

Ethical PR Practices in The Digital Age: A Cross-Provincial Comparison in Pakistan

Hafiz Muhammad Umar Farooq^{*1}, Ayesha Ashfaq²

¹*PhD Scholar, School of Communication Studies, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

²Chairperson & Associate Professor, Department of Media & Development Communication, School of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding author: umar002@gmail.com

Keywords: Ethical Public Relations, Digital Media, Government Communication, Pakistan, Provincial Comparison

DOI No:

<https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i2.265>

This paper examines ethical public relations (PR) practices in the digital age in all four provincial Directorates General of Public Relations (DGPRs) in Pakistan. With the increasing use of platforms like Facebook, X formerly known as Twitter, and WhatsApp for official communication by government agencies, issues of misinformation, political manipulation, and competing ethical standards are being raised. In qualitative analysis, 8 in-depth interviews were taken from PR officials of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan to analyze how digital communication is being handled and what ethical issues arise province-wise, the findings indicate that while digital platforms have increased the speed and ease of public communication, there are serious ethical issues like misinformation, anonymous handles, political manipulation of content, and poor mechanisms of accountability. The inquiry further discovers cultural, religious, and regional factors influencing communications practices differently in provinces. Participants overwhelmingly underscored the necessity for a uniform national framework to oversee digital PR ethics and institutional strength, paper study concludes that standard policy, uniform training, and culturally attuned approaches tailored to provincial contexts are required to achieve ethical, transparent, and inclusive government communication in Pakistan.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital media has transformed the nature of government-citizen relations in a phenomenal way by facilitating faster communication, wider reach, and increased citizen engagement. Provincial government public communications departments, i.e., the Directorates General of Public Relations (DGPRs) in Pakistan, have been employing social media platforms increasingly as a means of their public relations in an attempt to disseminate their messages, reach different publics, and respond to emerging issues in real time by using tools such as Facebook, X formerly known as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp extensively to publish information, promote government projects, and manage crises (Macnamara, 2016; Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Montes et al., 2024).

Digital platforms have made public communication faster and more efficient, but they also bring serious ethical concerns. Misinformation, limited transparency, political bias, and weak accountability have all raised questions about the trustworthiness of government communication (Bowen, 2013; DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Bowen & Erzikova, 2024). In Pakistan, these issues become even more complex because of the country's cultural, religious, and language differences, which vary widely from one province to another. Public relations now is not so much an issue of adopting new technology but also grounded in fundamental values such as openness, accountability, fairness, and the need to maintain public trust (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Parsons, 2008; Constantin & Nelwin, 2024). While all these values are becoming more important, still there is a very large unstated knowledge gap concerning how these values are actually being operationalized in practice in government PR efforts particularly in the administratively and culturally diverse provinces of Pakistan. There is no research that has tried to solve this issue in depth yet, and numerous questions still remain unanswered.

This study addresses this gap by examining the ethical practices of digital public relations across the four provincial DGPRs of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. It explores how ethical standards are implemented, identifies regional differences, and assesses the influence of cultural and institutional factors on ethical decision-making in digital government communication.

1.1 Objectives of the study

1. To examine how the DGPR offices in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan are using digital media for public relations.
2. To discuss the challenges of ethical issues for provincial PR departments when handling online communication.
3. To contrast ethical variations in standards, policies, and practices between the four provinces.
4. To analyze how institutional, social, and cultural determinants influence provincial-level ethical practices of PR.

1.1 Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How are digital media platforms being utilized for public relations by the DGPRs of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan?
- **RQ2:** What ethical challenges are encountered by PR professionals in managing digital communication across these provinces?

- **RQ3:** How do ethical practices and standards differ among the four provincial DGPRs?
- **RQ4:** What role do cultural, social, and institutional factors play in shaping ethical digital PR practices in each province?

2. Literature Review

The expansion of digital communication has transformed the landscape of public relations (PR), enabling faster, more interactive engagement between institutions and their audiences (Macnamara, 2016; Allagui & Breslow, 2016). Government organizations, in particular, have embraced platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp to disseminate information, manage crises, and promote public initiatives. However, the integration of digital tools into government PR has also introduced complex ethical challenges, particularly in developing democracies where regulatory mechanisms are still evolving (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Bowen, 2013).

2.1 Digital Public Relations and Government Communication

Researchers have underscored the growing application of online media in promoting government transparency and responsiveness (Macnamara, 2016; Bertot et al., 2012). The ease of social media promotes real-time posting, interactive debate, and access to public statements (Kent & Taylor, 2002). However, while the tools promote visibility and accessibility, they also subject institutions to public scrutiny when ethical violations such as misinformation, biased messages, or lack of accountability for actions occur (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014).

In Pakistan, use of digital media in public communication has multiplied many times, but institutional preparedness to counter ethical problems is uneven (Khan & Rasool, 2022). Provincial differences in resources, political systems, and communication policy decide to what extent the PR departments can handle such problems.

2.2 Ethical Principles in Public Relations

The moral premises of PR practice are based on principles of honesty, transparency, justice, and consideration of stakeholders (Bowen, 2007; Parsons, 2008). Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Two-Way Symmetrical Model also subscribes to dialogue-based, ethics-driven communication, with an emphasis on shared understanding between organizations and the public. Nevertheless, scholars have discovered that it is usually challenging to apply these ideals in divisive political or resource-constrained environments (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009).

Research has documented ongoing ethical concerns within digital government PR, such as the spread of misinformation, political influence over content, undisclosed sponsored material, and abuse of anonymous nicknames (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Bowen, 2013). These actions erode public trust and threaten the democratic principles of digital communication.

2.3 Regional and Cultural Influences on PR Ethics

Regional and cultural influences are identified in the literature as factors shaping PR ethics (Sriramesh, 2003; Huang, 2001). Communication strategies must be tailored to different linguistic, religious, and social contexts to be both effective and ethical. Institutional capacity, cultural values, and political environments vary at the provincial level in Pakistan and significantly impact the implementation of ethical PR practices (Khan & Rasool, 2022). For example, more developed provinces like Punjab and Sindh, with more developed urban centers and infrastructure, can

present more developed digital communication practices. However, provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa present unique issues related to limited resources, tribal affiliations, and customary social orientations that make it difficult to follow universal ethical principles.

2.4 Need for Ethical Frameworks in Digital PR

There is a consensus among scholars on the need for formal ethics codes to regulate digital PR practices, particularly in government agencies (Bowen, 2013; Parsons, 2008). Without standard policies and training, PR professionals have difficulty countering misinformation, remaining politically neutral, and providing inclusive communication. Scholars also highlight the importance of institutional responsibility and cultural sensitivity in promoting ethical public relations in multicultural societies (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009; Huang, 2001).

Despite such recommendations, there is very little empirical work on ethical digital PR practices in Pakistan's provincial government contexts. This study bridges the gap by providing a cross-provincial analysis of ethical PR practices that identify prevailing concerns as well as region-based differences in Pakistan's evolving digital public communication context.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The study draws from Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetrical Model of public relations that aims for dialogue, mutual understanding, and moral interaction between individuals and publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). As the most used model in PR literature, the two-way symmetrical model facilitates symmetrical, open communication in which organizations interact with their publics positively and respond in a way that fosters trust, inclusivity, and moral responsibility

Within government communication, the model is both a normative framework and an assessment tool for measuring the effectiveness of public relations practice in terms of openness, fairness, and responsiveness (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Transposed to the context of digital communication, the model emphasizes the necessity for governments to get beyond one-way information distribution and, instead, create interactive, citizen-focused communication that is attuned to the interests and cultural contexts of people. The two-way symmetrical model's application in this study is in ethical public communication focus, particularly where power imbalances, political influence, and cultural complexities can influence PR activities. In Pakistan's Provincial DGPRs, where regional variations in resources, institutional strength, and social norms are dominant, the model provides a useful frame of reference from which to consider both the potentialities and constraints of achieving ethical, dialogic communication in the digital age.

Moreover, the model aligns with international discourse on ethics, openness, and transparency in government communication, particularly in new democracies where institutional problems and socio-political diversity do come into play to make overall communication standards more challenging to enforce (Grunig, 2001). According to the two-way symmetrical model, this research analyzes how the PR departments of Pakistan's provincial governments handle ethical issues, interact with different publics, and modify communication strategies in the ever-evolving digital age in order to advance institutional objectives and public well-being.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative study design to explore ethical PR practices during the digital age in Pakistan's four provincial Directorates General of Public Relations (DGPRs). Eight participants were purposively chosen and included Directors General, Deputy Directors, and

Information Officers within the DGPRs in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. They were chosen because they directly managed digital communication and public relations at the provincial level. Data gathering was conducted through semi-structured interviews in Urdu or English, as preferred by the respondent. Interviews raised questions of the employment of online media, ethical issues, cultural effects, and institutional deficiencies in PR practice. Interviews were done with consent, audio-taped, transcribed, and translated where appropriate. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) principles, was used to identify prominent patterns and to develop themes from the data. Ethical principles were followed carefully, with participant confidentiality and voluntary consent guaranteed, and the research formally authorized

4. Finding

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five overarching themes that reflect the range of ethical digital PR practices by Pakistan's provincial DGPRs. The first, Use of Digital Platforms for PR, asserts that Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and other social media are being used everywhere for public outreach, crisis communication, and citizen engagement. The sub-theme of unbalanced digital capacity, however, emerged, as users from resource-poor provinces such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reported a lack of institutional capacity to utilize these platforms.

The second is Ethical Challenges in Digital PR and captures participants' concerns for the dissemination of misinformation, political manipulation of information, and use of anonymous departmental handles. Misinformation risks and political pressures are the sub-themes that capture how, without explicitly stated ethical guides, public communication becomes vulnerable to integrity challenges, with public trust being lost.

Table No 1: Thematic Findings with Interpretations: Ethical Digital PR Across Provinces

| Theme | Sub-Themes | Interpretation |
|---|--|---|
| Use of Digital Platforms for PR | Social media for crisis communication, public updates, and citizen interaction | Digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are widely used, but provinces differ in digital capacity and effectiveness. |
| Ethical Challenges in Digital PR | Misinformation, anonymous accounts, political content manipulation | Lack of ethical guidelines and accountability mechanisms leads to misinformation, political bias, and reduced public trust. |
| Cultural & Regional Influences | Religious sensitivity, language diversity, gender representation in content | Content is tailored to respect religious, tribal, and gender norms, but this also limits uniformity in communication standards. |
| Institutional Gaps & Capacity Issues | Training gaps, weak oversight, inconsistent content approval processes | Resource-poor provinces face greater challenges maintaining ethical standards due to limited training and weak oversight. |
| Need for National Ethical Framework | Desire for unified ethical standards and accountability mechanisms | All provinces express the need for national-level policies and training to promote consistent, ethical digital PR practices. |

The third theme, Cultural and Regional Influences, identifies the religious sensitivities, diversity of languages, and gender mores as content drivers. Adaptation of local mores was a highly visible sub-theme in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where conventional social hierarchies require accurate message adaptations, which limit conventional norms of communication.

The fourth theme, Institutional Gaps and Capacity Issues, captured differences in ethics training, control mechanisms, and content approval processes. The training deficits and inadequate institutional controls sub-theme was prevalent, particularly in the rural areas, leading to uneven ethical practice.

Lastly, the sub-theme Need for a National Ethical Framework captures all participants' shared call for harmonized systems, frameworks of accountability, and capacity building centered on ethics. The sub-theme policy standardization emphasizes that despite the provinces, PR practitioners in Pakistan are aware of the need for a national approach to advance ethical, open, and inclusive digital government communication.

4.1 Discussion

The study finds that provincial DGPRs have increasingly employed online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and WhatsApp in their public relations practice. This is in line with global trends in which governments adopt social media as tools of real-time communication, public engagement, and crisis communication (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Macnamara, 2016). The adoption is effective and consistent across various provincial levels. In provincial cities that are urban in nature, such as Punjab and Sindh, PR departments have developed with quite structured ways of communicating electronically. These provinces are more public participatory as well as platform literate. Nevertheless, provinces such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have limited resources that limit them from engaging with the public on a daily basis, an experience that is common with other developing countries (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012). One of the key areas of concern among participants is the rise of ethical problems like the spread of false information, politicization of information, and anonymous tweets. These problems signify global controversy over undermining transparency and accountability in online PR (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Bowen, 2013). The findings affirm the argument that the absence of uniform ethical codes enhances the possibility of unethical communication, which leads to public mistrust (Parsons, 2008). Political pressures were most acutely experienced where weaker mechanisms of control existed, suggesting an immediate link between institutional capacity and ethical risk. These results support Sriramesh and Vercic's (2009) discovery that ethical PR practices increasingly rely on organizational frameworks and socio-political environments.

The study recommends the way in which cultural, religious, and linguistic factors significantly impact digital PR practice in Pakistan's provinces. In the more conservative provinces of Balochistan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PR officials need to frame content in a tone sensitive to tribal tradition, religious practices, and gender sensitivities. This is consistent with previous studies emphasizing culturally sensitive communication strategies in plural societies (Huang, 2001; Sriramesh, 2003). While such adaptations increase cultural relevance, they also make it difficult to maintain universal ethical standards, particularly in terms of gender representation and public messaging inclusivity.

Consistent with the literature, institutional shortcomings such as inadequate ethics training, resource shortages, and ad hoc decision-making structures directly affect the ability to uphold ethical standards (Bowen, 2007; Khan & Rasool, 2022). These were most prominently witnessed in Balochistan and rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where quality formal training or content review procedures by PR officers were weak. These findings justify calls for more investment in capacity building and policy harmonization formulation to improve ethical, harmonized provincial communication (Parsons, 2008).

Participants from every province also demonstrated a collective desire for a uniform, national digital PR ethics framework to bring coherence, ease, and accountability. Failure to have a standard framework leads to fragmented practices, which beget the same issues that have been tackled in global studies on regulation of public sector communication (Macnamara, 2016; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It would be enabled by Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model to create a common national policy that is supplemented by training and cultural adaptation programs

5. Conclusion

The debate highlights that though that although online media have contributed immensely to the reach, immediacy, and responsiveness of Pakistan's provincial Directorates General of Public Relations (DGPRs), a set of ethical challenges, cultural problems, and institutional differences continue to be in the way of the evolution of uniform and transparent public relations practices in the provinces. This issue is further aggravated by discrepancies in training, policy implementation, and local cultural consciousness, leading to uneven levels of communication. These must be addressed through a holistic and unified effort involving policy guidelines at the national level, investment in institutional capacity, and enforcement of culturally sensitive communication policies. These measures are not only necessary to ensure digital PR compliance with ethics, but also to build public trust and synchronize the communication of the government with the variegated aspirations of the citizens of Pakistan. These issues need to be addressed through national-level policy interventions, bolstered institutional capacity, and culturally responsive communication strategies to make digital PR in Pakistan both compliant with ethical norms and harmonious with the expectations of the public.

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