromise their ethical values for corporate politics (Rousselet, Brial, Cadario, & Béji-Bécheur, 2020). While Malaysian practitioners are not expected to be counter-cultural heroes or guidance of western code of ethics and theoretical preposition, it is expected that they as the conscience of the organization and ethical advocates must be able to advise management and at the same time be protected from being treated as dissidents when striving for ethical compliances. Excellence theory posits PR participation in decision making and that is lacking amongst Malaysian practitioners. It is worthy to state that Malaysian practitioner's are not expected to challenge organization action because they are modeled to imitate ethical behavior of their bosses and management. However, how practitioners can effectively make their voice heard on ethical matters in a power distance culture is important in the practice of excellence PR. Hence, the third research question is stated below.

RQ 3: How does organization management influence practitioner's ethical disposition in decision making?

Methodology

The study utilizes a qualitative research approach because the inquiry focuses on understanding practitioner's experiences in relation to their ethical disposition. Face to face interview technique is commonly used in qualitative studies to explore participant's personal experiences. As such, semi structured interview was used to obtain data from participants in the study. The semi structure interview technique offered the researcher the opportunity to gather subjective information about practitioner's self-efficacy, ethical consideration and involvement in organization decision-making. Similarly, interview guide guided participants on what to say to provide accurate information on issue of discussion (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Although interview questions were semi-structured, however probes were deployed to gain deeper understanding of participant views. Interview protocol was designed to reflect the objective of the study and theoretical principle of excellence PR.

Sample/Participants

Malaysian PR practitioners were the main target and participants in the study. Kuala Lumpur the capital of Malaysia was chosen as location of study because of the number of PR

firms in the city. As such, the huge number of PR agencies, firms, and corporate office located in Kuala Lumpur offered a wide pool of informants needed to access the relative perspectives of practitioners in their capacity as professionals. Participants in the study cut across various backgrounds and organization including public and private entities, NGOs, and government link corporations (GLCs) with age range 28 to 65 and working experience of between 8 to 40 years in their job and position and eight female and twelve male respectively. Twenty (20) senior managers and executive ranked practitioners in Kuala Lumpur participated in the study. Participant were purposively selected and rightly identified based on their position, ranks and roles as senior executive managers/management with direct involvement in communication management in their respective organization. Practitioners were identified and contacted via the webpage of their respective firms and the researcher's social network.

Interview Procedures

Interview guide helped in directing the interview process in a consistent manner to ensure emergence of relevant data. Interview guide ensured that informants stay within the confines of the subject and not stray off the context of discussion (Smulowitz, 2017). Interview questions were pilot tested with five PR professionals to verify questions and maintain vocabulary uniformity in both the piloting phase and the main study. Interviews with participants in the study were conducted in their various offices in Kuala Lumpur over two months period. Zuckerman (1972) cited in Empson (2017) stated that the term elites describe individuals with significant power within a group considered as elites given their expert knowledge of a phenomena. Thus, senior managers, executive ranked PR practitioners and communication managers assume significant power and discretion in their various organizations and expert knowledge in PR the practice of PR.

Interview questions progressed from a general perspective to more specific questions to include job specifications and responsibilities, self-efficacy experience, ethical dilemmas, organizational culture and business focus, personal ethics as well as ethical decision-making choices and influences. Interview averaged between 40 to 50 minutes with participants and was recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim into word document. Participant voluntarily consented to participate in the study by filling and signing consent form was before interviews (Frunza & Sandu, 2017).

Transcription and Coding

Transcribed interviews were transferred to Atlas.ti 8 software for coding and data analysis. It was imperative to have verbatim transcription of data in order to capture word imitation without omitting non-verbal aspect of the interaction. Involuntary verbalization response of informants and non-verbal communication speech added to the context of clarity, inferring key informants' intended statement (Rodham, Fox & Doran 2015). It was important to include expressions such as "ok" "ah" "mmh" "yeah" "um" "hmm" and "uh" hesitations, speech cut-offs, interruptions, giggling and laughter, pauses and emphasis made by participants in the transcription process because they were intentionally uttered to add meaning to respondent's

views. Similarly, researcher's observation of informant's demeanor during the interview session was also an essential source of data as observatory field note. This is because information that was not captured in the audio recording was captured through observation particularly when issues about informant's ethical disposition were raised. Open coding was implemented through line-by-line assessment of word, sentences and paragraphs to identify practitioner's roles, participation in decision making and ethical disposition. Specific words and phrases describing participant's views were assigned salient description as codes. Codes were description of participant's statement and not merely interpreting respondent's views and were formed from phrases and terms used by participants in the interview.

The first step of coding involved line by line reading and assigning of phrases that best described content of the data. Ten codes for research question one, seven codes research question two and five codes for research question three were initially coded. The second level of coding involved identification of similar codes and grouping them into categorizes. Categorization was meant to eliminate redundancy or similar codes and as such, similar codes and related phrases were merged to form categories. For instance, in response to question one which was focused on what factors influence the ethical disposition of Malaysian PR practitioners. Key informants stated that organizational goals, business focus and management agenda were amongst factors influencing practitioner's ethical disposition. As such, it was important to group them into one categorize as they were similar and related in meaning. Subsequently, similar and related categories were merged while different ones were categorized separately to eliminate vague and conflicting themes, thus leading to the emergence of main themes.

Themes were thematically analyzed based on subjective interpretation of data in line with the constructionism/constructivism postulations (Boyland, 2019). Interpretation of theme into report was based on extracts from the data to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme which became findings of the study. It was expedient to employ thematic analysis because it allowed for identification of patterns and themes within the data set as well as subjective interpretation of data (Roberts, Dowell & Nie, 2019). Thematic analysis of data sufficiently demonstrated respondent's opinion depicting their experiences because the approach allows for detailed description of practitioners' ethical experience as it affected their ability to make or partake in decision making.

Findings

The first research question was: What are the factors that influence the ethical disposition of Malaysian PR practitioners? Analysis of the data revealed two main themes namely management directives, organization laws, business agenda/corporate policy. The obvious factor influencing practitioner's ethical disposition was management business focus. Malaysian practitioners felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to the company first and unquestionable support to management. 17 out of 20 key informants agreed that management business goals reflected in practitioner's actions because as employees of the organization practitioners are bound to comply with management directives or risk sack. This is evidenced by a quotation from participant three who stated that "We are duty bound to work with our superiors and management directives in discharging our duties. And when you have a boss like I do, you are replaceable and so I am left with no option but to do as the boss directs which is

where the internal control influence comes into play in my ethical decision on a particular issue”(P#3).

Similarly, participants felt they were subject to the organization laws irrespective of their ethical values or self efficacy. This is reflected in the statement of participant who stated that “There are laws governing the organization and how it operates so when you sign up to join the firm as an employee, you promised to do what is best for the company and comply with the law, culture and politics of the firm which is why we cannot oppose organization activities even when it appears unethical” (P#6). Furthermore, practitioners also felt a general lack participation in setting the business agenda of the organization. This is because management business agenda sets the tone for PR to follow and as such practitioners had no input in organization decisions. “If the focus of management is on financial gain from organization business dealings and less focus on things like CSR you cannot change such policy on your own because as long as business keeps coming and the company is doing well, there is no need to focus on corporate character and if you go against that agenda you risk sacking” (P#17).

Organization Culture

The second research question asked how corporate culture influences practitioners conduct, choice, action, and activities in the organization. Upon analysis of data three dominant themes were revealed namely organization culture, management prerogative, and budgetary allocation. Organization culture emerged as the dominant theme. Practitioner’s choice of actions, activities and conducts were directly informed by bosses and management. All 20 key informants in the study agreed that organization/corporate culture influence their conduct, choices and activities. This is acknowledged in respondent views “I am constantly reminded that I have to adapt to situations and how things are done here I mean things that are beyond my control. So, my efficacy of choice depends on the situation am dealing with and once management decides I cannot go against it. I may not support all the choices and decision of our management, but I really don’t have a choice but to comply culture and values here” (P#12). Although practitioners have the choice to comply with ethical code of the profession to guide their action and conduct or resign and quit if they feel their personal or professional values are violated. However, most practitioners complied with organization culture to secure their job because if they go against organization values they risk being viewed as unruly.

Management prerogative also influence practitioners conduct, choice, action, and activities in the organization. The right of the boss, managers or management to take decisions regarding business dealings of the organization influenced practitioners conduct, choice, action and activities. This is evidence in respondent statement “ Irrespective of how knowledgeable and skillful you may be with your educational qualifications, if management does not formally approve the content of your message, task, or proposal, you cannot release any message or perform any task irrespective of how qualified you think you are or how urgent the situation maybe, you have to follow the directives because only the boss up has the right to sanction you what we do here” (P#10).

Similarly, client’s needs and expectations as well as organization quest to gain competitive advantage influenced practitioner’s actions and choice. 15 practitioners stated that they have to carefully weigh options available to them in terms of the costs and benefits of their actions and conduct to the organization before they act. This is precipitated by budgetary

funds allocated or approved by management to PR. “And so he who sets the budget controls the action and activity of the company and that is that boss. Although I am privileged to sit and defend budgetary allocation for marketing and communications with management as the head of communication, however my proposals must go through layers of approval and very often it comes back short of my expectation and I have to work with what I have been given” (P#16).

Ownership/Power structure

The third research question asked does organization management influence practitioner’s ethical disposition in decision making process? Four themes emerged for this question: Ownership/Power Structure, Management Prerogative, Return of Investment and Client Needs. All 20 respondent in the study agreed that ownership and organization power structure significantly influence their ethics in decision making. This is because practitioners were not part of the management setup of their firms and as such they were passively involved in decision making which is why their ethical choice were directly informed by managers/owners desires. Similarly, religion reflected in the ethics and work culture of firms in the study because Islam encourages collectivism in terms of submission to authority and respect for authority which is why key informants in the study imitate ethical behaviors of top management of their respective firms. This is evidenced by the informant’s statement, “I cannot say that my boss is wrong at what he does or how he wants the organization to work so my ethics and choice of action and conduct is subject to the culture here even as an executive level office in this establishment I am constantly reminded that I am answerable to someone above me who happens to be my boss and so I when he instructs me on what to do I must obey because I work for him” (P#13). Management prerogative also influence ethical disposition of participants in the study. All 20 key informants agreed that management retain absolute discretion to chose and decide for the organization while PR implements management decision. “As an employee my decision and action follow existing procedures and so, my boss together with the management reserve the right to dictate and direct what I do, when to do it, and how to do it and it will continue this way because their focus is on result, and this is the reason they reserve the right to chose business priorities of the company” (P#2).

Some participants also stated that return on investment influenced their ethical disposition and decision. This is because competition for business has become fierce and firms are continually seeking to invest and make gains. Equally, practitioners are increasingly under pressure to meet organization goals and stakeholders needs while at the same time recoup funds from organizations investment. “Our investment on AI’s and social media was to keep us visible at all times and to handle business when we are out of office and so our expertise as communication professionals is needed to put these new tools to work to improve our performance and recoup money spent acquiring them and so my decisions are influenced by the need to recoup funds spent on communication tools and this is why I do what I do I to recover these funds for the company” (P#19). Similarly, client’s demands and needs often translate into management pressuring PR to deliver and satisfy client needs. “Now clients know what they want and with social media, they know where to get it and if you don’t give them what they want you lose and so as PR we are constantly under pressure from management to give clients what they want by any means necessary or else we lose them to our competitors” (P#14).

Discussion

The study explored the influence of self efficacy in the ethical decision making of Malaysian PR practitioners. The paper found theoretical and practical disparity from excellence theory in PR while acknowledging organization culture as an important influence of practitioner's ethical disposition in decision making. The first research question asked: what are the factors influencing the ethical disposition of Malaysian public relations practitioners? Findings showed that practitioner felt an overwhelming sense of obligation and unquestionable support to the firm and its management which is why practitioner is subject to organization laws and culture. The second research question stated thus: how do corporations influence practitioners conduct, choice, action, and activities in the organization? In response to this respondent in the study contained that their choice of actions, activities and conducts were directly informed by bosses and management which is why they had no choice but to obey management instructions and follow directives. Lastly the third research question asked: How does organization management influence practitioner's ethical disposition decision making? Findings in relation to the questions revealed that practitioners were not part of organization decision making setup and as a result, they implement decision made by management to satisfy both the organization and stakeholders needs. "Creativity is important for PR to strive, but no matter how knowledgeable, creative, and skillful as you think you are, and no matter your educational qualification and professional level, you have to play by the organization book and if management does not formally approve your task, content of message or your role you are out and so it has always been the organization way or nothing and this is far beyond my personal values (P#20).

Theoretical Implications

Findings from the study depart from the concept of the excellence theory in PR and the body of literature that supports it. As a result of this, it makes a case for future studies on participation in ethical decision making in an environment that is hierarchically centralized. The excellence theory postulates that PR must be part of dominant coalition, report or have direct access to management (Grunig, 1992; Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Lan, 2021). Thus, PR enables symmetrical model of communication and at the same time enhance relationship building for mutual benefit for the organization and its publics.

Self efficacy prompts practitioner's ability to advocate on behalf of the organization and advice management (Gusau, Abdullah, Hasan & Tamam, 2018). However, practitioner's role and function must align with corporate culture and management business agenda. As a result of this, the degree of discretion practitioners possesses in their capacity as employee's impact their performance. This is because practitioner's efficacy emanates from expertise and experience over time. However, efficacy to perform is altered by organizational culture and management prerogative in terms of what a practitioner can or cannot do, when to do it, and how to do it. Thus, internal control and power dynamics within the organization impaired participation in decision making and excellence PR. Although Malaysia practitioners are not expected to challenge hierarchical structure due to power distance culture in the country. However, it is important for practitioners to ensure management/managers and CEOs, do not prioritize profit and business performance over ethics.

Zafra and Maydell (2018) argued that code of ethics does not visualize every aspect of PR activity or organization action and as such the code is merely a guideline and not a law. However, strategic management recognizes practitioner's expertise which is why excellence PR proposes that PR be involved in management decision making. Nevertheless, Hofstede's cultural dimension theory acknowledges power distance, bureaucracy, respect for rank and authority and collectivism in terms of unquestioning loyalty and collective efforts to achieve organization goal (Frame & Ihlen, 2018). Findings from the study depart from excellence theory. Rather findings reflect contingency theory of accommodation. While excellence theory posits that PR be part of management, the contingency approach suggests that entities should deploy management strategies that meet the current needs of the organization (Cheng, 2020). This means that organization may adopt business models and leadership style needed for the firm to perform better in light of situation facing the organization. As such, it is incumbent on the organization to include or exclude PR in management setup because the choice to do so resides with upper management. And so adopting a flexible or rigid business model or leadership style may not be visible for every organization which is why firms adopt management styles that enables them to achieve their goals and objective (Appelbaum, Profka, Dep-ta, & Petrynski, 2018).

Practical Implication

The practical implication of this paper benefits PR and communication professionals in Malaysia. Excellence PR posits that PR be involved in strategic management. However, organizational culture and business agenda contrast practitioners' self efficacy, personal ethics and code of practices as indicated in findings of the study. Thus, excellence in PR is not feasible in a high-power distance culture like Malaysia where members of an organization often accept the decisions made by top management with little or no resistance. Therefore practitioners are often culturally-bound to accept the hierarchical structure and embrace collectivism without objection. This raises the question of how practitioners can or should react towards a course of the action, activities, or business goals of management and by extension organization run contrary to practitioner's efficacy and code of the profession. While Malaysian practitioners are not expected to be counter-cultural heroes upholding ethics of the profession irrespective of culture or governance system is important to elevate the image and reputation of the profession.

Scholars like (Greenwood, 2015; Schauster, Neill, Ferrucci and Tandoc 2020) advocate for practitioners to assume whistle blowing role to checkmate operational issues and unethical activities of the organization. By the same token, Greenwood (2015) acknowledged that dissent tactics (whistle blowing) may have retributive implication such as sack, suspension, retaliation or jail time for whistle blowers. With fear of retribution, whistle blowers (practitioners) often tend to give absolute loyalty and alliance to organization to protect and secure their job instead of adherence to ethical standards of the profession (Greenwood 2020). As evidenced in respondent statement "Blow the whistle when your guts are full because it does not always end well for blowers. Remember when you signed up to work you promised to comply with the law and culture of the place and if you don't like how things are done and if your personal values are high then quit, If management or the company is wrong the law will decide you cannot be the law in another man turf" (P#15).

Self-efficacy ensures that practitioner's emotional side reflects in their performance (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). As such, empowerment enables practitioners to exercise discretion and act on behalf of the organization as professionals. However, practitioner's actions and ethical disposition must comply with management agenda. Entities seeking legitimacy for their activities must act ethically (McMurrian & Matulich, 2016) even though practitioners cannot force ethics on management. Nonetheless, activism and dialogue becomes a legitimate PR practice and function for practitioner's to advocate for ethical compliance in their place of assignment. In polarized societies like Malaysia, corporate culture and business agenda allows management to convey their values and philosophy to every employee including PR practitioners. Thus, the task of practitioners as the ethical conscience of the organization becomes daunting in confronting management to comply with ethics because dissidence attracts retribution. While the justification for organization action can be viewed from the perspective of what serves the interests of firm and its stakeholders. Given their educational training and years of experience as communication experts, practitioners must continuously dialogue with management, advice, and advocate for CEOs/managers to act ethically particularly on communication matters. This is because slow response to stakeholders needs led to speculations and ultimately tarnish the image and reputation of the firm. As such, upholding ethical standards is essential to checkmate unethical activities in hierarchical culture and polarized societies like Malaysia. Hence, disparity between theory and practice of PR highlights peculiar challenges in relation to socio, economic and cultural context of PR practice which is why excellence theory cannot be applicable across the board.

Limitation

Participation in the study was limited to mainly practitioners in Kuala Lumpur because the location of study was most suitable due to availability of PR offices and departments. Findings from the study impacts literatures on excellence theory and reaffirmed that culture, governance, and economic systems impact the practice of excellence PR. As a result, excellence theory cannot be generalized because of cultural and contextual peculiarities. Similarly, informants from public sector were less expressive and unwilling to speak on ethical issues due to alliance and respect for institutional authorities. As such, this may have impaired the findings because of participants were less expressive. On the other hand informants from private entities were vocal in responding to questions without reservation and expressive in the manner and steps taken to guide against unethical actions of their organization such as withholding information from publics.

Given that the study deployed an inductive qualitative approach, findings cannot be generalized to broader population due to the limited number of participants involved in the study. Further study can be expanded to cover a large pool of participants across the country to have a generalized view of the ethical disposition and efficacy of Malaysia practitioners. Reluctance to engage or compliance with organization culture is perceived as breach of organization rules. This is because organization laws and culture entrust management with authority over subordinates as employees (Metwally, et al., 2019). Likewise, further study is needed to identify, define, and conceptualize action practitioner can or must take to compel management act ethically without retribution. Conflict of interest arises when practitioners prompt management to prioritize ethics over financial gain particularly in societies with high power dis-

tance culture or hierarchically centralized society. As a result, hierarchical authority takes prominence and decides what is ethical and what is not instead of ethics that emanates from acceptable moral and professional standard. Hence, further study can focus on framework for organization dissident in culturally polarized societies like Malaysia.

Conclusion

Self-efficacy plays an important role in practitioner's action and decisions. As such, PR practitioners are expected to uphold acceptable professional standards when carrying out their duties which included adherence to code of conduct of the profession. Conversely, Malaysian practitioners are subject to organizational laws and culture because management of the organization sets its own values, agenda, and ethical standards that practitioners must follow. As a result, organization values and ethical inclinations became norms for employees (practitioners) to follow when performing their role as representatives of the organization. Excellence theory postulates that PR be involved in strategic management for organizational effectiveness. However, findings from the study run contrary to excellence theory postulations because Malaysian practitioners are not actively involved in strategic management. Thus, findings from the study poses significant theoretical questions for excellence theory. Respondent's views are theoretical outlier contrary to previous literatures and the proposition of excellence theory. As a result, quantitative deductive study is needed to validate if findings of this study hold true for Malaysian PR as the study population in light of the theoretical outlier.

Practically, ethical issues and conflict arising from management unethical actions, warrants answers to how practitioners can confront or dialogue with management without retribution. How practitioners should react or act in the event organizational agenda supersede moral standards are pertinent issues facing practitioners in the performance of their roles. Although ethics and managerial behavior are not universal across cultures (Richardson, Yaapar, & Amir 2016; Kenny, 2017), this study highlights challenges facing practitioners in power distance societies or hierarchical centralized society like Malaysia. Every organization has its own unique approach to work, leadership style, and business approach and this perhaps explains why management approaches are heterogeneous across sectors, organization, regions and nations (Richardson, et al. 2016). Consequently, autonomy of Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) through legislation or act of parliament can empower the institute to govern and regulate the profession independently and mandate accreditation to ensure professionalism and ensure loyalty to the codes of the profession which moves above and beyond the organization's culture and policies.

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