

Analysis of Public Relations Code of Ethics in The Film Air 2023

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine how the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) Code of Ethics principles are represented in the film *Air* (2023), which depicts the communication strategies between Nike and Michael Jordan in establishing brand image. **Method:** Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through detailed scene observation and supporting theoretical documentation. The analysis employed stages of data reduction, presentation, and conclusion to identify ethical values embedded in character interactions and narrative development. **Results:** The findings indicate that the six PRSA principles – advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness – are consistently reflected in the film, particularly through the communication strategies and decision-making processes of Sonny Vaccaro and Deloris Jordan. These portrayals illustrate the role of ethics in fostering credibility, building reputation, and maintaining public trust within professional Public Relations practice. **Novelty:** This research contributes to the intersection of media studies and public relations ethics by demonstrating how cinematic narratives can serve as a medium to analyze and contextualize ethical practices, offering insights for both academic discourse and professional application in the communication field.

INTRODUCTION

Film is a mass communication medium that functions not only as entertainment but also as a channel for moral, social, and professional messages [1]. Through stories packaged visually and emotionally, films can reflect values relevant to real life, including in the context of Public Relations (PR) [2]. In PR practice, ethics play a vital role in maintaining public trust, building a positive organizational image, and ensuring that communication is transparent, honest, and responsible [3].

The film *Air* (2023), directed by Ben Affleck, tells the story of Nike's marketing team's struggle to secure a partnership with Michael Jordan – a young athlete who later became a global icon. The narrative showcases various processes of strategic communication, negotiation, and critical decision-making involving professional values [4]. In this context, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code of Ethics becomes relevant for analysis, as the film touches on fundamental principles of PR practice [5].

Sonny Vaccaro, a sports marketing executive known for recruiting athletes to endorse athletic brands, is depicted as the central Nike figure with a vision of making Michael Jordan the face of Nike shoes, even though Jordan was not yet famous in the NBA. Sonny is known for his bold, strategic, and humanistic approach in persuading Nike's management and the Jordan family.

Public Relations (PR) is a managerial function that builds and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics through planned and

continuous communication [6]. PR serves as a communication bridge between organizations and audiences, acting as a crucial strategy in shaping image, influencing public opinion, and maintaining reputation professionally [7].

In practice, PR emphasizes not only communication skills but also adherence to ethical values [8]. PR ethics are a set of moral principles that guide practitioners in carrying out their duties with integrity and responsibility. According to Theaker (2016), PR ethics are necessary to maintain transparency, prevent information manipulation, and foster public trust in organizations.

The primary function of PR ethics is to serve as a moral foundation in the communication process, especially when practitioners face dilemmas or competing interests. Ethical regulations in PR ensure that all communication activities align with honesty, fairness, and professionalism. One internationally recognized ethical guideline is the PRSA Code of Ethics.

PRSA is a professional association in the United States that sets ethical standards for PR practitioners through six core principles: advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. These principles provide a moral foundation for practitioners to perform their roles professionally [9]. Through characters in *Air*, such as Sonny Vaccaro, Deloris Jordan, and Nike's management team, it is evident how these values are practiced, upheld, and even tested in the dynamics of competitive business.

The relevance of this film to PR is significant because it illustrates how communication strategies should not only focus on achieving business goals but also emphasize ethical responsibility toward the public and partners. Therefore, analyzing *Air* through the lens of the PRSA Code of Ethics is important to understand how ethical values are represented in communication decision-making and branding strategies in real-world contexts.

This study is also supported by previous research highlighting the importance of ethical codes in strategic communication practice. For example, [10] analyzed violations of the PRSA Code of Ethics in the film *Thank You for Smoking*. Although the object of study differs, the research emphasizes that violations or applications of PR ethics in film can concretely illustrate moral challenges in professional communication. Unlike Rumui's approach, this study does not focus on violations but on the representation of the PRSA principles in building brand reputation [11].

Analyzed PR ethics in a public debate between Bengkalis regent and vice-regent candidates using a quantitative approach. The results showed that the principle of "free flow of information" was the most dominant value. Erlina Rumui (2016) explored PRSA violations in *Thank You for Smoking*, focusing on communication manipulation by the main character. Meanwhile, [12] applied IPRA PR ethics to analyze *Wag the Dog*, which also depicted political communication violations.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how the PRSA Code of Ethics principles are represented in *Air* (2023) and how these values are integrated into the narrative of strategic communication between Nike and Michael Jordan.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the representation of PRSA Code of Ethics principles in the film *Air* (2023) [13]. Primary data were obtained through non-participant observation of the film, while secondary data were collected from literature such as academic journals, books, and relevant articles on PR ethics.

The research steps were carried out as follows: First, data collection was conducted by watching the film thoroughly and noting important scenes that potentially represent PRSA ethical values. Second, data reduction was performed by grouping screenshots from these scenes based on the six PRSA values: advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness [14]. Third, data presentation was carried out in descriptive and interpretative narratives, explaining the meaning of each scene within the context of PR ethics. Fourth, data analysis was conducted by matching findings from the film with theories and principles found in PRSA documents and other supporting literature. Finally, data verification was performed through source triangulation [15], comparing the interpretation of film scenes with communication theories and ethical codes from various academic sources to ensure the analysis results are valid and credible. This step ensures that the representation of PRSA values in the film is theoretically and empirically relevant.

The object of this research is the film *Air*, released in 2023 and directed by Ben Affleck. This film was chosen because it depicts the dynamics of the relationship between a corporation (Nike) and a public figure (Michael Jordan) in branding and negotiation processes relevant to PR practice. The main focus of this study is to identify and evaluate how the six PRSA ethical principles—advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness—are reflected in the actions and decisions of the main characters in the film.

Data were collected through film observation by noting and analyzing key scenes that represent PRSA ethical values. Observations were conducted systematically to identify moments relevant to these principles, whether in the form of dialogue, character actions, or supporting narrative contexts.

In addition to observation, the researcher also employed documentation techniques by reviewing secondary sources such as journals, scientific articles, and books discussing PRSA codes of ethics, PR professional ethics, and theories of strategic communication. These secondary data serve as a foundation to strengthen the analysis and provide theoretical context for the findings from the film.

Data analysis was carried out through three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was done by selecting scenes relevant to PRSA principles from the film. Next, data presentation was conducted in descriptive narratives linking film scenes with the analyzed PRSA principles. Finally, conclusions were drawn to assess the extent to which these ethical values were applied or represented in *Air* as a case study of strategic communication and brand reputation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Advokasi (Advocacy)



(Sonny explaining Jordan's expertise to Phil)

The principle of advocacy in the PRSA Code of Ethics emphasizes that Public Relations practitioners have the responsibility to act as responsible spokespersons for the organization, client, or public interests they represent [16]. PR practitioners must advocate for clients' interests ethically, provide accurate information, and support the organization's strategic goals without sacrificing the truth. Advocacy is not merely about speaking on behalf of the client but also about demonstrating the courage to voice ideas and perspectives believed to be true, even at the risk of being unpopular within the organization.

In *Air* (2023), advocacy is represented through the character Sonny Vaccaro in the scene where he fights for the idea that Nike should recruit Michael Jordan as its main brand ambassador. In this situation, Sonny does not merely present technical data but also uses emotional and strategic approaches to persuade Nike's management, including CEO Phil Knight. With strong conviction, he says, "Michael Jordan is the future of this company," a key line reflecting his vision. Sonny presents clips of Jordan's gameplay and explains that Jordan is not just an athlete but will become a symbol of the future of basketball and the sports shoe industry.

Sonny's application of advocacy is evident. He actively voices an initially unpopular idea, which was even opposed internally. Yet, with courage and deep conviction, he continues to champion it because he believes it is the best step for Nike's future. He even declares that he is willing to risk his career if the plan fails—a clear form of moral and professional commitment to responsibly defend the organization's interests.

From a PRSA ethics perspective, Sonny's actions reflect the role of a PR practitioner not only as a communication bridge but also as a strategic thinker who advocates for ideas crucial to the organization's long-term success. Advocacy here is not only about speaking but also about courageously sustaining what is right despite internal risks. Sonny acts as an internal advocate—a voice within the company capable of strategically and ethically shifting organizational direction.

2. Kejujuran (Honesty)



(Sonny talking to Deloris at his house)

The principle of honesty in the PRSA Code of Ethics requires that a Public Relations professional must always convey accurate, truthful, and non-misleading information. PR practitioners must avoid manipulating information for unilateral gain and must maintain transparency in communication, whether with clients, the media, or the public. Honesty serves as the main foundation in building trust and credibility, because without honesty, the entire communication effort will lose its integrity.

In the film *Air* (2023), the principle of honesty is strongly reflected in the scene when Sonny Vaccaro visits the Jordan family's home and speaks directly with Michael's mother, Deloris Jordan. This scene illustrates a more personal and emotional atmosphere, not in a corporate meeting room, but in a warm and intimate family space. Sonny is present not only as a representative of Nike but also as an individual who believes in the value and potential of Michael Jordan.

In that conversation, Sonny does not try to exaggerate Nike's advantages over its competitors. He even honestly admits that at the time, Nike was not the leading brand in the basketball shoe market. In his words, which are both honest and full of hope, he says, *"We may not be the biggest, but we see something others don't."* This line is delivered by Sonny in a calm yet confident voice. His tone is gentle but clear, and his expression is serious — his eyes focused on Deloris, showing that he is sincere and not merely "selling a dream" like an ordinary salesman. Sonny's hands do not point or make excessive gestures, but rather rest on his lap or are used lightly to emphasize his words, indicating that he is truly speaking from the heart.

This attitude reflects the transparency that lies at the core of the principle of honesty in PRSA. Sonny does not hide the fact that other brands like Adidas and Converse were more popular and had bigger budgets. However, he offers a long-term vision and a promise that Nike would treat Jordan differently. He chooses an honest approach instead of making grand, uncertain promises. Sonny's honesty actually strengthens his position in the eyes of Deloris, who from the beginning is portrayed as a careful mother who does not easily trust others.

Deloris's gestures in that scene also show interest and respect. She does not immediately interrupt or reject him. She listens attentively, occasionally nodding slightly as a sign of acceptance of Sonny's honesty. At the end of the conversation, Deloris does not give a direct answer, but her calm expression shows that Sonny has succeeded in building initial trust through the honesty he displayed.

From the perspective of communication ethics, Sonny's attitude is an ideal example of how a PR professional should act – openly acknowledging weaknesses, yet still offering value and potential in a sincere way. Such honesty not only builds credibility but also creates a healthy, equal, and trust-based communication relationship.

3. Keahlian (Expertise)



(Nike designing the Air Jordan)

The principle of expertise in the PRSA Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance for Public Relations professionals to consistently improve their competence, skills, and knowledge. A PR professional is not only responsible for delivering information but must also understand context, audience, and the right strategy in carrying out communication practices. Expertise includes both technical and ethical abilities in crafting messages that are effective and impactful.

In the film *Air* (2023), the principle of expertise is vividly displayed in the process of designing the Air Jordan shoes by the Nike team. One of the key figures in this scene is Peter Moore, the shoe designer assigned to create a special shoe for Michael Jordan. This scene portrays the collaboration among team members – Sonny, Howard White, Rob Strasser, and Moore – who professionally combine their knowledge in branding strategy, NBA regulations, and Jordan's personal preferences.

In one scene, Peter Moore presents a sketch of a shoe boldly featuring dominant red and black colors, which at that time violated NBA shoe color regulations. However, they did not take the risk recklessly. The team considered how this violation could actually be turned into an opportunity to create controversy and media exposure, even calculating in advance that Nike would pay the NBA fines so Jordan could continue

wearing the shoes. This serves as a concrete example of how expertise in PR, design, and strategy can be carefully integrated to create significant impact.

Peter Moore's expression while presenting his design shows enthusiasm and pride. He points to the sketches on the table with energetic hand movements, his eyes shining as he explains the color concept and the philosophical reasons behind the sole's design. Meanwhile, Sonny listens attentively, occasionally smiling in satisfaction as the team's ideas become more refined. There is no excessive dialogue, but the facial expressions and interactions between characters demonstrate that they truly know what they are doing.

The expertise shown is not only in the technical aspect of shoe design but also in building the story (storytelling) behind the product. They understood that Jordan was not merely a basketball player but would become a cultural symbol. Therefore, the shoe design had to carry iconic value. This reflects that an expert PR professional does not only think about the present but builds strategies with long-term value.

The application of this principle is also evident when they prepare a presentation for the Jordan family. The Nike team crafted a personal narrative, incorporating clips about Jordan's childhood and his future vision—not just technical data. This demonstrates that they understood the importance of emotional appeal in communication, something that cannot be achieved without deep understanding of the audience and context.

Thus, the film *Air* illustrates that expertise in PR is not only measured by the ability to speak or persuade but also in developing strategies, crafting visual communication, and collaborating within a multidisciplinary team. The principle of expertise in PRSA is clearly reflected in how Nike built a brand not only from a product but from a vision executed with precision and profound knowledge.

4. Independensi (Independence)



(Deloris, as Jordan's mother, negotiates royalties for Jordan)

The principle of independence in the PRSA Code of Ethics emphasizes that a Public Relations professional must maintain objectivity and honesty in decision-making. PR practitioners must be free from pressure, influence, or interests that could

compromise their professional judgment. Independence does not mean working alone, but rather having the courage to voice one's own perspective and uphold integrity, even in difficult situations.

In the film *Air* (2023), the principle of independence is strongly embodied in the character of Deloris Jordan—Michael Jordan's mother—during the scene where she negotiates the royalty clause with Nike. This moment occurs near the end of the film, when Nike has presented its offer and expects approval from the Jordan family. However, Deloris emerges as a firm and independent figure in responding to the proposal.

With a calm yet authoritative voice, Deloris states, "*A shoe is just a shoe until my son steps into it.*" This line symbolizes how she takes control of the negotiation, unaffected by the prestige of a major brand or by sweet promises. In the conversation, she is not emotional but entirely logical. She demands that Michael receive a share of the profits from the sales of shoes bearing his name—an unprecedented request in the world of sports and the shoe industry at that time.

Deloris's expression is steady: her face remains composed yet firm, her eyes fixed and unwavering as she speaks. Her hands rest on her lap; she does not point or intimidate, but her firmness comes through the clarity of her words. This gesture demonstrates that she did not come merely to accept an offer but to set a standard. She knows her son's worth and refuses to let Nike profit without granting Michael his fair share.

The application of the independence principle is very clear in this scene. Deloris does not allow the situation to be dictated by a corporation with financial power and reputation. She is not intimidated by Sonny or Nike's CEO. Instead, she stands as the one directing the negotiation. This shows that she preserves her independence as the primary decision-maker in her son's life, refusing to let external pressures cloud her judgment.

From a PR perspective, Deloris's actions reflect the independence of a communicator who understands the context, dares to make her own decisions, and is not easily swayed by another party's narrative. In PR practice, the ability to remain objective and uphold professional judgment is a crucial ethical responsibility. Deloris demonstrates this not only as a mother but also as an informal PR figure who fights for personal values and fairness.

Thus, the film *Air* illustrates that independence in communication does not belong only to certified professionals. Anyone who can maintain objective judgment under pressure and is unafraid to voice what is right demonstrates the principle of independence in its strongest form, as upheld in the PRSA Code of Ethics.

5. Loyalitas (Loyalty)



The principle of loyalty in the PRSA Code of Ethics emphasizes that a Public Relations practitioner must maintain trust and commitment to the organization or client they represent, as long as it does not conflict with ethical principles and the public interest. Loyalty does not mean blind obedience, but rather adherence to professional values and the responsible, ethical pursuit of the client's goals. A PR professional must demonstrate integrity in maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and the public.

In the film *Air* (2023), the principle of loyalty is strongly demonstrated by the character Sonny Vaccaro. From the very beginning, he believes that Michael Jordan is the figure who can change Nike's future. Even though many of his colleagues, and even Nike's CEO Phil Knight, are unconvinced, Sonny continues to fight for the idea with full dedication. Sonny's loyalty is not only evident in his business strategy but also in his courage to risk his own career in order to support what he believes to be the best step for the company.

The scene that best reflects this principle is when Sonny speaks directly to Phil Knight and the Nike management team. In that meeting, Sonny stands tall in front of the presentation screen, his gaze sharp, and his voice steady and firm. He declares that if the plan fails, he is prepared to face all the consequences, including losing his job. *"If it doesn't work – fire me,"* he says in a tone that is firm but not emotional. His body language shows no hesitation. He stands upright, without a smile, making it clear that he is not trying to flatter his superiors but is instead defending his conviction and loyalty to the company's vision.

Sonny's loyalty is not to individuals but to values – specifically, Nike's long-term vision and the extraordinary potential he sees in Michael Jordan. He does not merely perform his role as a marketing manager but becomes the voice driving a major transformation. Even when he knows Nike has little chance compared to big competitors like Adidas and Converse, Sonny refuses to give up. This shows that his loyalty is not based on short-term gains but on the monumental change he believes can be achieved together.

From an ethical PR perspective, Sonny's actions represent a perfect example of responsible loyalty. He does not sacrifice honesty for the sake of allegiance, nor does he protect personal interests. Instead, he takes risks to support the organization's mission and to build a meaningful relationship between the brand and the public. Sonny realizes that if Jordan joins Nike, it will not just be an endorsement, but a historic milestone in the sports industry and brand communication.

Thus, the principle of loyalty in PRSA is powerfully reflected in Sonny Vaccaro's character—who upholds his commitment to the company's mission without losing integrity or his dedication to truth and strategic values. The film *Air* shows that loyalty is not merely about "obedience," but about defending something greater in an ethical and responsible way.

6. Keadilan (Fairness)



(Jordan receives a share of the profits from the sales of Air Jordan shoes)

The principle of fairness in the PRSA Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of equal, just, and non-discriminatory treatment toward all parties involved in communication. A PR practitioner must respect all voices, avoid biased treatment, and uphold openness in collaboration. Fairness means granting rights to those who contribute while maintaining mutually respectful relationships within the organization as well as with the external public.

Discussion

In the film *Air* (2023), the principle of fairness is clearly illustrated in the final negotiation scene between Nike and the Jordan family. After a long discussion, Deloris Jordan makes an unusual request for that time: that her son, Michael Jordan, receive royalties from every sale of shoes bearing his name. This marked a pivotal moment in the history of business and sports, as no athlete—especially one who had not yet played in the league—had ever received such a deal.

The scene takes place in Nike's office, in a formal setting that grows tense as Deloris states her condition. She sits with an upright posture, her hands on the table, and

her gaze fixed straight at Sonny and his team. There is no raised voice, no threats, but her expression is serious, firm, and non-negotiable. Meanwhile, Sonny and the team fall silent for a moment – their expressions reveal shock, even slight confusion, as the request went far beyond industry norms at that time.

However, Deloris explains that Michael Jordan's value lies not only in his basketball skills but also in how his presence will reshape the sports industry. "*A shoe is just a shoe until my son steps into it,*" she says again in a calm yet resonant tone. This line becomes the embodiment of fairness: if the company is to gain massive profit from Jordan's name, then Michael deserves a share of that value. It is not about greed, but about fairness in recognizing real contribution and impact.

Nike's team ultimately agrees to the condition. This decision becomes a revolutionary moment in branding and endorsements. From a PR perspective, the choice to grant royalties is a clear example of fairness – Nike honestly acknowledges the contribution of a prospective partner, gives him his rightful share, and does not exploit its corporate power to pressure the smaller party.

Ethically, the agreement illustrates a relationship based on justice and mutual respect. Nike, as a corporation, does not force old standards but is willing to respond to reasonable demands. Deloris voices her son's rights not through emotion but with strong reasoning. This is fairness in PR practice: giving recognition and appreciation to all parties in proportion.

Through this scene, *Air* teaches that fairness is not just about numbers and contracts but about moral value and the courage to treat others equally. For PR practitioners, fairness is the foundation of building long-term, healthy, and meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.

In the context of the film *Air* (2023), the application of the six PRSA principles – advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness – functions not only as a narrative element but also as a reflection of how ethical PR practices directly contribute to building and maintaining a company's positive image. For example, Sonny Vaccaro's advocacy demonstrates the courage to defend an idea he believes is right for the company's progress. His honesty in communicating with the Jordan family builds trust. Nike's expertise is visible in its holistic branding strategy. Deloris Jordan's independence in negotiation shows that autonomous decision-making can strengthen bargaining power. Sonny's loyalty to the company's vision, and the fairness achieved through royalties for Michael Jordan, are all woven together to form an ethical PR practice with long-term impact.

These principles do not stand alone but support one another in creating a strong narrative of trust, values, and reputation. This aligns with previous research findings by Dea Aldita (2014) in her study of the film *Wag the Dog* using the IPRA approach, where the application of communication ethics influenced strong public perception of political figures in the film. Similarly, Erlina Rumui's (2016) study of *Thank You for Smoking* shows that violations of communication ethics led to negative organizational image. From these

studies, it can be concluded that there is a direct correlation between ethics in PR activities and the resulting public perception and reputation.

By combining the findings from the film *Air* and previous literature, it becomes clear that PR activities without the application of ethics are vulnerable to public distrust and reputational crises. Conversely, PR conducted professionally while upholding codes of ethics – whether PRSA, IPRA, or Perhumas – will yield positive outcomes, namely an organizational image that is credible, humanistic, and competitive. Ethics in PR is not merely an added value but an essential element that must be integrated into every PR activity, from planning and execution to the evaluation of communication strategies.

Therefore, the film *Air* proves that when PRSA ethical principles are applied consistently in strategic communication, the results achieved are not only business agreements but also a strong brand image and sustainable public trust, in line with the ultimate goal of modern public relations practice.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study concludes that *Air* (2023) effectively illustrates the six core principles of the PRSA Code of Ethics – advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness – through its narrative and character interactions, highlighting the centrality of ethical values in successful strategic communication and relationship building. **Implication :** These findings imply that cinematic representations can serve as powerful pedagogical tools for teaching and contextualizing ethical practices in Public Relations, reinforcing the importance of moral integrity alongside professional competence in shaping credibility and long-term reputation. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited by its reliance on a single film as the unit of analysis and the descriptive qualitative approach, which may not capture broader patterns of ethical representation in media or provide generalizable conclusions. **Future Research :** Subsequent studies should adopt comparative analyses across multiple films, integrate audience reception studies, or employ mixed-methods approaches to deepen understanding of how ethics in Public Relations are represented and perceived in popular culture.

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