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A Quantitative Examination of the Phenomenon of Soli and Public Relations Practice in Ghana

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Abstract

Public Relations (PR) practitioners are cited as being among the top three sources that perpetuate brown envelope journalism (*Soli*) in their dealings with journalists. The practice, thus, appears to have become a norm among PR practitioners and journalists (reporters) without recourse to the ethical implications of the practice. This study investigates the factors PR practitioners in Ghana consider when they engage in the phenomenon of *Soli*. The paper adopted the quantitative research approach and the survey design to investigate this phenomenon. Findings of the study were tested using the Binary and Ordered Probit regression models. The results showed no significant relationship between PR practitioners' knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics and the payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. The results also showed a positive significant relationship between PR practitioners desire to obtain positive media coverage and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. The study recommended the promotion and enforcement of professional and organisational policies on inducement and *a redefinition of the media relations function of PR practitioners*.

Keywords: *Code of Ethics, Public Relations Practitioners, Media, Soli, Communication*



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Introduction

Public Relations (PR) – media relationship is a core function of public relations practice. The core of PR practice is to establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between an organisation and its various publics (Wilcox et al., 2005; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994) of whom journalists constitute a critical segment. This function of PR requires the PR practitioner to relate well with the media to get their organisation's stories or events covered by the media. It is argued that media relations practices account for over 60 percent of all PR in an organisations' efforts to reach its publics (Zoch & Molleda, 2006).

In the performance of their PR functions, some PR practitioners' resort to paying news reporters or editors to get their stories or events covered (Tsetsura, 2015). For these reporters, there is an acceptance of money or other forms of gifts as sitting allowance for events captured to be published in their media spaces (Alhassan & Abdulai, 2019:1). Similarly, Tsetsura and Grynko (2009) note that there is a symbiotic relationship between PR practitioners and journalists: both need each other and both realise that the free flow of information is essential. There are, however, ethical concerns regarding how this relationship between the PR practitioners and journalists is established and maintained, particularly in the Ghanaian context.

In the Ghanaian media landscape, it is a common practice to see PR practitioners doling out moneys, gifts and refreshments to journalists when they are invited to cover events, a phenomenon known in the Ghanaian media landscape as '*Soli*'. This practice is a widespread phenomenon in global media relations and is given various terminologies (euphemisms), depending on the nature and locality. It is termed as cash for news coverage (Kuckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003), media bribery (Tsetsura, 2005), media non-transparency (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009), media opacity (Tsetsura & Kuckeberg, 2009; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010), paid news (Tsetsura, 2015) and payola (Acheampong & Babangida, 2017).

As generally understood in Ghana, *Soli* is a term used to describe "the practice of when journalists accept money from event organisers at the end of press conferences or similar events. The money is supposedly to be used to pay for the cost of travel to the event" (Temo, 2013: 7). *Soli* is derived from the word 'Solidarity' "denoting that the source has some sort of sympathy with the despairing situation of the journalist and therefore wants to extend a helping hand which can also strengthen the ties between the two parties" (Skjerdal, 2010). Kasoma (2009) defines brown envelope journalism (*Soli*) as the practice of granting monetary incentives to

journalists or media outlets to get ample coverage. These monetary incentives are normally enclosed in brown envelopes - the idea being that since the envelopes are opaque, the monetary content does not become apparent. The phenomenon – *Soli*, though unethical and unprofessional (Skjerdal, 2010) seems to have become entrenched in PR practice in Ghana to the extent that budgetary allocations are made for the payment of *soli* when there is an event. Thus, various PR practitioners “simply accept this [*Soli*] as a necessary expense” (Mathews, 2016). These practices by PR practitioners have come under serious scrutiny by well-meaning Ghanaians, academics and diplomats at large and with some calling to question the ethical implications of such behaviours/practices. Also, Ristow (2010), Kasoma (2009) and Kruckeberg & Tsetsura (2003) argues variously that the underlying motives of the phenomenon of *Soli* is to elicit favourable news coverage in the media or to avoid negative media coverage. This payment, it is argued, is normally offered in the form of cash or surplus per diem (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). Although some studies have attempted exploring the dimensions of the values and perceptions of the ethics of practice and the phenomenon of *Soli*, it has largely focused on the qualitative aspect of the phenomenon. Hence, establishing the quantitative dimension of examining the significant relationship of media favour and coverage and the offer of *soli* which is critical is still under explored.

Research problem and hypotheses

PR practitioners are among the sources that perpetuate *Soli* in their dealings with journalists (Kasoma, 2010). The practice, thus, appears to have become a norm among PR practitioners without recourse to the ethical implications of the practice as enshrined in the IPR-Ghana code of ethics.

Kasoma (1999) previously argued that “human beings subscribe to several moral systems at any point in time and ethics begins where elements within a moral system conflict and a person (PR practitioner) is called upon to choose between various alternatives”. What is not clear in the literature is whether the conduct of PR practitioners in Ghana relative to the payment of *Soli*, contravenes the professional principles and code of ethics of the Institute of Public Relations (Ghana)? What ethical considerations inform the decision of PR practitioners to pay journalists *Soli* despite the ethical provisions in their profession regarding the practice?

Previous studies that have examined the relationship between *Soli* and favourite news coverage tend to focus on journalists’ perspectives and largely dominated by qualitative approaches. In terms of its scope, previous literature focused on examining the existence, forms, perceptions, pervasiveness, the moral aspects and the effects of the phenomenon of *Soli* (see: Agbemenu & Tandoh, 2015;

Grynko, 2012; Ristow, 2010; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015; Tsetsura, 2015, Alhassan and Abdulai, 2019). An analysis of the literature shows very little scholarly attention has so far focused on the perspectives of PR practitioners in this widespread phenomenon. In particular, there is a dearth of literature that explores the factors which influence PR practitioners' decision to engage in the practice of paying *Soli* to journalists for the coverage of events in Ghana. This present study therefore contributes to the literature on a quantitative exploration of the factors PR practitioners in Ghana consider when they are confronted with the phenomenon of *Soli*. In this study, we test the following hypothesis:

H1₀: There is no significant relationship between PR practitioners' knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners

H1₁: There is a significant relationship between PR practitioners' knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners

H2₀: PR practitioners' desire to obtain positive media coverage has no significant relationship with payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners.

H2₁: PR practitioners' desire to obtain positive media coverage has a significant relationship with payment of *Soli* by PR practitioner

Theoretical framework

***Soli* in PR practice**

Kasoma (2010) studied the perspectives of PR practitioners in Zambia on "brown envelopes and freebies" and found that although they perceive the practice as wrong, unprofessional and abhorred any association of the phenomenon with their practice, they perpetuated the giving of 'brown envelopes and freebies' to journalists. The considerations for their receptiveness to brown envelopes were found to be the result of the symbiotic relationship they shared with journalists; their perception of freebies as part and parcel of their news management function; and how giving of 'brown envelopes and freebies' were instrumental in achieving their boundary spanning role.

Agbemenu and Tandoh (2015) examined journalists, event organisers and public relations practitioners' perception on 'soli' and how it affects news reportage. They found that Public Relations (PR) practitioners give soli to media men and operators because they want to avoid paying high commercial rates but at the same time be able to publicise their products and services through an array of media.

Kim and Bae (2006) investigated how source-media relationships influence perceptions toward news selection from the public relations practitioners' viewpoint in Korea. The results show that Korean public relations practitioners

who perform formal media relations believed that journalists would select news stories based on journalists' media routine principles, such as using government sources. In contrast, Korean public relations practitioners who pay *solli* believed that journalists would select news stories based on journalists' extra-media factors, such as personal relationships with public relations practitioners.

These studies above show the pervasiveness, the perceptions, the forms and the influencing factors of *Solli*. The methodology used for most of the studies was largely qualitative. However, it appears minimal quantitative studies have sought to examine the relationship between the influencing factors and the phenomenon of *Solli*. This study therefore, made use of statistical tools such as Pearson moment correlation coefficient to examine the relationship between the influencing factors and the phenomenon of cash for coverage (*Solli*) in Ghana to address this gap in literature.

PR and Journalism Relationship

Sterne (2010) observed that much has been written about the relationship between PR practitioners and the media (journalists). Based on extensive literature on PR practitioners and journalist's relationship, Kasoma (2010) notes that the relationship between PR practitioners and journalists is fluid in nature. This relationship is punctuated with cooperation sometimes, conflict at other times, and negotiation at yet others (Kasoma, 2010). Grunig and Hunt (1983) also observed an area of conflict between journalists and PR practitioners in media relations and notes: Journalists feel overwhelmed by mass of press agents and publicists – 'flacks,' as they call PR people - who dump unwanted press releases on their desk and push self-serving stories that have little news value. On the other hand, public relations practitioners feel that they are at the mercy of reporters and editors who are biased against their organisation, who would rather expose than explain, and who know little about the complexities of their organisation.

Citing PR practitioners in Zambia, Kasoma (2010, p. 458) reports of an interviewee who indicates "we have a very cordial relationship with journalists based on mutual understanding that the other [one] cannot effectively work without the other". Another practitioner thought of the relationship as "suspicious because while journalists have a duty to get information, [we] are under oath to keep secrets" (Kasoma, 2010, p. 458).

Exploring the factors that account for PR-Journalists relationship, Sterne (2010) also identified the factors to include: the desire for publicity which drives approaches to the media; the use of flattery, bribery and exaggeration; the use of stunts to attract attention; the search for free advertising; the pressure journalists experience due to poor working conditions; and the reluctant acknowledgement

that journalists often end up in the public relations profession because of the attraction of higher pay and greater job opportunities.

Collison (2003) also asserts that journalists have less help to do their jobs but have more to cover for their media houses, hence they rely on public relations professionals to provide information not only in a timely and concise manner, but as effectively as possible. Justifying the reason for journalists' reliance on PR practitioners, Lewis et al. (2008) posit that "journalists' reliance on public relations and news agency copy has been promoted by the need for a relatively stable community of journalists to meet an expansive requirement for news in order to maintain newspapers' profitability in the context of declining circulations and revenues". This suggests that PR practitioners see their role in providing journalists with information as a form of help in order to ease the burden of journalists in their news gathering process. Thus, doing so has the tendency to build a relationship of dependency among the two professions, that is, PR and journalism.

Kaur and Shaari (2006) also conducted a survey of PR practitioners and journalists on the perception they have about each other. Generally, the survey indicates some similarities and differences in the perceptions of the two professional groups with PR practitioners holding stronger perceptions than the journalists on the various aspects of their relationship. The study revealed that PR practitioners hold a strong view that it is the information they provide to the journalists that makes the latter functional while journalists think less strongly of the contribution made by the former. The PR practitioners also hold the view that there is more of a symbiotic relationship between the two groups than the journalists.

The available literature above is suggestive of an interdependent relationship between PR practitioners and journalists albeit the inherent issues of mistrust and antagonism between the two professions. There are indications also of how the cultivated relationship between the two professions can have the audience short-changed in the news production process as PR copies are sometimes presented as newsworthy stories rather than treated as advertorials, hence, raising ethical concerns regarding the very nature of the PR-journalists relationship. There is also an indication of PR practitioners gaining positive media coverage out of the cultivated relationship with journalists, an issue that has the tendency for non-transparent media thereby undermining the gatekeeping role of journalists.

Ethics and Public Relations

Public Relations have been referred to as the "social conscience" of the organisations they represent, even though the degree to which public relations professionals have been able to impact the ethics programmes of their organisations

remains debatable (Danner, 2006). Skinner, Mersham & Valin (2003) however, highlights the significance of ethical decision making of PR practitioners through the balance between personal and professional values, the values of the client organisation, and the values of the publics with which the organisation has relations with in the two-way symmetrical model of public relations practice.

Many critics argue that there can be no ethical public relations because the practice itself is similar to manipulation and propaganda. Many journalists, policy makers, and laymen believe that the term 'public relations ethics' is an oxymoron, either an unreal possibility or smoke and mirrors to hide deception (Bowen, 2007). This worldview held by critics is informed by the historical antecedence of hyperbole, sensationalism, and untruths in the practice of public relations during the press-agentry phase (public be damned era) of public relations (Bowen, 2007). Bowen (2007) posits that Ivy Lee's Declaration of Principles ushered in an era of Ethical Public relations and moved the practice into an era of the "public be informed" with emphasis on telling the truth and providing accurate information. This development in the evolution of PR, thus, informed modern ethical consideration in the practice of public relations and the numerous ethical codes that guide the practice of PR.

According to Parson (2008, p. 150), public relations ethics focuses on the ethical implications of the strategies and tactics that are applied to solve the public relations and communications problems of organisations. It focuses on the ethical issues that emanate directly and sometimes indirectly from the strategic decisions that are made to meet public relations objectives. Skinner, Mersham, and Valin (2004) observed that PR practitioners today are faced with the challenge of upholding ethical tenets in their practice due to the impact it has on the management of strategic relationships within the complex dynamics and interrelationships of a global context. That is, public relations professionals are often torn between making decisions that satisfy (1) the public interest, (2) the employer, (3) the professional organisation's code of ethics and (4) their personal values. Bowen (2007) also notes that Public Relations is a field fraught with ethical dilemmas. According to Lee (2012) much of the discussion about ethics in public relations is philosophical and prescriptive; outlining what public relations professionals ought to do to fulfill moral obligations to various stakeholders, and how to avoid ethical lapses. However, Tsetsura and Krukeberg (2011) note that, although codes of ethics exist worldwide, there are numerous problems with their reinforcement. Tsetsura and Grynko (2009) found that accepted codes of ethics are not enforceable and thus are not practiced by public relations practitioners

On the empirical front, Lieber (2005) did a cross-cultural analysis of public relations ethics to ascertain the ethical-decision making patterns of public relations practitioners using qualitative interviews, Defining Issues Test (DIT) and a

quantitative version of the five-factor (TARES) test. The results indicate no statistically significant difference in levels of moral development and ethical consideration between sampled practitioners in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

From the foregoing therefore, it can be argued that ethics is an integral part of Public Relations practice and PR practitioners are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards in the discharge of their duties and by extension, members of IPR (Ghana) are expected to do same. Contrary to this expectation however, PR practitioners are criticised for not maintaining the ethical standards required. This study is thus motivated by these criticisms, among others, to assess the extent to which PR practitioners in Ghana live by their ethics especially in their daily interaction with practicing journalists.

***Soli* and PR Code of Ethics**

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has Advocacy, Honesty, Expertise, Independence, Loyalty, and Fairness as its core values that set the foundation for the Member Code of Ethics and set the industry standard for the professional practice of public relations. These values are the fundamental beliefs that guide the behaviours and decision-making process of members. As part of the Code of Ethics of PRSA, a provision on the free flow of information reads, “core principle protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.” The provision seeks to maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials, and the public and to aid informed decision-making.

The Institute of Public Relations, Ghana (IPR-Ghana) has as part of its Ethical Codes specifically code 13 that frowns on inducement and influence of the media and other publics respectively. Code 13 reads *“using any “manipulative” methods or techniques designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the action taken on them...”*

All members of IPR (Ghana) are expected to abide by the ethical provisions enshrined in the IPR-Ghana code of ethics. Specifically, on the issue of inducement and influence, as indicated in the IPRA code above, code 13 frowns on members of IPR (Ghana) inducing or influencing public representatives, the media, or other stakeholders. This implies that in the case of the media as is the focus of this study, members of IPR (Ghana) are enjoined by these provision (code 13) not to do anything that would induce, influence and compromise the integrity and independence of the media. It is the interest of this study to examine the compliance

or otherwise of PR practitioners in Ghana to this provision as stipulated in the IPR (Ghana) code of ethics when dealing with the media.

Relationship between Positive Media Coverage and *Soli*

Pang (2010) posits that gaining positive coverage in and through the media remains “central” to the work of PR practitioners. Kasoma (2010) also notes that there are extant literature showing that public relations practitioners see themselves and their new role in society as a management role. This new role is defined by Larsson (2009) as “strategies for controlling the news agenda by producing and serving the media with material that promotes the instrumental purposes of the sender’s interests”. Kasoma (2010) thus suggests that it is possible that public relations practitioners perceive ‘brown envelopes and freebies’ as a means of arriving at their perceived role in society.

Seitel (2004) asserts that getting positive media coverage remains central for public relations practitioners even though public relations have grown much beyond the mere press agency or securing of publicity. This is arguably the result of the desire of public relations practitioners to get the views of the organisations they represent out to the public who are heterogeneous in nature and the news media serve as the appropriate vehicle through which the publics can be reached with those views. In order to achieve this goal, PR practitioners build relationships with the media through a variety of ways some of which are deemed as unethical. *The Jakarta Post* of March 21, 2005 for instance asserts that “envelope journalism” – the practices of giving bribes including money to win favourable media coverage – has been embraced by many public relations practitioners (Sinaga & Wu, 2007).

A study by Jo and Kim (2004) also found that PR practitioners believe that the media have power to control the public agenda, as well as their own; hence in order to set a positive agenda for the organisation they represent, PR practitioners pay ‘Hong bao’ (an envelope full of money) to journalists. Corroborating this, Tsetsura (2015) found that PR practitioners desire to control what is published about them in China; resort to payment of gifts to the media. Mathews (2016) also observed that companies are rarely explicit that they want good coverage in return for the money paid to journalists but an understanding nonetheless exists. Mathews further asserts that if journalists did not receive ‘hong baos’ they would write negatively about the organisation or event or not give much coverage. Impliedly, the desire to obtain positive media coverage and payment of *Soli* are inextricably linked. It is the interest of this study to ascertain how the desire to obtain positive media coverage influences the payment of *Soli* to journalists by PR practitioners in Ghana.

Meanwhile it is worthy of note that the media also take advantage of the situation to trade their objectivity and independence by granting the desires of the PR practitioners in exchange for gifts and other monetary returns. That is, the phenomenon of *Soli* seems to be the appropriate avenue through which PR practitioners and the journalists reach a compromise in order to obtain positive media coverage. For instance, Dirbaba (2010) asserts that there are reports of investigative journalists in Ethiopia who use their position to heckle and blackmail individuals to pay *soli*. He notes further that other journalists promise positive media coverage in exchange for *soli*. Citing an account of a journalist in *The Ethiopian Herald*, Dirbaba notes:

When I go for news gathering, I discuss with him [the news source] whether the news event should be covered in a news flash or be given more space. If he needs more space, I will arrange an appointment for further interview. I then send him some three or four copies of the newspaper. I post the person's photo on the front page, and write the article very emphatically. I may not openly ask him to give me the money. But – I agitate him by calling him several times and discuss in a manner that makes him understand the intention. [...] You can agitate him to give you the money, you blow up the article using lots of adjectives, enumerate all the positive sides undermining all the weak and negative sides, even when the institution is practically very weak. You pump it up to make the weak organisation very strong. Then, the person himself expresses his appreciation to you via telephone. And he invites you to his office. You get the money placed in a white envelope from the secretary with great gratitude. (Former editor with *The Ethiopian Herald*, personal communication, 17 July 2010).

Making a case for a positive relationship between *soli* and the desire to obtain positive media coverage, Ristow (2010, p. 14) indicates:

If low pay is one explanation for incidents of cash for news coverage, perhaps the most obvious explanation is also very simple: Governments, corporations, and private individuals often want to control what is said about them...the easiest way to do that is, effectively, to "own" the journalists.

According to Ristow, this means that corporations have a strong vested interest not only in getting their news into the media, but getting the spin they want on it hence it is the most common form of cash for news coverage in some countries. The findings give indications that the primary goal of PR practitioners in the performance of the media relations function is to put the views of the organisation they (PR practitioners) represent across to the publics. The studies have also

established that in order to achieve the goal of obtaining favourable media coverage, PR practitioners build a variety of relationships with the media. Inherent in this relationship with the media as indicated by the studies above, is the payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. It is the desire of this study to ascertain whether or not the desire of PR practitioners to obtain positive media coverage is intrinsically linked with the payment of *Soli* to the media and its assigns (journalists).

Methodological Framework

This study adopted the quantitative research approach to examine the factors PR Practitioners considers when they encounter the phenomenon of *soli*. The authors are interested in measuring the relationships that exists among variables that are deemed significant or not in the payment of *Soli*. The authors gathered the quantitative data through a survey of Ghanaian PR practitioners who are members of the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana and are in good standing. These PR practitioners were sampled using convenient sampling technique and the questionnaires, designed using Google forms, were administered to them.

A total of 123 members of IPR-Ghana who were in good standing as of the time of taking the data were targeted for this study. Subsequently, the questionnaires that were completed and returned were 89; hence the response rate was 72.4%. After data cleansing, the usable feedback from the survey for the data analysis was 87. The questionnaire was designed using Google-forms application and sent to accredited members on behalf of the researchers by IPR (Ghana). This was done to ensure easy access to the respondents since they are widespread, thus, making it difficult for the researchers to reach all of them with a printed questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale designed by Tsetsura (2015) was adapted for this study.

For data analysis, STATA was used to quantitatively analyse all coded responses from the respondents. The data was sorted out into frequencies, percentages and cross tabulations. The Binary Probit Regression model was used to address the first hypothesis while an Ordered Probit Regression model was used to address the second hypothesis. The analysis was represented and expressed into tables and charts as the findings of the study.

Findings and Discussions

Demographics of Respondents

The Socio-demographic characteristics of respondent selected for this paper were age, sex, years of experiences, sector employment and memberships of respondents.

Age and Sex distribution of respondents

The sex distribution showed a greater number of the respondents were males (69%) and a few were female (31%). The ages of respondents in this study revealed that most of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39. From the data gathered, 8% were less than 30 years of age, 63.2% were between the ages of 30-39, another 8% were between the ages of 40-49, and 20.7% were 50 years and above.

Years of experience and Sector of Employment

Majority of the PR practitioners had more than 10 years of experience. The study found that 32.2% of PR practitioners had less than 5 years of work experience; another 32.2 % of PR practitioners had between 5-10 years' work experience in, and 35.6% PR Practitioners had more than 10 years' work experience. This implies that majority of PR practitioners are old in the industry and very experienced. The study revealed that 77% of the PR practitioners work in the Public sector and only 23.0% work in the private sector. This suggests that majority of PR practitioners in Ghana worked in the public sector while a minority of them work in the private sector.

Membership of a professional body

All the PR practitioners (100%) were members of IPR (Ghana). Being a member of a professional association suggests that the individual is expected to have knowledge of, subscribe to, and at the same time uphold the highest ethical standards of that professional body.

The Phenomenon of *Soli*

Level of awareness of the Phenomenon of 'Soli' in Ghana and Related Matters

Respondents were asked whether they were aware of a phenomenon in Ghana called '*Soli*'. Table 1 shows the responses of the journalists and PR practitioners to the question.

Table 1: Awareness of *Soli*

Awareness of <i>Soli</i>	PR practitioners	
	Freq	Percent %
Yes	80	92%
No	7	8%
Total	87	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2017

From Table 1 above, majority of the respondents indicated that they are aware of the phenomenon called *Soli*. The study revealed that 92% of the respondents

indicated that, they are aware of the phenomenon of *Soli* while 8% indicated that they were unaware of the phenomenon of *Soli*. This implies that PR practitioners are not oblivious of the fact that the phenomenon of *Soli* exists in when dealing with the media and thus an affirmation of the a priori assumptions of public perception.

Payment of Soli as an acceptable behaviour

Additionally, PR practitioners were asked to indicate whether they think it was ethically acceptable to give *Soli* to journalists or not. Table 2 shows the Perception of PR Practitioners regarding the payment of *Soli* to Journalists.

Table 2: Payment of *Soli* as an Acceptable behaviour

Item	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	7	8.0
No	80	92.0
Total	87	100

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As observed in Table 2 above, 92% of respondents thought that it is not ethically acceptable to give *Soli* to journalists when they are invited to cover an event while 8% (N=7) thought otherwise. This implies that majority of PR Practitioners do not think it is ethically acceptable to give *Soli* to journalist when they are invited to cover an event or a programme of the organisation the PR practitioner represents.

PR Practitioners’ knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of conduct on bribery and inducement of Journalists

PR practitioners were required to indicate whether they had knowledge of a specific code of conduct of IPR Ghana which frowns on inducement of journalists. Figure 1 shows a percentage response rate of agreement or otherwise of PR Practitioners’ knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code on bribery and inducement of journalists.

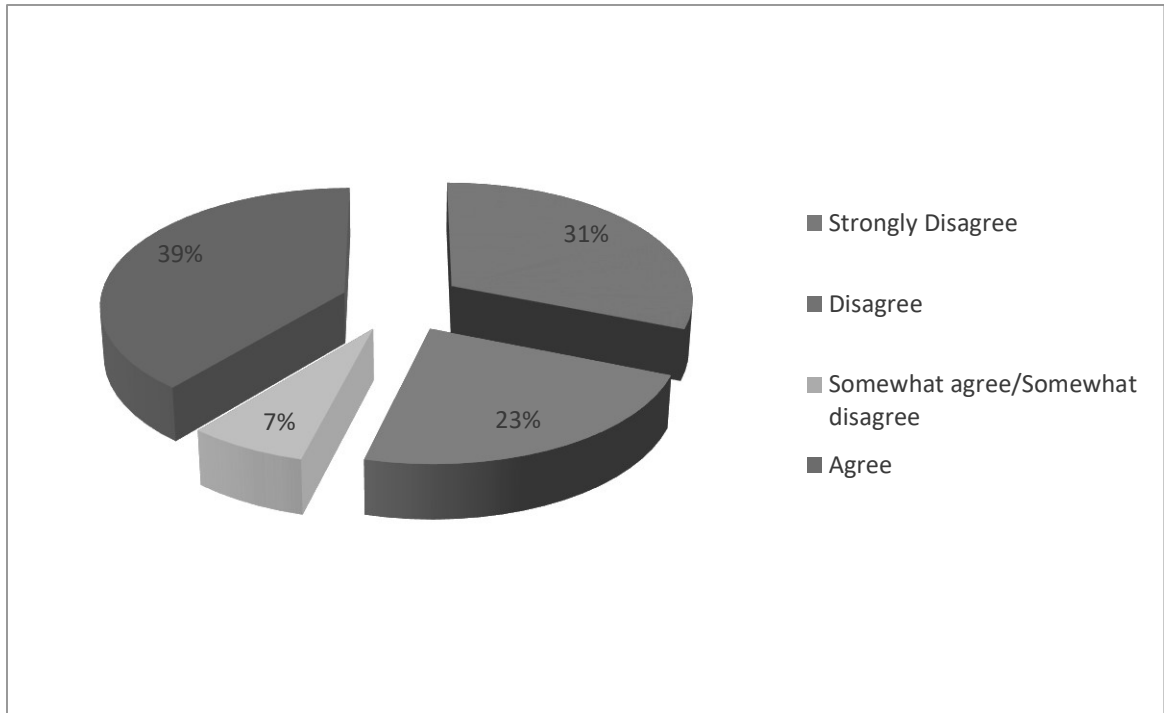


Figure 1: PR Practitioners' Knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code on bribery or inducement of journalists

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As observed from Figure 1 above, majority of the respondents disagreed with the fact that they had knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics. Cumulatively, 54% of PR practitioners disagreed that they had knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media, 7% were indifferent while 39% agreed that they have knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media. However, the observed responses show that 31% of PR practitioners strongly disagreed, 23% disagreed, 7% somewhat agreed/somewhat disagreed, while 39% agreed. There were no responses for strongly agree. This suggests that majority of PR practitioners who participated in this study did not have knowledge of the IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media.

Payment of *Soli* by PR Practitioners

Another key variable in this study is the payment of *Soli* to journalist by PR practitioners. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they give *Soli* to journalists or not when journalists are invited to an event or programme in their organisation. Figure 2 shows the responses of PR practitioners to the question of whether they give *Soli* to journalists when they invite journalists to events or programmes.

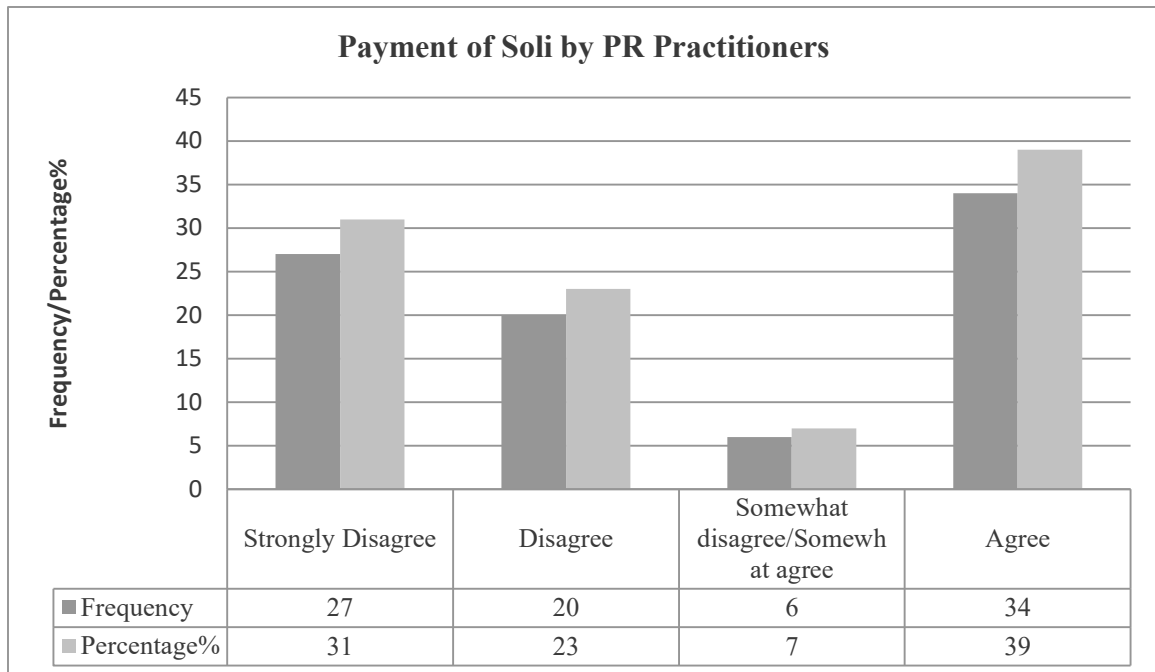


Figure 2: Payment of *Soli* by PR Practitioners

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As observed in Figure 2, 34 respondents representing 39% agreed that they pay *Soli* to journalists when they invite them (journalists) to events or programmes, an affirmation of the findings of Alhassan and Abdulai (2019) on whether or not practitioners accept the token on invitation to functions for coverage. Only 6 respondents representing 7% of respondents were indifferent (somewhat agreed/somewhat disagreed), 20 respondents representing 23% of respondents disagreed while 27 respondents representing 31% of respondents strongly disagreed. There were, however, no responses for strongly agreed. This implies that, cumulatively, majority of the respondents (N=47; 54%) disagreed with paying *Soli* to journalist when they invite them (journalists) to events or programmes.

Factors PR Practitioners consider in the payment of Soli to Journalists

To ascertain the considerations PR practitioners, have for engaging in the phenomenon of *Soli*, the respondents were asked to respond to some items on the five-point Likert scale. These factors were gleaned from qualitative studies that had established the considerations PR practitioners have for engaging the phenomenon of *Soli*. These factors were quantitatively analysed to ascertain the most consideration PR practitioners have for paying *Soli* to journalists. Table 3 below shows the mean values of each response obtained from practitioners.

Table 3: Factors PR Practitioners Consider when paying *Soli* to Journalists

Statements	R an k	Mea n	Std. Deviation
Demand for <i>Soli</i> by journalists	1	3.75 86	.98790
Poor pay of journalists	2	3.39 08	1.39231
Budgetary allocations for <i>Soli</i>	3	3.27 59	1.21703
Motivation for the media to honour an invitation	4	3.14 94	1.11573
Positive media Coverage	5	3.00 00	1.37249
Relationship management	6	2.88 51	1.24289
As a token of appreciation to journalists	7	2.87 36	.94996
Professional norm	8	2.86 21	1.24052
Compelled by Superiors	9	2.60 92	1.01565
Interdependent Relationship	10	2.51 72	1.28373
Boundary spanning role	11	2.39 08	1.01565
News management function	12	2.31 03	1.00360
Killing a negative story	13	2.25 29	1.26875
Organisational policy	14	1.91 95	.61414

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Table 3, of all the considerations that PR practitioners have for paying *Soli* to journalists, the demand by journalists to be paid *Soli* when they cover an event is the motivating factor with the highest consideration by PR practitioners (M=3.758) while the least consideration was the policy of the organisation to pay *Soli* whenever they invited the media to their event or programme (M=1.9195). In order of priority, considerations include: demand by journalists (M=3.578), poor pay of

journalists (3.39), because it is budgeted for (M=3.27), to get continuous coverage of events (M=3.14), to obtain positive media coverage (M=3.0), to maintain good relationship with the media (2.88), as a token of appreciation for the journalists attending the event (2.87), because it's a norm (2.86), compulsion from superiors (2.6) the interdependent relationship they share with journalists (2.5), as a boundary spanning role (2.39), as part of PR practitioners news management function (2.31), to kill a negative story (2.25), and because it is the policy of the organisation the PR practitioner works (1.91). The implication is that the value of 3.75 obtained by the first item (I give *Soli* because journalists often demand *Soli* from me) is closer to 4 which represents agree on the 5-point Likert scale. It also means the only item that all the respondents agreed to as the consideration for paying *Soli* is journalists who come to cover their events often demand *Soli*'. The remaining 9 items had mean values of approximately 3 which represents a point of neutrality (somewhat agree/somewhat disagree) on the 5-point Likert scale; hence, all the respondents were indifferent with regard to those items. The remaining 4 items had mean values of approximately 2 which represents 'disagree' on the 5-point scale, hence, all the respondents 'disagree' with those four items to be a consideration for paying *Soli*.

The findings above, therefore, is at variance with the general notion of 'positive media coverage' being the most consideration PR practitioners have for paying *Soli* to journalists (e.g. Sinaga & Wu, 2007; Pang, 2010; Mathews, 2016). The findings therefore suggest that the phenomenon of *Soli* is perpetuated by journalists because they are the ones who request for it from their news sources (PR practitioners) as indicated above.

Payment of *Soli* and Positive media Coverage

PR practitioners were also required to indicate if the payment of *Soli* was the result of their desire to obtain positive media coverage for the organisation of client they represent. The results in Figure 4 shows the level of agreement among practitioners regarding the desire to obtain media coverage being an influencing factor in their decision to pay *Soli* to journalists.

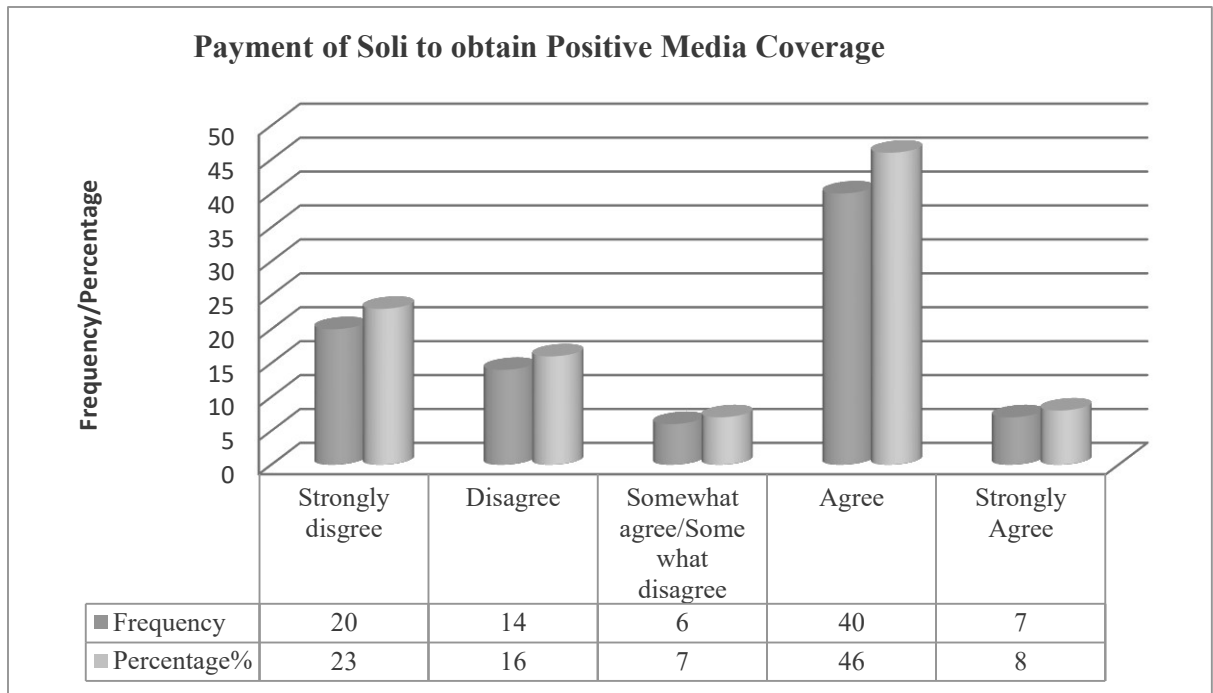


Figure 4: Payment of *Soli* to obtain Positive Media Coverage
Source: Field Survey; 2017

The observed Figure 4 above shows that majority of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they pay *Soli* in order to obtain positive media coverage. Of the 87 respondents, 46% and 8% of the respondent respectively agreed and strongly agreed that they pay *Soli* in order to obtain positive media coverage, 7% were indifferent, while 23% and 16% strongly disagreed and agreed respectively that they pay *Soli* in order to obtain positive media coverage.

Testing of Hypothesis 1: Knowledge of IPR Code and Payment of *Soli*

A Binary Probit Analysis was computed to assess the relationship between PR Practitioners knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics and payment of *Soli*. The hypothesis that was formulated reads:

H1₀: There is no significant relationship between PR practitioners’ knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners

H1₁: There is a significant relationship between PR practitioners’ knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners

The table below shows the relationship between PR Practitioners' knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics which frowns on inducement of the media and payment of *Soli*.

Table 4: Knowledge of IPR (Ghana) Code on Inducement and Payment of *Soli*

Payment of <i>Soli</i>	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z-value
Sector of Employment	1.339**	0.635	2.11
Years of Experience	0.041	0.098	0.41
Age	-0.032	0.040	-0.80
Sex	1.773***	0.429	4.13
Knowledge of IPR-Ghana code on inducement			
Disagree	0.969	0.841	1.15
Neutral	-1.188	0.739	-1.61
Agree	-0.602	0.457	-1.32
Constant	-0.268	1.061	0.25

*, **, *** refer to 10%, 5% and 1% significant levels, respectively.

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As shown in Table 4 above, a Binary Probit model was ran to assess the relationship between knowledge of IPR (Ghana) code of ethics on inducement/bribery and acceptance of *Soli*. The results showed no significant relationship between the two variables, hence we fail to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between IPR knowledge on inducement/bribery and payment of *Soli*. Although the different levels of agreement about knowledge of IPR appeared to indicate a negative relationship as shown by coefficients, none of them was statistically significant, hence our inability to reject the null hypothesis¹. This implies that whether or not a PR practitioner has knowledge of IPR code of ethics on inducement of the media,

¹ It is important to note that all the PR practitioners sampled for this study are member of IPR (Ghana) some of whom are final level certificate holders and have taking courses in ethics and are also aware of their professional code with regards to inducement of the media, still pay *Soli* to journalists.

it has no effect on the payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. This finding is consistent with that of Hickson (2004) who observed that PR practitioners break the code of ethics of the PR organisations in Asia to engage in the payment of brown envelope to the media; though Hickson’s study did not capture knowledge on code of ethics as explored in this study. Although Lee (2011) observed that, having knowledge in ethics is a key determinant of ethical PR practice, his study did not capture how this knowledge influences payment of *Soli*.

Meanwhile, according to Nwabueze (2010), code of ethics ensures that people practicing a particular profession are led to deciphering what is morally right from what is morally wrong without being policed to do so. They are guiding principles which are not laws but become binding to people who adopt it as a moral boundary for the practice of their profession. Therefore, as members of IPR (Ghana), PR practitioners are expected to abide by the code of ethics². However, the findings of this study reveal otherwise. It suggests that majority of IPR members are ‘code breakers’ and do not abide by the code of ethics of their professional association by paying *Soli* to journalists which has the tendency to compromise the journalists’ objectivity and independence.

Testing of Hypothesis 2: Payment of *Soli* and Positive Media Coverage

An Ordered Probit Regression Model was computed to examine the relationship between positive media coverage and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. The hypothesis that was formulated reads:

H2o: PR practitioners’ desire to obtain positive media coverage has no significant relationship with payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners.

H2i: PR practitioners’ desire to obtain positive media coverage has a significant relationship with payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners.

Table 5 below shows the relationship between *Soli* and Positive media Coverage.

Table 5: Positive Media Coverage and Payment of *Soli*

Positive Media Coverage	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z- value
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² Code 13: Using any “manipulative” methods or techniques designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the action taken on them.

Payment of Soli	0.795**	0.298	2.67
/cut1	-0.162*	0.0981	1.65
/cut2	-0.032	0.263	0.12
/cut3	1.773***	0.429	4.13

*, **, *** refer to 10%, 5% and 1% significant levels, respectively.

Source: Field Survey, 2017

As shown in Table 5, an Ordered Probit Model was computed to assess the relationship between payment of *Soli* and positive media coverage. There was a positive significant relationship between the two variables ($z=2.67$). Hence, the H_2 of no relationship is rejected. This implies that there is a significant positive relationship between the desire by PR practitioners to obtain positive media coverage and payment of *Soli* by PR practitioners. This finding suggests that the more PR practitioners have the desire to obtain positive media coverage, the more likely they would pay *Soli* to journalists and vice versa. This is in line with the proposition of the theory of reasoned action (Montaño & Kasprzyk, 2008) that, an individual's beliefs about the outcome of the performance of a specific behaviour (attitude) as well as his or her beliefs about what is expected of him or her by others in the environment (subjective norms), can inform the intention to execute the behaviour. As such, PR practitioners desire to obtain positive media coverage, and the belief by PR practitioners that when they pay *Soli* they would obtain positive media coverage informs their decision to pay *Soli* to journalists in order to achieve the outcome (positive media coverage). The results are consistent with Tsetsura (2015) who observed that PR practitioners desire to control what is published about them resort to payment of gifts to the media. It is also consistent with the study of Jo and Kim (2004) where PR practitioners indicated that the media have power to control the public agenda, as well as their own; hence in order to set a positive agenda for the organisation they represent, PR practitioners pay 'Hong bao' (an envelope full of money) to journalists.

Conclusions

In light of the findings made by this paper, it can be concluded that there is non-compliance of PR practitioners in Ghana to the professional code of ethics of their profession. Majority of PR practitioners in Ghana pay *solì* in order to obtain positive media coverage.

The study examined PR practitioners' knowledge of IPR code of ethics on inducement and payment of *solì* to the media. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between the two variables. The study therefore concludes that whether or not a person has knowledge of IPR code

of ethics on inducement, it does not influence the decision to make payment of *solì* to the media.

Again, the study also examined the relationship between PR practitioners' desire to obtain positive media coverage and payment of *solì* to the media by PR practitioners. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between the two variables. The study therefore concludes that the desire to obtain positive media coverage by PR practitioners has an influence on their decision to pay *solì* to the media.

Recommendations

Promotion and enforcement of professional and organisational policies on inducement

The findings of this study have led to the conclusion that having knowledge of professional codes is not an end in itself in ensuring the high ethical standards. Therefore, a mere condemnation of PR practitioners who engage in the phenomenon of *Solì* is not enough to assuage the payment of *Solì*. The Institute of Public Relations, Ghana and the Ghana Journalists Association must institute punitive measures for practitioners who fall foul of the codes of conduct of their profession. Similarly, organisations who budget for corporate giveaways as gifts to journalists during events should be discouraged to avoid conflicting state with the codes. A policy on licensing of PR practitioners and journalists must be advanced for consideration and to ensure the revocation of such license from members who break the code of ethics of the professional body. Media organisations operating in Ghana should also make it as a policy to sanction their journalists when there is sufficient evidence to prove that a journalist accepts *Solì* from news sources. This would go a long way to enhance the reputation of the media organisations concerned and at the same time ensure that the public is not short-changed in the news production process. Similarly, organisations that engage the services of PR practitioners must as a matter of policy resist the temptation to approve payment of *Solì* to the media when such payments are included in the budget by the PR unit or PR consultant of their organisation.

The media relations function of PR practitioners must be redefined.

The media relations function of PR practitioners must be redefined to meet the dynamics of the 21st century PR practice. The mere counting of the number of releases produced and the level of press cuttings achieved or the handling of enquiries by the media should not be the only indicators for measuring performance of PR practitioners' media relations effort. The intricacies of the

activities performed must be examined holistically with a view to ensuring that there are no ethical violations in the discharge of such function by the practitioners.

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