

# An exploration of strategic public relations management in Ghana

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## Abstract

The study examines the current state of public relations practice in Ghana. The study applied the four principle of generic public relations theory to determine whether PR practice in Ghana was strategic. A mixed mode of survey and in-depth interviews were used to gather data from 108 respondents and 15 interviewees respectively. Findings show PR in Ghana is seldom managed strategically, is practiced more at the technician level than managerial, and is bound to cultural norms of the country.

## Keywords

Communication management, culture, excellence, globalization, global theory, strategic public relations

## Introduction

The onset of globalization, driven mainly by information communication technology, has resulted in the phenomenal growth of the public relations profession, leading to unending discussions on the extent to which public relations (PR) truly contributes to an organization's bottom line. The spread of globalization and its subsequent impact on public relations practice (in what is now described as international or global public relations) has created serious questions centered on the relevance and effectiveness of PR practice in different cultural settings. Indeed, available literature (Falconi, 2010: 2; Freitag and Stokes, 2009: 6) suggests that scholars and practitioners believe that PR now transcends cultural barriers and that it can be practiced effectively on a global scale.

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Several articles and book chapters have been written discussing the practice of PR in different countries.

This research aims to examine the current state of strategic public relations practice in Ghana. Despite the remarkable growth in public relations on the African continent since the early 2000s (Steyn, 2005: 15; Stone, 2004: 226), there is a paucity of scholarly works regarding PR practice on the continent. Except for South Africa, which has contributed immensely to the global discussion on PR, there is limited literature regarding PR practice on the rest of the continent. Ghana, which has witnessed political stability and economic growth for more than two decades, is yet to fully “come to the table” as far as the discussion on PR pedagogy is concerned. Ghana is often referred to as the “gateway to Africa.” Despite the political and economic progress, as well as the increasing growth of the PR industry, academic research on strategic PR management is either lacking or severely limited. Literature shows that the discussion on strategic public relations is largely centered on Asia, Eastern Europe, and the United States (US) (Lim et al., 2005; Rhee, 2002; Turdubaeva, 2010; Verčič et al., 1996; Wakefield, 2007; Yue, 2016). This makes Africa in general, and Ghana in particular, an untapped area for such discussions. This gap means that discussion on global PR practice and applicable theories cannot be fully resolved without contributions from African countries such as Ghana. There is therefore a clear need for many more empirical studies that can set the foundation for a framework that is African. According to Rensburg (2007), African scholars and practitioners must be able to demonstrate how public relations can contribute to both practice and the body of knowledge at the global level:

The African continent is a greenfield for research, and scholars have finally realized that some, but not all, aspects of the Anglo-European-American concept and practice of communication management can be transplanted onto the field in Africa. The composition of the social fabric and the value system of Africa is still far too different from that of the developed world (p. 38).

Sriramesh and Verčič (2002) argue that the paucity of empirical evidence from other cultures could hinder PR scholarship and practice. They therefore suggest the need to gather more “case studies in international public relations” that are not American or Western European based (p. 103). Sriramesh (2008) also calls for “more empirical evidence from other Asian cultures as well as Africa and Latin America” before one can say for certain that public relations practice is the same globally. While it is acknowledged that the body of knowledge on global PR has increased, there is still a “dire need for greater numbers of studies from different socio-cultural environments” (Sriramesh et al., 2013: 121). This study, therefore, attempts to bridge the gap by empirically investigating strategic public relations practices among selected organizations in Ghana.

## Literature review

### *Public relations in Ghana: A brief history and development*

Modern public relations was first introduced in Ghana by the British colonial administration, although the exact date is unclear. According to Gyan (1991), the British colonial administration used PR to disseminate information to the public while also building relationships with

key community and opinion leaders as a means of generating understanding of the administration's policies. Multinational organizations operating in the country also used it to serve their interests. The need to fill the communication gap between the colonial administration and the citizens led to the establishment of the Department of Information Services in 1949 (now Information Services Department, Amoakohene, 2015). When Ghana gained independence in 1957, Ghana's first president, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, revamped the government ministries by placing Ghanaians in charge of government affairs. The Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) was later established in 1959 to train communication professionals. The Institute of Public Relations, Ghana, was also established in 1971 (name was changed from Public Relations Association of Ghana to IPR in 1992) to promote professionalism among practitioners, improve the image of public relations in the country, and set standards for public relations practice (Blankson, 2009: 189). Several universities are currently running PR courses at both the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The stable democracy in Ghana and the activities of IPR Ghana have seen public relations grow at a phenomenal rate. The political stability and economic growth enjoyed by the country have witnessed the setting up of multimillion-dollar organizations as well as an influx of foreign investments, especially in the area of oil and gas, mineral exploration, telecommunications and consumer industries. Public Relations has come a long way in Ghana with almost every organization having a PR/communications department.

Despite the strides made, the practice of PR is not well documented, leaving a gap in literature. Indeed, Sriramesh and Verčič (2009) emphasize the lack of research on how public relations is practiced in different international settings. The authors contend that most of the developments in public relations theories and research conducted are mainly from Western perspectives. In Africa, some attempts have been made to address this imbalance (Kiambi, 2012; Oksiutycz and Enombo, 2011, Thompson, 2018; Wu and Baah-Boakye, 2006, 2009). In Ghana, Thompson (2018), for instance, conducted a study on PR education in an emerging democracy. The result showed that PR education in Ghana is largely influenced by the socio-political and economic situation, as well as Western ideologies, particularly the four models of public relations and system theories. Similarly, Wu and Baah-Boakye (2006, 2009) found that practitioners in Ghana performed a managerial role and that culture plays an essential part in PR practice in the country. Their study suggested that although two-way communication (symmetrical and asymmetrical) is practiced, PR in Ghana is largely shaped by the personal influence and cultural interpreter models. Other scholars such as Kiambi (2012), Oskiutycz and Enombo (2011), and Anani-Bossman (2019) have made similar findings in Kenya, Gabon and Ghana respectively.

The notion of culture as influencing PR practice, in particular, has been discussed at length in the body of literature. Treadwell and Treadwell (2005), for example, posit that culture affects how practitioners write as they identify and define audience needs. Other scholars (including Chmielecki, 2011; Edwards and Hodges, 2011; Hodges, 2006; Sriramesh, 2009) have also written extensively on the relationship between culture and PR. The literature on PR practice in Africa cited so far shows that the practice in Africa is strongly influenced by the cultural interpreter and personal influence models despite the presence of the Grunigen models. The personal influence model is premised on the cultivation of relationships with external stakeholders such as communities, government,

media and activist groups. The cultural interpreter model, on the other hand, is used by multinationals corporations (MNCs) in other countries “where it needs someone who understands the language, culture, customs, and political system of the host country” (Grunig et al., 1995). The strong influence of the two models on PR practice in Africa is not surprising, as Africa has a strong cultural system based on strong interpersonal relationships. In Ghana, the cultural system is premised on the principle of stakeholder/community participation or collectivism (Wu and Baah-Boakye, 2009). This principle allows PR practitioners to effectively assist organizations to interpret the attitude and behaviors of stakeholders. Practitioners are, therefore, able to develop a more effective organization–stakeholder relationship through two-way communication.

### *The excellence study*

The Excellence study revealed 14 characteristics of an excellent public relations program (Grunig et al., 2002). These were grouped under three categories: program level, departmental level, and organizational level. Three effects of excellent public relations were also identified in the Excellent study: meet communication objectives, reduce the cost of regulation, pressure, and litigation, and contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction among employees. The study concluded that for public relations to be effective, it must be included in the overall decision-making process. PR managers must form a part of the strategic process in the organizational structure. This, according to Dozier et al. (1995), demonstrates that an organization is excellent (p. 7).

After testing the excellent principles in Slovenia, generic principles and specific applications were developed by Verčič et al. (1996). These authors suggest that these principles could be applied to the practice of PR in every country, but with variations made to fit the local cultural, political and social environment. The Excellence study identified four essential principles for the strategic management of public relations:

1. The involvement of public relations in strategic management.
2. The empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition—direct reporting relationship.
3. The use of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations.
4. Knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical communication.

The strategic nature of PR practice has been discussed at length among scholars. Verhoeven, Zerfass, and Tench (2011) and Zerfass (2008) note that for organizations to be effective, PR must be a part of the organizational policy decision-making process. Practitioners serve as facilitators by assisting organizations to align organizational objectives with the needs of stakeholders and different environmental situations. The applicability of the four principles in particular has been tested in a number of countries, including China, Singapore, South Korea, Gabon, Italy, and Kyrgyzstan (Oksiutycz and Enombo, 2011; Rhee, 2002; Turdubaeva, 2010; Valentini, 2013; Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014; Yue, 2016) with the results demonstrating that the four generic principles can be used to measure the level at which PR is practiced in different countries, that is, whether the practice is strategic. These four generic principles also formed the basis of the current

research, in which the extent to which public relations was practiced strategically and whether it made contributions to strategic management were examined. The following questions were formulated for the research:

RQ1: To what extent are Ghanaian public relations practitioners involved in the strategic management of their organizations, and do they manage their public relations programs strategically?

The Excellence authors believe that for PR to be strategically managed, practitioners must have a say in the strategic management process of the organization. Further, involvement in the strategic planning process allows PR practitioners to develop programs that communicate with both internal and external strategic publics who pose a risk to and/or provide opportunities for the organization. This enables the organization to achieve its goals. Verčič et al. (1996) note that organizations strive to develop a positive relationship with the strategic publics that support them. Being part of strategic management allows the practitioner to develop programs that build relationships thus enabling the organization to save money that might have had to be spent on litigation, regulation, legislation, pressure campaigns, or boycotts resulting from poor relationships with their publics (Verčič et al., 1996: 37).

RQ2: What kinds of reporting relationship do public relations departments in Ghana have with the dominant coalition and senior management?

Dominant coalition refers to the decision makers in organizations. They are responsible for developing the goals and missions for the organization. Authors of the Excellence study argue that for the PR department to be managed strategically, it must be part of or have access to those responsible for decision-making. The PR department must be given the power to practice PR based on professional principles rather than the ideas of senior management, regardless of how well-intentioned those ideas might be. Involvement in the decision-making process or reporting directly to senior management enhances the status of PR in the organization, thereby gaining substantial influence in contributing to how the organization operates.

RQ3: How effective are Grunig and Hunt's original four models (press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical) of public relations in describing public relations activities in Ghana?

Extensive research has been conducted on the extent to which organizations practice the four models of public relations first identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984). According to the excellence theorists, communication activities should be based on two-way symmetrical communication since it leads to a better and long-term relationship between the organization and its publics. Two-way symmetrical strategies are perceived as balancing the interests of both publics and the organization and ethical in nature. In other words,

two-way symmetrical communication changes not only the behavior of the publics but also of the organization.

RQ4: What is the extent of public relations knowledge in public relations departments in Ghana?

Excellent PR departments have practitioners who have gained theoretical knowledge of the field through formal education, self-study, experience, and/or continuing education (self-development). Knowledge needed to perform strategically includes the ability to effectively manage the response of the organization to issues and develop strategies for the department, as well as the ability to conduct formative and evaluative research (Grammer, 2005: 38). Practitioners who have the necessary theoretical foundation are able to participate in the strategic management of the organization since they have the required expertise.

Given the different context, the research will determine whether these principles can be applied to the Ghanaian environment or whether other factors also influence PR management.

## **Methodology**

The researcher used a mixed-method research design comprising a survey and a series of qualitative interviews to gather data. The instrument for the research was adapted from the original work by Lim et al. (2005) with slight modifications to fit the Ghanaian context. The demographic questions were similarly modified to fit the Ghanaian environment. Issues such as nationality and ethnicity were therefore removed while income per month was changed to the local currency—cedi. The professional associations provided were also modified to include the Institute of Public Relations (IPR, Ghana).

The research population consisted of PR practitioners across the multinational, government, and non-profit sectors, as well as the in-house PR departments of organizations. Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 200 practitioners, of which 108 were returned, giving a return rate of 54%. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used in the data gathering process. These two sampling methods were deemed appropriate for a number of reasons. Firstly, Ghana currently does not have any directory with a list of organizations with a public relations or communication department. Secondly, not every practitioner is a member of the local association (IPR, Ghana) and some professionals also double as PR practitioners even though their main work is in other departments such as marketing and human resource. Thirdly, the IPR list is outdated and contains names of people who have either changed jobs or are not practitioners at all but are either journalists or honorary members. Moreover, the list does not have the email and phone numbers of the members, so it could not be relied upon. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviations were used to analyze the statements.

A one-on-one qualitative interview, based on an interview guide developed by Lim et al. (2005), was also conducted with 15 practitioners. Based on extant literature

(Daymon and Holloway, 2011; Latham, 2013; Mason, 2010; Merriam, 2009), 15 practitioners were considered an appropriate sample size for the interview. Daymon and Holloway (2011), for example, posit that in qualitative research, a sample size of between four and 40 is sufficient, while Latham (2013) proposes 15 as the minimum number of interviews. The interviewees included practitioners who also participated in the survey. The purpose of the questions was to explain the practice of public relations based on the survey, as well as to probe and uncover unique local characteristics. The selection of practitioners who had also participated in the survey for the interview was to enable the researcher to probe and identify any discrepancies found in the quantitative data. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in English. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed with the assistance of a computer software (Atlas.ti 7). The analysis and interpretation were premised on the process outlined by Lichtman (2013) in terms of codes, categories, and concepts. Themes were derived based on the strategic principles used for the study. The findings of both the interview and the survey were analyzed in answering the research questions.

## Findings and discussion

In general, more than half of the respondents were males (69%) with females constituting just 31%. Nearly half (48%) of the practitioners were between the relatively young age of 21 and 35 with those over 40 years constituting 32%. More than half (53%) possessed postgraduate degrees with 36% having a bachelor's degree. Interestingly, most respondents (64%) said their organizations were not part of any professional body. The majority (63%) reported their incomes as ranging between Gh¢2000 and Gh¢5000, which is on the low side. Regarding work experience, over half (51%) of the practitioners said they had been practicing for more than 6 years.

Concerning the 15 participants who were interviewed, seven were in-house practitioners, some with MNCs. Five worked with government institutions while three were from NGOs. Participants comprised 10 males and five females.

### *RQ1: Involvement of public relations in strategic management*

The results showed that contribution to routine operations ( $M=4.19, SD=1.04$ ) is the highest form of activity engaged in by practitioners. This corroborates the findings of Lim et al. (2005) and Yue (2016). However, unlike the findings of the two studies stated, practitioners in Ghana reported developing contacts with important publics ( $M=3.96, SD=0.94$ ) as the second highest, with helping management to identify both internal and external strategic publics coming in third ( $M=3.87, SD=1.05$ ). What this means is that practitioners engage in activities that are not strategic, although the impression is often created that this is not the case. Responding to major social issues actually came in fourth ( $M=3.81, SD=0.99$ ), which gives credence to the view that practitioners in Ghana tend to perform more technical functions than managerial functions. What is of interest is that contribution to strategic planning ( $M=3.7, SD=1.16$ ) did not rate high with measurement of the extent to which the dominant coalition sought the opinion of practitioners in decision making or planning ( $M=3.66, SD=0.94$ ), and the value that

**Table 1.** Mean and standard deviations of Ghanaian public relations practitioner's involvement in strategic management.

Indicator	M	SD
We contribute to strategic planning	3.72	1.16
We contribute in responding to major social issues (crisis, layoffs, fee hike, etc.)	3.81	0.99
We contribute to major initiatives (mergers, acquisition, new movements in markets, launch of new products/services)	3.68	1.13
We contribute to routine operations (e.g. development and maintenance of employee communication, community relations or media relations programs)	4.19	1.04
We conduct formal research (e.g. from news clipping, internet) for use in decision making	3.59	1.19
We conduct informal research (e.g., informal interviews) for use in decision making	3.51	1.07
We help our management to develop goals and objectives in organizational mission and policy	3.63	1.04
We help management to scan the environment and identify issues which may hold potential threats or opportunities	3.80	1.09
We help management to identify both internal and external strategic publics that affect the organization's mission and goals.	3.87	1.05
We have contacts with important publics (e.g. analysts, economists, industry experts, government officials) outside the organization	3.96	0.94
The management seeks our opinion in decision making or planning	3.66	1.03
The management values our judgment in decision making or planning	3.60	1.13

*N* = 108. All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), 5 (*strongly agree*).

senior management placed on the decision-making abilities of practitioners ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) also receiving low ratings (Table 1). Based on this, it can be concluded that views of practitioners are not highly valued in the decision-making process. It is also an indication that practitioners do not generally form part of the decision-making process.

Findings from the interviews corroborated the survey. Of the 15 interviews conducted, only six participants reported being part of the management decision-making process. All the participants, however, confirmed that they reported directly to the chief executive officer. In the words of one practitioner, "even though PR is crucial, and the CEO knows this, I am however not part of decision making even though sometimes I am invited to 'sit in attendance' and make contribution when management deems it necessary." Another participant also noted that "I do not sit in management committee meetings. I, however, do make inputs on decisions that are taken on certain areas." What was significant was that most of the participants who were part of senior management worked with multinational organizations. In all likelihood, multinational organizations understand the importance of PR for organizational survival more than local organizations. The results of the survey and the interviews reveal that decision makers tend to ignore the inputs of practitioners when making

**Table 2.** Knowledge potential for public relations practitioners in Ghana.

Indicator	M	SD
Knowledge for the technician role	4.065	
Produce communication materials (e.g. press release, media advisory, fact sheet, brochure, speech, audiovisuals)	4.12	0.96
Coordinate a press conference	4.08	1.02
Convince a reporter to give publicity to an organization	3.84	1.06
Understand the news value of journalists	4.22	0.88
Knowledge for the managerial role	3.68	
Conduct research to segment publics	3.63	1.13
Conduct evaluation research	3.70	1.11
Prepare a departmental budget	4.06	0.98
Develop strategies for solving public relations and communications problems	4.15	0.89
Help management to understand the opinions of particular publics	4.03	0.96
Help management to scan the environment and identify issues which may be potential threats or opportunities	3.93	1.10
Negotiate with an activist group	3.26	1.12
Write and publish research papers in PR or communication-related journals	3.18	1.18
Establish ties or joint ventures with accredited PR organizations (e.g. Institute of Public Relations Ghana, African Public Relations Association (APRA) etc).	3.25	1.28

N= 108. All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), 5 (*strongly agree*).

key policy decisions. In some situations, practitioners tend to take the initiative to counsel management on the possible impact of a decision taken, which sometimes is accepted by management.

Even though practitioners reported that they conduct formal research ( $M = 3.59, SD = 1.19$ ) for use in decision making, the results of the one-on-one interviews show that research is mostly informal. The fact that items that measured knowledge for conducting formative ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.12$ ) and evaluative ( $M = 3.70, SD = 1.11$ ) research were among the lowest shows the infrequent use of formal research in public relations management (Table 2). Although the result gives the impression that research is critical to the work of practitioners, the interviews reinforced the long-held view that PR research is more talked about than actually practiced. Practitioners opined that the lack of consistent formal research was mainly due to constrained financial and human resources as well as time. Lim et al. (2005) suggest that the decision to conduct informal research may be because it is quicker and cheaper, and does not require expertise as does formal research. According to one participant:

We do the informal more than the formal because the formal tends to be costly and even if you want to do it yourself you realize that your sample size will be small because you can't do it alone.

Another participant also made the following comments in this regard:

We have a very good idea of our customer base and prospective clients. And because we have so many branches, we have an idea of which of the public to target with our message. So, what we do is we rely on historical information, industry analysis and expert opinions to come up with the various players who form our stakeholders. We, however, do not do extensive research. We have employed the services of experts when it comes to external research on some of these things.

For these participants, external research mainly takes the form of media analysis rather than attitudinal or perception research. Concerning evaluation, one participant made this comment:

We do not do evaluative research unless it is a conference where we evaluate the outcome using brief questionnaires. But in terms of evaluation for a campaign, we haven't done it. Evaluation research is a bit problematic because sometimes the decisions are taken for us and so we cannot properly plan on how to evaluate. It is now that we are beginning to assert ourselves more into some of these things.

The preceding above is also an indication that despite the advancement of public relations as a management function, Ghana is still lagging in this realization. Although PR may have developed in Ghana, senior management still does not value its contribution to organizational goals. Overall, the interviews revealed that research, especially evaluation research, was based on peer feedback, unsolicited feedback from the public, debriefings, and customers feedback. This also confirms the findings of Anani-Bossman and Tella (2017) that research in Ghana is more informal than formal. Accordingly, the results show that practitioners working in multinational organizations practice strategic PR more than those in local organizations, confirming the findings of Turdubaeva (2010), Lim et al. (2005) and Yue (2016).

### *RQ2: Empowerment of public relations direct reporting relationship in Ghana*

Grunig and Grunig (2011) posit that for public relations to be strategic, it must be represented in the dominant coalition. This is not the case in Ghana, however. The findings of both the survey and the interviews showed that practitioners were not part of the dominant coalition. Participants pointed to the lack of management understanding of the strategic value of PR as the reason. Evidence from the interview showed that the management of these organizations does not understand PR and thinks the purpose of PR is to enhance the image of the organization through positive publicity. PR is therefore equated to media relations. Communication managers of some of the organizations made the following statements:

I engage the CEO on things that are of interest PR wise to the organization, but I am not part of their meeting. Sometimes the decisions are taken, and I am only asked to implement and so whether the decision will favor our publics or not, the decision has already been taken. Sometimes when I realize the decision will be problematic, I engage the CEO but then it becomes difficult to retract it because it has already been taken.

In terms of being part of the decision-making process, it depends on what unit of decision. In some areas yes, in some areas no. I do not sit in management committee meetings, but I make key inputs on decisions that are taking on certain areas.

Practitioners were of the view that although PR has seen a great improvement in Ghana, senior management still lacks the knowledge and understanding of the importance of PR in achieving organizational goals. These practitioners believe that PR is seen merely as media relations and making “issues” go away. Responses clearly show that the value of PR in Ghana is yet to be fully appreciated. What was apparent, however, was that practitioners from MNCs tended to be part of the decision-making body; as one practitioner puts it: “In some organizations, PR is seen as a supporting service, but here PR is an integral strategic part of what we do. So, we are at the highest level.” Another also stated that: “Because management values PR, I have been made part of the leadership team. Even when it is purely business they sometimes ask for my input.” The CEOs of most of the MNCs are expatriates from developed countries and are likely to understand the value of communication and the place of PR within the management system.

The majority of practitioners (84%) reported having a direct reporting line to the executive body with 21% having indirect reporting lines. This is significant and agrees with the Excellence principles. However, this does not mean practitioners are playing strategic roles in their organizations. Grunig et al. (2002) note that the purpose of empowerment is to enable the practitioner to truly offer his expertise for the benefit of the organizations, not because it will allow PR to help dictate organizational decisions (p. 142). A positive albeit weak correlation ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ) was found between the head of PR being part of the dominant coalition and having a direct relationship to the dominant coalition. This corroborates the views in the literature (Lim et al., 2005; Yue, 2016) that practitioners are not likely to be members of the dominant coalition even though they may report directly to the power elite.

Overall, the majority (82%;  $n = 108$ ) of respondents reported that they received strong support/support from the dominant coalition, an indication that practitioners generally believe management supports the communication function in the organization. This was reflected in the interviews where practitioners acknowledged that management gave them the necessary support to do their work because of the value they placed on PR. The support, though, is not unanimous as one interviewee pointed out: “Although the CEO tends to value my work, most of the management staff only look at the tangibles, but PR is not like marketing and so even though I get the support, it is not 100%.” The findings from the survey and the interviews revealed that support received from management was not enough to make practitioners part of the decision-making body. Some of the interviewees felt that in their organizations, management is only looking at how much will come in physically and since the contribution of PR is usually not tangible, it becomes a challenge for PR to be accepted as part of the dominant coalition: “In this organization, we have been unable to make the breakthrough in terms of support because the CEO is only looking at how much will come in.” Overall, practitioners were of the view that the attitude of local CEOs to PR demonstrated a lack of knowledge and understanding of the strategic role that PR plays. For practitioners, this was the main reason that PR is generally made subservient to marketing, as seen in the following comments:

The attitude of the C-Suite towards PR is a real issue. The understanding that senior management should have is not there, hence it is difficult. Many of them just see PR as a cost generating center and not an income generating center. So, until that thing is properly cleared it will be a huge challenge.

Most companies relegate PR to the background and do not give practitioners the resources to do what they want to do. Practitioners always complain about budget. It is because management do not think we are strategic enough. So, everyone feels we should not be given extra money.

People tend to downplay the role of communications and so if you are not a strong person, you will be taken for granted. Sometimes the CEO is also a factor. If you have a CEO who is all concerned about figures you will struggle to justify your inclusion. I know in some countries they have merged communication and marketing.

Practitioners mentioned that their budget allocation suffers compared to their marketing counterparts, mainly because marketing can show something of equal value while they (practitioners) cannot. The comment from one practitioner from an MNC echoed the sentiments that others raised:

PR is not about selling so when you make it a function of marketing, you're looking more at revenues rather than the broader issues that affects it. And that often tends to affect the levels of contribution that people can make to affect the business. If PR is in marketing the budget is often in marketing and media buying as opposed to spending on PR and PR does not always show the quick tangible benefit, which is revenue. Sometimes, it has a long-term effect. So, if you are looking at a narrower conversation where PR sits in a marketing function, again how do you even measure and support it. I have worked in organizations where every time there has to be budget cuts, PR is the first to be cut because marketing can always justify saying that my spend is a certain percentage of revenue and therefore if you cut my spend, essentially, you have cut my revenue.

The implication is that PR practitioners will have to justify how their activities generate immediate income rather than talk about long-term intangible returns. The outcome of the survey regarding the value of public relations in as far as return on investment (ROI) is concerned reflected this (Table 3). Table 3 shows that practitioners' estimate of the value of public relations was rated slightly higher than their estimate of the dominant coalition's valuation of public relations.

From the data, it can be concluded that the dominant coalition support and value the public relations department to a certain extent. However, because this value is less than that of the practitioner's own estimation of the value of PR, the dominant coalition is likely to support marketing with more resources than the PR department. This result is consistent with the findings of Grammer (2005), which showed that the dominant coalition tends to support the marketing function more than the PR function. Lim et al. (2005) postulate that until practitioners find a way to quantify their contribution to the bottom line, the dominant coalition will continually "pinch on the public relations budget" due to the prevailing perception that PR is neither cost-effective nor an efficient business tool (p. 328).

Table 3. Frequency table for practitioners and their perception of dominant coalitions' estimation of value pertaining to public relations (cost–benefit ratio).

	Frequency	%
PR practitioners estimate		
Less than 100%	26	24.1
100%	39	36.1
Greater than 100%	37	34.3
Not selected	6	5.5
	108	100
Dominant coalition's estimate as perceived by PR practitioners		
Less than 100%	39	36.1
100%	34	31.5
Greater than 100%	29	26.9
Not selected	6	5.5
	108	100

### RQ3: *The models of public relations in Ghana*

The data found that practitioners largely practiced the press agency and both two-way symmetrical models of public relations. Most (72%) practitioners asserted that the purpose of PR was to generate publicity for the organization ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.05$ ) (see Table 4). The responses of three of the interviewees also reflect what most of them said:

Every organization needs to communicate its activities and policies to the public. So, they need an outfit that will do that for them. The purpose of PR therefore is to communicate the actions of the organization to the publics in a favorable way

PR is to create visibility for the company and also create the needed goodwill for us to be able to build on and thrive on a business. It exists to portray the organization positively to its stakeholders.

PR is there to tell a story of any company. We are in the story telling business but a story that will give value to our audiences. It is like you are in a company, you do all the things you think you are doing to customers and community, but nobody hears what you do or say. Without PR, I do not see how a company can strategically send out its ideas and vision to the public.

Further evidence of this is found in the activities most practitioners mentioned: responding to media issues, media engagements, coordinating events/meetings, development and distribution of communication materials, writing stories for publication, publicity activities such as advertisements and suchlike. These activities are oriented towards the press agency model. Again, practitioners tend to evaluate the success of PR programs based on people who attended the events or used their products/services ( $M = 3.74, SD = 0.99$ ). This includes using media clippings ( $M = 3.35, SD = 1.04$ ). A practitioner made the following comment:

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations of public relations models in Ghana.

Indicator	M	SD
Press agency model	3.37	
The purpose of public relation in my company is to get publicity for my organization	3.79	1.06
Our public relations unit disseminates only favorable information and avoid disclosing unfavorable information to the media	2.96	1.32
We stage events, tours and open houses	3.78	1.19
We hold banquets	3.09	1.29
We offer gifts or memorabilia	3.53	1.22
We determine how successful a program is from the number of people who attend an event or use our products/services	3.74	0.99
We determine how successful a program is based on the number of media clippings generated	3.35	1.04
It is the view of my organization that public relations should only act as a liaison between the organization and the media	2.73	1.31
Public information	3.17	
The purpose of public relations in my company is to disseminate neutral and accurate information, rather than serve as an advocate for the organization or a mediator between management and publics	3.55	1.21
It is the view of my organization that the emphasis of public relations is placed on public service and social responsibility	3.27	1.22
It is the view of my organization to make private economic gain and special interests subordinate to the public good	2.70	1.26
Two-way asymmetrical model	3.43	
The purpose of public relations in my company is to persuade publics to behave as the organization wants them to behave	3.27	1.09
Before starting a public relations program, we conduct research.	3.39	1.19
Before starting a public relations program, we conduct attitude surveys or other informal research to ensure that an organization's policies will be implemented in ways its publics will most likely accept	3.36	1.09
After conducting a public relations program, we perform evaluation of the program	3.72	1.15
Two-way symmetrical model	3.6	
The purpose of public relations in my company is to develop mutual understanding between the management of the organization and publics the organization affects	3.93	1.06
The purpose of public relations in my company is to change the attitudes of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors	3.28	1.14
Before starting a public relations program, we conduct surveys or other informal research to find out how much management and publics understand each other	3.29	1.13
Before starting a public relations program, we seek the opinions of those groups or individuals who will be affected by the decision or policy.	3.62	1.08
It is the view of my organization that public relations should provide mediation for the organization to help management and publics negotiate conflict	3.60	1.05
We comply to an enforceable code of ethics and standards of performance including the disciplinary action of those who deviate from accepted behavior	3.90	1.10

N= 108. All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), 5 (*strongly agree*).

We mainly use media clippings to determine how well we are doing. This is because when we put something in the public domain, it is important for us to see how much publicity we received.

Another said that “clippings play an important role for us. When journalists cover a story, or we send a press release, we want to know that the stories were carried and the prominence given to them.” The lack of/insufficient use of formative and evaluative research, as noted earlier, shows that PR practice in Ghana is not primarily based on the two-way symmetrical model. Interestingly, the results of the survey (see Table 4) demonstrate that the two-way models were significantly practiced. About 75% of the respondents stated that the purpose of PR was to develop mutual understanding between the organization and its publics ( $M = 3.93, SD = 1.06$ ). What is interesting is that very little of this was reflected in the comments of most interviewees. Respondents interviewed claimed that two-way communication was more spoken of than practiced. Yue (2016) and Lim et al. (2005) attribute this to social desirability, that is, the desire to portray themselves, as well as their organization, in a positive light. In this regard, practitioners tend to show how PR *ought* to be practiced rather than the way *it* is actually practiced in their organizations. Many of the interviewees intimated that the ideal situation is symmetrical communication, but acknowledged this was more in theory than really practiced.

Evidence from the research shows that PR practice in Ghana follows the mixed-motive approach whereby both the two-way asymmetrical and the two-way symmetrical models are used. Practitioners therefore develop strategies based on the need to reach a compromise with stakeholders. This results in a win-win situation for all parties involved in the negotiation process.

A significant relationship was found between the involvement of practitioners in strategic management and the two-way models ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.01$ ), an indication that an organization that is predisposed to strategic management and has practitioners who are able to manage activities in a strategic manner is more likely to put the two-way models into practice. These findings correlate with the findings of the interviews where practitioners admitted that they develop communication strategies for their organizations. A Pearson correlation showed a substantial relationship between the two-way models and knowledge of the managerial role ( $r = 0.42, p < 0.01$ ) and knowledge required for the technician role ( $r = 0.41, p < 0.01$ ). The result is evidence that both the managerial role and the technician role are essential for the practice of strategic public relations. What it also means is that practitioners who had knowledge of the managerial role are likely to develop PR strategies based on more formal research to further enhance the reputation of their organizations with key publics.

Findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data show that PR in Ghana cannot be categorized solely on the models postulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984). In Ghana, and in Africa in general, interpersonal communication plays a key role in relationship building and this translates to the way organization–stakeholder relationships are managed. In Ghana, the sense of belonging is very strong and this allows relationships to be created based on dialogue. Interpersonal communication is at the core of relationship building with key stakeholders such as journalists, regulators, community leaders, and opinion leaders. The idea of interpersonal relationships is found in the African philosophy of

Ubuntu, which translates to “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Fourie, 2008: 63). The concept of Ubuntu is based on communalism in terms of which people are defined in relation to their community. Mersham et al. (2011) note that Ubuntu places emphasis on collectiveness and community. The African is therefore viewed as someone who participates in and depends on others for her/his development. Emphasis is therefore placed on transparency, negotiation, and inclusiveness. The Bantu people of Uganda, for instance, define public relations as “relating well with people” (Natifu and Zikusooka, 2014: 224). According to Skinner and Mersham (2009), the ubuntu concept is likely to explain why public relations scholars, in their effort to develop a global model for PR, tend to find public relations in Africa very challenging, as it does not really conform to the normative models espoused by, among others, Grunig. Christian (2004) concludes with the following:

Since the self cannot be conceived without necessarily conceiving of others, Ubuntu adds a universal and compelling voice against the Enlightenment’s atomistic individuals who exist prior to and independently of their social order. In the West, where “individualism often translates into an impetuous competitiveness,” the cooperation entailed by ubuntu’s “plurality of personalities” in a “multiplicity of relationships” is an attractive, though overwhelming concept. The modernist concept of individuality now has to move from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality a la community (p. 245).

Interpersonal communication is also reflected in the personal influence model which, as the data found, is also practiced in Ghana. Sriramesh (1992) describes the personal influence model as a quid pro quo relationship between practitioners and key publics such as journalists, editors, government legislators, and tax officials. The model is premised on developing relationships with key stakeholders as a means of showing the importance of face-to-face communication in the public relations process.

Unlike the personal influence model, however, the interpersonal communication or ubuntu philosophy goes beyond the quid pro quo relationship. Interpersonal communication is an integral aspect of Ghana’s cultural system and organizations understand that they are as much a part of the community as the community is part of the organization. Organizations therefore work with the community in ways that are seen as appropriate. In Ghana, and Africa in general, corporate social responsibility, for example, is practiced with a “societal perspective.” Practitioners “show a high concern for societal issues, which motivates continuous dialogue between the organization and society” (Van Heerden and Rensburg, 2005: 85).

Angus and Kapanga (2008) discovered that tradition, trust, power of the community, and word of mouth were key drivers of brand growth in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and other African countries. These are essential values that define everyday communication in Africa. In a culturally sensitive country like Ghana, and Africa in general, the interpersonal communication/personal influence model plays a key role in strategic engagement. The success of any business is highly dependent on managing the relationship with community/opinion leaders, who are well respected by the community members. In Ghana, engaging opinion leaders, government regulators, and other influential members of society at the interpersonal level is viewed as showing deference.

Almost 80% of the respondents indicated that they initiate contact with essential publics, including analysts, economists, industry experts, and government officials, which tends to contribute to their overall success as strategic managers ( $M=3.96$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ). The interpersonal relationship was most profound in the area of media relations. In Ghana, media relations is not just about inviting the press to cover events or asking them to publish press releases or features. Practitioners realize the critical role the media play as gatekeepers in ensuring they always obtain favorable publicity. Practitioners therefore establish relationships using end-of-year gifts, sponsorships, development (training) programs, and press soirees—mostly for senior journalists and editors, with the media and other important publics. The following comment by a practitioner reflects what many of the interviewees said:

We organize a press soiree at least once a year for senior journalists where we have mostly informal discussions on issues within the industry. Off course these discussions are off record, but the idea is to establish a closer relationship with them in order to ensure favorable publicity.

Practitioners believe that establishing a positive relationship with the media will lead to the blocking of any form of negative news about the organization before it goes out, as articulated by a respondent: “Because we speak freely with them, we are able to clarify information before it becomes public. By this we are able to check all forms of inaccurate information that will bring problems to the organization.” This result corroborates the literature (Huang, 1990; Sriramesh, 1992; Sriramesh and Grunig, 1988) that shows interpersonal communication is used in certain cultures to develop personal relationships with key publics, including governments, media, and activists. These relationships are developed by means of gift giving, cocktails, hosting dinners, and media soirees. Such relationships allow organizations to later solicit favors from the stakeholders.

### *RQ: Knowledge potential of public relations practitioners in Ghana*

The research respondents reported a higher knowledge of the technician role ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than knowledge for the managerial role ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). A paired-sample *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two roles ( $t = 6.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As shown in Table 2, there was high proficiency in the production of communication materials ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), coordinating press conferences ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), and understanding the news value of journalists ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). Concerning the managerial role, practitioners were proficient in developing communication strategies ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ), preparing departmental budgets ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), helping management to understand the opinions of particular publics ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and helping management to scan the environment and identify issues which may hold potential threats or opportunities ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). Practitioners did indicate their lack of writing of research papers in journals ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). This is not surprising as the interviewees intimated that their busy schedule did not allow them to publish papers. There is also the possibility that practitioners in Ghana do not really possess the skills for writing academic papers. Similar findings by Yue (2016) demonstrate that there is a gap between industry practitioners and

publication in journals. Yue (2016) attributed this situation to three things: (1) a shortage of research ability and academic writing skills among practitioners, especially as respondents mainly work in industry; (2) lack of time on the part of practitioners to write and publish articles whilst full-time employees, and (3) a lack of interest or motivation in writing scholarly papers as their professionalism was not evaluated by the quantity or quality of publications (p. 54). Practitioners also depicted less knowledge in negotiating with activist groups ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). This may be because in Ghana negotiations with such groups are usually handled by members of the dominant coalition. Yue (2016) also alluded to the fact that negotiations with such groups are often not prioritized by organizations. The low level of knowledge of the managerial role revealed by the data is not surprising as most of the practitioners did not have a formal background in communication/public relations. Very few also engaged in development training programs to acquire a certificate in communication. Respondents attributed this to a lack of budget as well as lack of commitment from management. This situation was not found among the MNCs, however, as many of them sponsored their communication officers to do further training.

The findings further indicated that most practitioners were not affiliated to any PR professional body such as the IPR, Ghana or other international bodies such as the IPR, UK, IABC, or IPRA. The implication is that they are likely to miss out on current trends and practices in the industry. This is contrary to the literature, which states that public relations departments that are excellent will have departments staffed by professionals who are educated in the body of knowledge of PR and are also active members of professional associations. Although public relations in Ghana is maturing, it still has a long way to go to reach its potential. One of the key challenges attributed to the slow progress of PR in Ghana is the attitude of the C-suite. Management does not value the efforts of PR and often relegates it to the background until there is a crisis.

The qualitative aspect of the study sought to confirm that culture did indeed play a role in PR practice in Ghana. The results clearly confirm the role that culture plays in PR practice in Ghana, as participants were of the view that businesses must be situated within the cultural context of a country. One can therefore not import foreign ideologies into another culture. "Cultural matters are very important in Ghana. If you want to succeed you need the approval of community and opinion leaders as their words carry weight and value," said one participant. Another participant noted that, "if you are able to get the buy-in of the community, in terms of peer-to-peer recommendation, it becomes easier for you as opposed to blasting on the mass channel and it becomes quite effective as well and also you are able to build relationships and even get feedback." Another participant gave some examples to buttress the point he was making about the role culture plays in the Ghanaian business environment:

For example, if you are going to a chief you cannot go empty handed. For international companies they have a policy against anti-bribery. So, if you go and give them gift before you go and see them, in a way it is an inducement. But here it is culturally accepted no matter the issue. So, if a foreigner does not understand, he might say don't give any chief any gift. When you do that you are not going to get anything done in this country. If you invite the media to come and cover an event for example, you must give them transportation, what we popularly call *sofi*. In the foreign country you don't do that else you will fail.

Participants were clear that, in their view, consensus building was essential when dealing with stakeholders. This means that before embarking on a campaign, the organization needs to engage the communities concerned and get their buy-in. In Ghana, opinion leaders such as chiefs are highly regarded and have great influence. They are critical of the performance of organizations in communities. This is reflected in the following comment by a participant:

You can't just say that I am a British company, so I must do things the British way. You need to be guided as to the cultural norms that influences the way we conduct business. How we treat our people, how the business is run. In Ghana, your body language, the way you talk to people is important. Sometimes when I have expatriate managers, we organize training for them as to how they should behave, especially when talking to those in higher authority.

Clearly, an organization, especially a multinational, cannot hope to be successful without adapting to the cultural environment. Culture is essential to the livelihood of an individual and organizations will have to adapt to their environment if they wish to succeed. As one practitioner put it, “any organization that eliminates the influence of culture will end up shooting itself in the foot.”

## Implications for theory

The results of the study provide further support for a global theory of public relations. It supports the call by Sriramesh (2008) for further evidence from other jurisdictions such as Africa. The study also shows that the practice of PR in other parts of the world cannot be fully categorized under the models postulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Ghana, and Africa in general, has its own unique set of behaviors that influence the way business is conducted and these need to be factored into any discussion on a global body of theory that shapes the practice of PR. This suggests the need to have further discussions and to conduct research on African public relations practice.

The results further show the need for African PR scholars and practitioners to critically examine the current trends in PR and communication management and develop a model that reflects the African situation. Scholars need to investigate the state of theory, research and practice with “Afro-optimism” as postulated by Rensburg (2007). An African model of PR must incorporate the characteristics of the generic principles as well as features of the African philosophy of ubuntu. Ubuntu, as noted earlier, is reflected in consultation, agreement, feedback, engagement, and consensus. With the increasing entry of MNCs into Ghana, and Africa as a whole, PR practitioners will continue to be at the forefront of connecting the two different cultural philosophies. Practitioners are expected to “develop communication approaches and skills to resolve the discordance between the business-as-business practice and the prevailing African orthodoxy of business-as-a-social cause on the continent” (Mersham et al., 2011: 203). As literature continues to identify similarities and differences in PR practice globally, Ghanaian PR scholars and practitioners should be able to collaborate and network to develop effective programs that work for the country. These can then be incorporated in educational curriculums for PR education in Africa. Graduates of PR education in Ghana will then be

equipped with the required tools that reflect both global standards and the African context. The study also has certain theoretical implications for debates on the relationship between marketing and public relations from an African perspective. Evidence from the research demonstrated a high regard for marketing compared to PR. This has implications for PR efforts, especially in relation to budgets. Practitioners should be able to educate the organization, particularly senior management, on the value of PR and how it contributes to organizational success. Understanding the work of PR will be key to the place of PR within the organizational structure. The results further demonstrate the strong influence of interpersonal communication in PR practice, despite technological advancement. Although multiple channels of communication, both new and traditional, exist, interpersonal communication is still the most effective means of communication for shaping public opinion. Whereas Western communication attempts to keep face-to-face communication to a minimum, Africans tend to share information orally (Mersham et al., 2011). Dialogue and consultation are therefore essential in creating consensus and resolving issues.

## Conclusion and future studies

The purpose of the study was to examine the strategic nature of public relations practice in an African setting, specifically Ghana. The results corroborate the literature which indicates that public relations practice is seldom practiced at the strategic level. What the data also revealed was that despite the growth in public relations in Ghana, the profession still has a long way to go in order to become excellent. This can be seen in the fact that marketing appears to be given priority over public relations. It was also evident that PR practice was based more on the technician role—receiving instructions from the dominant coalition—than the managerial role—being involved in policy decision making. This is not surprising as top management in this part of the world does not really value the contribution of PR to the bottom line. Lim et al. (2005) attribute this to a lack of valid models that can be used to justify the contribution of PR to the bottom line (p. 336). The result also affirms that PR practice follows the symmetrical models but with a strong leaning towards asymmetrical communication. There is also a strong focus on the press agency. Overall, PR practice in Ghana has its own characteristics in that it is premised on strong interpersonal relationships, informal relations and the cultural environment of the country.

Public relations in Ghana, despite not being fully involved in strategic management, is becoming more professional as more communication schools are being set up to train practitioners at various levels. However, it will also be essential for organizations to engage in development programs that will enhance the level of knowledge of their PR personnel.

In order to determine the extent to which excellence theory applies to Ghanaian PR practice, comprehensive research on the other five generic principles should be conducted. Future research could also examine the relationship between formal education in PR and excellent PR, as well as the use of research and evaluation in PR practice. As noted earlier, the research result shows the need to study the relationship between PR and marketing in Africa, which is an area of research that is largely ignored. Understanding

the relationship between the two disciplines is also essential for the development of PR practice in Africa.

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