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Perception and Contribution of Public Relations to Society: What Does the Public Think? Insights from Türkiye

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to understand how the public perceives public relations and why it is perceived in that way by society. This research is related to the perception of public relations and is conducted in Türkiye. Semi-structured interviews with 30 people from different occupations/professions are conducted to identify their views on public relations. In addition to the perception of public relations, this study aims to find out the contribution of public relations to the organizations and society. Findings state that public relations is considered to have an important function for the organization and society. The Turkish participants of the study have an idea of public relations and are accurately describing some aspects of public relations. Their view is not negative, and they think that public relations contributes to society because it provides information to society from organizations. They also state that public relations should pay attention to the values of society. However, the public relations practitioner is perceived to favor the interest of the organization when a conflict between the organization and the public occurs.

Keywords: public relations; profession; perception of public relations; society

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1. Introduction

Is there any public relations scholar or professional who has not faced difficulty in explaining what the profession stands for regardless of where they practice or contribute to the scholarship of public relations? There are more similarities in this respect than the differences among us: we need to explain what public relations is and is not.

Asna (1997), one of the pioneers of public relations in Türkiye, defines "what public relations is not" in this way: it is not organizing events, not throwing cocktail parties, not just media relations, and not something that women in miniskirts do and is beyond protocol.

It is challenging to talk about the effects of something if you cannot articulate its framework and what it stands for correctly. Talking of the effects is the second step and cannot be delivered if you do not know the function from the onset. In addition to ignorance about public relations, the field also has a negative image surrounding it. Coombs and Holladay (2007, p. 1) state "that public relations activities are often equated with spin, stonewalling, distortion, manipulation, or lying. . .people tend to regard anything labeled as 'public relations' with great suspicion". Rand (1969, p. 65) claims that public relations is a "misunderstood" and "abused" term. According to the results of a five-year credibility study carried out by the Public Relations Society of America with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1999, public relations practitioners ranked 42 among the 44 public figures in the credibility index (Callison and Zillmann 2002, p. 86). Another study was conducted in 1972 and in 1992 with students, educators, and PRSA members to identify the responsibilities of public relations practitioners. In 1992, most respondents agreed that the primary responsibility of public relations practitioners was to the client,

then to the client's public, followed by the self. The last two places were society and the media. In 1972, the order was different. The responsibility to the client was followed by society, then self and the media, and finally, to the client's public (Newsom et al. 1993). A more recent study that looked into the prestige of 740 occupational titles found that public relations specialist rated above average (Sallot 2002). The study conducted by Bowen (2003) concluded that most of the new majors believe public relations has little content other than media relations and event management. The respondents are not aware that before implementation, there are other necessary steps such as strategic management, relationship building, and research.

The public relations profession is a profession not similar to what physicians, teachers, or accountants do and in which they have regular contact with people. Therefore, the only reference point is the representations of public relations in popular culture (Johnston 2010). Public relations has been described negatively over several decades, and this description provided images that influenced the perception of the public. The perceived credibility of the profession is affected by how people perceive the profession and whether they view public relations as being valuable to society (White and Park 2010).

Research across Ghana, Ethiopia, and New Zealand highlights varied perceptions of public relations. The study conducted in Ghana among a company's customers aimed to evaluate public perception of public relations practices. The results indicated that, overall, people had a positive view of public relations. However, most respondents held a neutral opinion regarding the public relations practices of the selected organizations. The study also suggested that negative perceptions of public relations could be improved through ongoing engagement with stakeholders and awareness campaigns, among other strategies (Frimpong 2021). A study assessing employee perceptions and practices in Ethiopian municipalities employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating surveys, interviews, and observations. The findings indicated positive perceptions of public relations among employees; however, interviews revealed that PR practices were constrained by limited funding and expertise (Spurgeon and Wondimu 2018). The study, which explores the business perspective on public relations in New Zealand, revealed that CEOs held a negative view of PR practitioners. They considered PR to be a key aspect of business operations but believed reputation management was better handled by themselves rather than through external consultants, except in times of crisis (Sterne 2008).

Misrepresentations of public relations practitioners in the media can negatively affect the profession because these create wrong assumptions and alter the public attitude toward the profession (Lambert and White 2012). Hence, understanding how the media defines public relations and how it is covered in the news stories is important. The perceptions coming from the mass media are building the image of public relations and defining what it is, making executives and people talk along this way (Jo 2003). A study on media perceptions of public relations in New Zealand reveals that these perceptions are generally negative. The antagonism felt by media practitioners stems from their experiences with public relations professionals, as well as the identities they have formed themselves (Sterne 2010). Another study examined how news writers, journalists, and reporters in television, radio, and print media in the USA perceive the public relations profession. When asked to define public relations, the most common responses included "to promote a product or company", "to gain positive exposure for the company", and "to represent a company or employer" (Buhagiar 2006, p. 19). The role of public relations was viewed as "providing information", "serving as the point of contact for their company", and "promoting their company or client" (Buhagiar 2006, p. 20).

The research of Pincus et al. (1993) confirmed the continuing negative perceptions of journalists on the materials provided by public relations practitioners. Another study identified that the opinions of journalism educators on public relations do not differ from what has been discussed previously in the literature (Shaw and White 2004). Research has revealed that the public relations profession is depicted negatively in the media and movies (Cline 1982; Spicer 1993; Miller 1999; Yoon and Black 2011; Lambert and White 2012). A

study conducted by Ames (2010) indicated that the recent popular American movies depict the image of the public relations practitioner less negatively than in the past and that it is more diverse and complex. The public relations practitioner is seen as more credible, respected, and influential. A study conducted in Türkiye analyzed the 262 articles published in one year by five national newspapers. The study concluded that the coverage of public relations in the media had not been negative in general, but the depiction of public relations by the columnists was more negative than the other stories. Some of the negative mentions were related to media relations (cash for news coverage, gifts), non-professional people entering the field (a model), and lack of public relations functions in the organizations (Görpe and Mavnacıoğlu 2009). A study on Turkish TV series portrayal of public relations concluded that except for two people, all public relations practitioner roles were female, and almost all of them were shown as negative, angry, flattering, liking money, and cruel. They also built a career with lies, sexuality, and fraud (Alikılıç and Baş 2018).

The study is conducted with people in Türkiye from different occupations to understand its perception and contribution to society. The public relations profession has been practiced in Turkey since the 1950s, yet discussions about its role and function are still ongoing. The profession has faced significant criticism, particularly regarding its association with propaganda, misinformation, and manipulation. Although public relations is practiced in both the public and private sectors, there remains a blurred perception of it among the public. By exploring society's perception of public relations, we can gain valuable insights into strategies for improving public understanding of the profession.

The literature review conducted discusses public relations as a profession, the function of public relations for society, and the ethical aspects of public relations. Since the research is conducted in Türkiye, there is an overview of the development of public relations in Türkiye. Without knowing the development of any profession, understanding its perception will not be comprehensive.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Public Relations as a Profession

Professionalism has been on the spot of public relations since the beginning of the 20th century (Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg 2009, p. 1). Public relations can be viewed as a young profession that is constantly trying to prove its maturity and demonstrate its independence from other media and business professions, especially in the second half of the twentieth century and early 21st century (Kolić Stanić 2018, p. 120). As stated by Dühring (2015, p. 5), "public relations as an academic discipline seems to be lost in several forms of translations or transformations with open-ended outcomes". Theaker (2004, p. 66) states that some practitioners who think of themselves as creative rather than scientific disagree with public relations being transformed into a profession, and they are skeptical about the rise in undergraduate and master degrees because they do not see these professional qualifications as representing professionalism. "Discussions about professionalisation (and de-professionalisation) began in the 1970s. This was a result of observations concerning the growing power of bureaucratic management, process-driven working methods and de-skilling of middle-class labour" (Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg 2009, p. 1).

Public relations consists of many sub-domains, such as corporate communication, strategic communication planning, internal communication, investor relations, and so on, but many people continue relating the domain to publicity (Fawkes 2018, p. 160). Dühring (2015, p. 18) argues that it is important to accept and reinforce the status quo first. Public relations continues to be a vibrant and developing field of research with new topics and approaches. The Melbourne Mandate (2012), endorsed at the World Public Relations Forum in 2012, mentions the contribution of public relations to society by building and sustaining strong relationships between the organization and its public. The professionals have the mandate to "define and maintain an organization's character and values; build a culture of listening and engagement; and instill responsible behaviours by individuals and

organizations" (https://www.globalalliancepr.org/melbourne-mandate accessed on 12 April 2021).

Although public relations is a progressive and active research area with an increasing number of conferences, journals, and university programs, public relations appears to lack a basic and consistent knowledge base that defines and limits the discipline (Dühring 2015, p. 6). Despite this conceptual ambiguity, public relations is viewed more favorably than it is often portrayed in the media, as demonstrated by the White and Park (2010) telephone survey. Respondents considered public relations an important activity that benefits society by providing information, and they disagreed with the notion that it is merely damage control, an attempt to conceal something or an unimportant activity. However, public relations was still linked to publicity, media relations, and efforts by organizations to promote their agenda (White and Park 2010). Sisco et al. (2011) state that public relations cannot be considered a mature discipline yet because it does not have a focus on research and theory building. Dühring (2015, p. 18) argues that unless the field continues to come up with its own concepts and theories distinguishable from other fields, it cannot change its negative reputation.

Although education is considered to have an important role in the transmission and reproduction of knowledge, there are competing views on how public relations knowledge should be disseminated (Fitch 2016, p. 7). Molleda et al. (2017, p. 1086) state that having a centralized curriculum consolidates the knowledge of the profession across institutions and enables the introduction of best practices of public relations to all practitioners. "No discipline is an island". Public relations cannot be independent of or indifferent to the society in which it operates (Mckie and Munshi 2009, p. 61). Fitch and L'Etang (2020) state that the public relations curriculum tends to fulfill industry expectations by helping to develop the students as future practitioners, but a more historical understanding of public relations can advance important skills of students, such as research, analysis, and interpretation. The academics want to provide the students an all-encompassing picture of the field, but they cannot do this. Whatever the name of the course or program, the educator teaches whatever he or she understands from the program (Dühring 2015, p. 18).

Public relations associations have made consistent efforts over the years to both legitimize and professionalize the practice by increasing the knowledge of the profession, improving its reputation, its ethical standards, and improving the certification processes (Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg 2009, p. 1). Professional associations have an important role in the professionalization process. They create normative values, standardize the practices, and offer a unified identity to practitioners and institutions about public relations (Yang and Taylor 2014, p. 509). However, within the context of public relations, Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg (2009, p. 4) state that many professional organizations cannot improve the image of the profession in the eyes of the public.

2.2. Public Relations and Society

Christensen and Langer (2009) state that public relations has the potential to be a fundamental driving force for a better society. Public relations professionals should understand the problems and trends facing businesses and society and effectively interpret and communicate their long-term implications to management (Verwey 2000).

As stated earlier, as an academic field and practice, public relations has challenges, and how the students are educated affects both society and the role of the profession is perceived by society (Mckie and Munshi 2009, p. 61). One of the many challenges that public relations faces is to define its values, the ethical perspectives that guide its functions, the values it adopts affecting society, and the values it adds to the efficient functioning of the market and public policy (Heath 2000, p. 69).

van Ruler and Verčič (2005, p. 187) mention four characteristics of European public relations: reflective, managerial, operational, and educational. The reflective dimension is explained as "to analyze changing standards and values and standpoints in society and discuss these with members of the organization, in order to adjust the standards and

values/standpoints of the organization accordingly" (van Ruler and Verčič 2005, p. 187). Heath and Coombs (2006, p. 3) explain the SMART approach in the following way:

- Societal value and meaning: Practitioners are aware of the consequences of each statement and behavior in society and in the community in which they work. Public relations practitioners and clients are not working in a vacuum. They are part of society;
- Mutually beneficial relationships: Relationship building is essential for public relations. For a relationship to be beneficial, all parties involved should support and gain from this relationship;
- Advantages through objectives: Public relations is designed to achieve specific goals;
- Rhetorical strategies: Rhetorical approaches in public relations require research-based strategic planning that will decide the messages and tactics to be used to achieve goals;
- Tactics: Each public relations activity is a tactic.

By understanding the social value and function of public relations, one can see the positive and beneficial role it plays in society (Bowen 2010, p. 574). "Public relations practitioners are often cast as the 'social conscience' of the organization, playing a role in the development of ethical standards within institutions" (Skinner et al. 2003, p. 16). The rhetorical tradition of public relations has the public discourse role in which ideas and issues are discussed, studied, and decisions are collectively made. In this way, consensus is achieved to guide personal and social decisions (Heath 2000).

Public relations in a postmodern, hypercomplex society should be revisualized on the assumption that the publics are now more active, more knowledgeable, and stronger in their decisions. Therefore, these publics should be now more engaged and involved in the construction of values and meanings for all types of organizations (Valentini and Kruckeberg 2011, p. 101). Valentini et al. (2012, p. 874) state that "In such a chaotic environment, it is thus paramount that organizations realize that publics cannot be controlled or managed and that organizations are better off when publics are part of a 'community' in which organizations are also full-fledged members". Thus, the role of public relations is to guide both institutions and the public in creating a community where dialogue and mutual understanding can take place (Valentini et al. 2012). Bowen (2010, p. 574) states that public relations is good because it helps to develop individual moral autonomy, informed rational decision-making, and freedom of choice. These are the backbones of a democratic society. In the global society of our century, Valentini et al. (2012, p. 875) describe ways to renew and sustain the sense of community in public relations as follows: helping community members and institutions to be aware of their common interests, helping individuals in the community to overcome alienation, helping individuals find safety and protection by relating to others, taking an active part in community projects that support progress, and helping to develop personal friendships.

Public relations is always seen as a profession that works behind the scenes, entering and leaving problematic situations. However, public relations is often regarded as a corporate conscience in line with the business ethics of social responsibility (Brautović and Brkan 2009, p. 188). Public relations professionals face the dilemma of making decisions that satisfy (1) the public interest, (2) the employer, (3) the ethical codes of the professional organization, and (4) personal values. These four groups are not in conflict with each other in the ideal world, but they often clash in real life (Skinner et al. 2003, p. 18). A survey conducted in Kenya on perceptions of public relations practice and practitioners found that trust in the PR profession was a key factor influencing how PR is perceived. Additionally, the use of social media significantly contributed to participants' positive views of PR practices and professionals (Muturi and Njoroge 2022).

2.3. Public Relations Ethics

In public relations, unethical practices have been a serious problem with many detrimental effects (Ki et al. 2012, p. 267). Continuing unethical public relations work gradually worsened the credibility, value, and image of the field (Ki and Kim 2010, p. 223). As stated

by Parsons (2016, p. 1), recognizing, confronting, and dealing with ethical dilemmas in day-to-day public relations practices are the three most important components of ethical realities. In other areas of mass communication (advertising, public relations, etc.) where there is professional persuasiveness, active individuals cannot defend what they engage in from the "societal, common good and ethical perspective" (Baker and Martinson 2001, p. 148).

Parsons (2016, p. 8) defines public relations ethics as "...the application of knowledge, understanding, and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behavior in the professional practice of public relations". The lack of a clear function for public relations implies that practitioners in the field sometimes lack actual guidelines for ethical decision-making and negotiate their roles and responsibilities, especially when they encounter new or difficult issues (Berg and Gibson 2011). The power of public relations to shape ideas is one of the most compelling reasons for considering duties toward society. In this way, care can be taken not to abuse this power with dishonest manipulations (Parsons 2016, p. 6).

Most public relations ethics theorists approve of some version of the idea that practitioners should balance their clients' advocacy needs with the comprehensive concept of "public interest" (Medeiros 2019, p. 162). "The code's ethical recommendations to public relations professionals around the world encourage PR practitioners to work in three ethical realms: endeavoring, undertaking, and refraining" (Del Rosso et al. 2020, p. 7). It has been argued that it is not possible to talk about ethical public relations since the practice itself is like manipulation and propaganda (Chentiba et al. 2021, p. 80). A constant issue in public relations ethics is how professionals should resolve the ethical dilemmas that are related to the persuasive advocacy task. Such ethical dilemmas can fall into one of these forms: between professional responsibilities and ethical dilemmas, between rival professional responsibilities, or rival ethical principles (Hove and Paek 2017, p. 86). According to the research conducted by Neill (2016, p. 861), public relations educators and practitioners mention the three most common ethical issues as "messaging (such as how much information to disclose and when), transparency in sponsored content (such as native advertising and paid endorsers/bloggers) and lack of access to leadership or information". To examine the use of power bases, a survey is conducted with German journalists and public relations practitioners. The findings indicate that while public relations practitioners see their influence coming from providing information and fostering strong relationships, journalists believe public relations professionals exert influence by pressuring them or purchasing advertising space (Koch et al. 2020).

Studies on how decisions are made in public relations ethical dilemmas have found that the process is complex and is driven by a variety of philosophical approaches, organizational cultures, or levels of practitioner experiences (Place 2015, p. 254). Public relations practitioners are influenced and controlled by their employers. Their personal ethical decisions are performed for practitioners, customers, organizational superiors, and the general public. When public relations practitioners suffer from uncertain role expectations, this results in psychological tension, inhibiting their ability to make clear moral decisions (Berg and Gibson 2011). Ki et al. (2012) found that professionals who work in companies that have an ethical perspective are significantly more likely to engage in ethical practices.

Various public relations organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) create ethical codes or ethical statements for the public relations practices and thus strive to provide ethical standards and guidelines for their members (Ki and Kim 2010, p. 223). In Türkiye, TUHID (TUHID n.d.) and IDA (IDA n.d.) have created ethical and professional standards. However, it should be kept in mind that not all public relations practitioners belong to professional organizations, and even if they do, it does not mean that they use the rules as guidelines. At the same time, public relations practitioners may not be trained in ethical decision-making during their studies or at their workplaces (Peck and Matchett 2010).

2.4. Public Relations in Türkiye

The modern public relations in Türkiye started with the establishment of the Anadolu Agency and with the reforms of Atatürk. Later, advertising agencies, press offices, information offices, and press consultancy departments were established within public institutions (Geçitli 2008; as cited in Karaaslan Şanlı 2015, p. 143). "Public relations in Türkiye is still a developing as a promising profession and is dependent on cultural and economic change" (Özden and Saran 2004). The public relations sector in Türkiye is vivant, although its antecedent was the state. Public relations in Türkiye has been recognized as a component of public administration practice, and it did not evolve from journalism and advertising as it had been in other countries (Watson 2015). Figure 1 is a snapshot of the development of public relations in Turkey, starting with the 1950s in public administration and then expanding to other areas too.

[1950s] Sub-category of Public Administration → [1960s] Governmental → Education → Corporate → [1970s] Agencies → [1990s] International agencies → Municipal/NGOs.

Figure 1. The development of public relations in Türkiye. Source: (Watson 2015).

Kazancı (2006) states that the Ottoman Empire had its own way of public relations, not similar to today's public relations practices. In the 1960s, some public institutions in Türkiye had established public relations units where the duties, powers, and responsibilities were clearly defined. For-profit organizations understood the contribution of public relations to the realization of their long-term goals and policies; therefore, they invested in in-house departments or professional consulting services (Hızal et al. 2014, p. 632). Bıçakçı and Hürmeriç (2013, p. 99) divide the history of public relations in Türkiye into three periods, as "antecedents, emergence and developmental":

1. Antecedents of PR:
    a. Single-party phase (1920–1946);
    b. Multi-party phase (1946–1960).
2. Emergence of PR (1961–1980);
3. Development of PR:
    a. Liberal economy phase (1981–1992);
    b. International competition phase (1992–2001);
    c. Integration phase (2002–ongoing).

The university education in public relations began in the 1960s in Türkiye (Balta Peltekoğlu 2018; Hızal et al. 2014). The Public Relations Association of Türkiye was founded in 1972, and its first President was Alaeddin Asna (Öksüz and Görpe 2013). The first public relations agency, A&B, was established in 1974. The first woman public relations practitioner in Türkiye, Betul Mardin, became the first Muslim President of IPRA in 1995 (Bıçakçı and Hürmeriç 2014, p. 263). Efforts to establish a professional industry association date back to 1997, when senior executives of some Turkish public relations agencies started to participate in international public relations events organized by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the International Communications Consultancy Organization (ICCO). Public Relations Consultancies Inc. of Türkiye (PRCI Türkiye) was established in 1998, and PRCI Türkiye was transformed into IDA by 13 public relations consultancies in 2004 (Göncü 2018, p. 691). The Corporate Communication Professionals Association of Türkiye (KID n.d.) was founded in 2009. "Communication Services Perception" research conducted by the three professional public relations associations (TUHID n.d.; IDA n.d.; and KID n.d.) in 2014 provided an overview of the Turkish public relations industry. The findings state that marketing communication, crisis communication, media relations management, and digital/social media management are the areas that help the most to achieve the business objectives. The participants of the study indicate that

they outsource mostly media relations management, digital/social media communication, event management, and crisis communication services. Internally, they manage internal communication and public affairs.

The rationale behind this study is to explore how the public relations profession is perceived in Türkiye. To address this, the study is guided by three key research questions:

RQ1: How is the contribution of public relations to society viewed across different professions?

RQ2: What roles are attributed to public relations?

RQ3: How do individuals perceive the ethical responsibilities of public relations?

3. Materials and Methods

Semi-structured interviews with 30 people from different professions in Türkiye are conducted with the aim of understanding how public relations is perceived by the public and uncovering why it is perceived in this way by society. "Usually, interviewing is defined simply as a conversation with a purpose. Specifically, the purpose is to gather information" (Berg 2001, p. 66). Qualitative researchers consider alternative knowledge concepts and explain the construction of social reality. Researchers showcase a variety of meanings and facts and believe in the active role of the researcher in the research process (Brennen 2017). "Qualitative research strategies provide perspectives that can prompt recall of these common or half-forgotten sights, sounds, and smells." (Lune and Berg 2017, p. 12). Interviews are most commonly used in qualitative research, and they are a main source for social sciences (Edwards and Holland 2013). "In interview conservation, the researchers ask about and listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. xvii). Semi-structured interviews are organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions as well as questions coming from the conversation between an interviewer and interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). "The interviewer listens to their dreams, fears, and hopes; hears their views and opinions in their own words and learns about their school and work situation, their family and social life" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. xvii).

In Türkiye, research on the perception of public relations remains limited, as the field is relatively new both in practice and education. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding regarding the role of public relations and its contribution to society. When research focuses on abstract or potentially misunderstood concepts like public relations, interviews prove valuable in facilitating deeper engagement between researchers and participants, allowing for clarification and elaboration. "Qualitative approaches enable researchers to investigate the complexities and dynamics of social interactions, providing rich and nuanced insights into the phenomena under consideration" (Susanto et al. 2024, p. 264).

A small study with modest objectives may justify declaring saturation early in the research process. However, researchers making substantial claims must carefully ensure the thoroughness of their data collection and the rigor of their analyses. For instance, while a study based on 25 interviews might be adequate for a limited project, it could raise skepticism if the findings aim to address broad topics, such as human nature, or challenge well-established research (Charmaz 2006). A sample size is deemed adequate when interviews yield little to no new information, a concept commonly referred to as "data saturation" or "data sufficiency" (Jowsey et al. 2021).

Table 1 shows the participants and the professions of the participants of the study. The names of the participants are not revealed to preserve confidentiality. The sample represented different professions such as lawyer, manager, architect, doctor, insurer, psychologist, politician, real estate agent, teacher, human resources specialist, sales representative, accountant, hairdresser, pharmacist, and so on.

Table 1. Sample profile.

Participant Name	Profession	Gender
Aslan	Operations manager	M
Asli	Special needs teacher	F
Berke	Lawyer	M
Dogan	Human resources manager	M
Emir	Sales representative	M
Emre	E-commerce site regional manager	M
Gul	Insurer	F
Hakan	Textile	M
Mine	Digital content creator	F
Nevin	Politician (local)	F
Ulku	Sales representative	F
Soner	Architect	M
Tulay	Teacher	F
Ugur	Customer representative	M
Umit	Store manager	M
Aydan	Hairdresser	F
Ulfet	Textile agent	F
Haluk	Doorkeeper	M
Saniye	Tailor	F
Nurgul	Pharmacist	F
Nilhan	Accountant	F
Suna	Interior designer	F
Nurdan	Preschool teacher	F
Gungor	Real estate agent	M
Yıldız	Airline	F
Oguz	Academic	M
Ates	Industrial engineer	M
Defne	Civil servant	F
Isik	Lawyer	F
Ayhan	Doctor	M

In this study, 30 participants were selected to explore perceptions of public relations, ensuring that individuals with relevant experiences or insights were included. This approach is consistent with (Creswell and Creswell 2018) assertion that qualitative research seeks to "purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) means that qualitative researchers select individuals who will best help them understand the research problem and the research questions." (Creswell and Creswell 2018, p. 333). Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select cases that provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al. 2015). We interviewed 14 males and 16 females with ages ranging from 24 to 71.

Most of the interviews took place through Zoom, but two of them were phone interviews, and six of the interviews were face-to-face. The research started in June 2020, and

the last round of interviews took place in August 2020. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. They lasted from 15 to 50 min.

The questions addressed to the participants were on the "perception of public relations" and "practices of public relations practitioners" or what they do. The other set of questions involved the "function of public relations" or what the need for public relations is and its contribution to society. "Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke and Braun 2016, p. 297). It allows researchers, practitioners, or observers to systematically analyze diverse types of information, enhancing their precision and sensitivity in interpreting and understanding observations related to individuals, events, contexts, and organizations (Boyatzis 1998, p. 5). "Thematic analysis does not rely on frequency counts to indicate the importance of coded data" (Jowsey et al. 2021, p. 473).

4. Results

Except for six people, none of the participants had known anyone from the public relations field. All the participants stated that they had heard of public relations, and they all stated that public relations is a profession. The results are organized around the following themes: "perception of public relations", "practices of public relations", "the need for public relations", "contribution of public relations to the society", and "public relations ethics".

4.1. Perception of Public Relations

The participants heard of public relations but were not aware of exactly what it is when compared to other established professions. The perception of public relations was a neutral one, neither negative nor positive, but when they started talking about its importance, emphasizing it as a profession, we heard the frame of the importance from their accounts. "Not many things come to my mind because I am outside the field but mainly communication methods come to my mind, what are the methods, comparisons in communication to make better" (Oguz). "...communication comes to mind, holding the pulse of the public, to understand the needs of the public" (Emre). "I have a neutral feeling. Corporate communication has become more popular. Maybe they do similar things, maybe public relations is at a more important place, but it is a little bit neutral with me" (Mine). "I see it as an important profession, but I am not sure how important it is seen in the society" (Isik).

The perceptions and the change in perceptions on public relations were put forward in the interviews. As stated by one participant, "In the past, I was thinking of it as welcoming and promotion. Now what comes to mind is a department at the background who directs and works on the answers that should be given" (Ulku). "...Establishing a relationship with the public, forming relationships on a one-to-one basis with people, and trying to make everyone happy. The only reason for this is that public relations has not done its promotion and the second reason is its name" (Nurdan).

When discussing public relations, other professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and psychologists, are mentioned. These professions were used for comparison purposes. In the case of psychologists and psychiatrists, the participants associated them with public relations work, whereas for lawyers and doctors, the use was for direct comparison.

Participants also talked about where their perception of public relations is coming from. "...the perception most likely is coming from American films and serials. Blonde women in short skirts and bargaining" (Suna). "The first thing that comes to mind is American movies. I watched a movie. An insurance company has been sued. The public relations people are bad guys. Although the insurance companies had done wrong, they are defending them..." (Soner).

The perception of public relations is derived from their encounters and observations. In the words of one participant, "... when you enter hospitals and beauty parlors, I am not naming any, there a small office, named public relations, but what they do is registration...

The problem here is that public relations specialists have not been presented accurately. . .” (Nurdan). “They smile at you and are around you. . .” (Ayhan). “This is the unit that a company or a hotel communicates with people. If I go to a company or a hotel, most likely, I will see first a public relations unit, the unit that I will explain my complaint and for whom I am here.” (Asli).

The way public relations has been defined, and its linkage with areas and concepts stemmed from the perceptions of the participants. They discussed it in terms of marketing, advertising, event management, hosting, brand, and image. The participants view public relations as an advertisement, and the function of this advertisement is to explain the organization. The perception of public relations as a problem solver and customer relations was strongly emphasized in the accounts of the participants. Public relations is seen as a “bridge” between companies and customers; it is their first contact point wherever they go. However, problem-solving was perceived in two different ways. One was solving the problems for the organization. The other was understood in terms of the role of a psychologist and his/her solving problems. “They take the pulse of the public. . . they learn the needs of customers and expectations” (Emre). “. . .Helps everyone, must reply to everyone. . .The public relations specialist is helping you in the bank. Registration maybe. Or they say we will connect you to a public relations specialist. A man or a woman answers the phone and replies to your questions. . .” (Aydan).

The communication component of public relations under different communication contexts and the representation function have also been highlighted by the participants. The two communication contexts brought up were mostly at the interpersonal and societal levels. The participants consider public relations practitioners as communicators and representatives. “They reflect the institution outside to the public, like brand image” (Mine). “It is the unit that distributes the messages that need to be distributed from the organization” (Ulku). For the participants, public relations works for the image of the brand and organization by creating a bridge between the organization and the public.

Overall, the public relations concept is associated with different levels of functions such as sales, marketing, events, advertising, image, brand, managing complaints, managing perceptions, and customer relations. The roles of a psychologist and a life coach given to public relations are illustrated by these words: “. . .listens to the person next to him like a psychiatrist doctor. Stays silent, acts patiently. Tries to calm down. They have a difficult profession like a doctor. . .” (Hakan). “When you say doctor, health comes to my mind, Public relations like a psychologist...” (Haluk). “I think of them as people who are doing things helpful for the people.” (Nurgul)

Figure 2 illustrates the perception of public relations visually. Public relations is associated with communication, and this communication is associated with relationship building. Equally, public relations is perceived as marketing, advertising, events, hospitality, brand, and image. The third dimension, which was also very prominent, was the role attributed to public relations as a problem solver and customer relations.

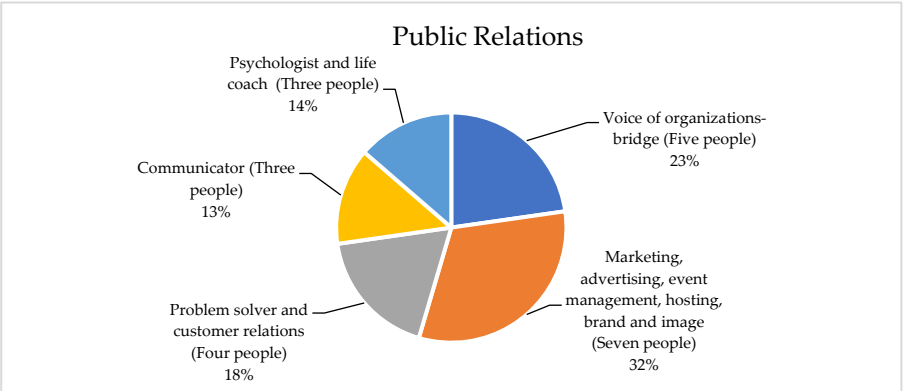


Figure 2. Perception of public relations.

4.2. Practices of Public Relations Practitioners

The participants had multiple perceptions of public relations, but these perceptions have not been transferred easily to their imagining of the day in the life of a public relations practitioner. Three accounts were provided under this question. One account was based on their observation of the public relations in their workplaces, and the other was coming from their imagination of the work. The source of the third one was their personal experiences with "public relations practitioners" (which for them represented public relations).

The occupations of a public relations practitioner in a day include internal and external communication, social media work, marketing, media monitoring, solving problems, issue management, and conducting research. The participants imagined their workday as busy, stressful, with no definitive times, and receiving a lot of communication, e-mails, and more. When they were describing their workday, they also talked about their personality characteristics. The attributes that have been mentioned the most were "mediator" and "problem solver", and most of the participants had the bridge visualization in their minds. "Let us say there is an issue. . .To solve the issue talks with different departments. Let us say one organization had done product sales and there is a problem with the customer. . .The public relations person follows this and twists the negative into positive" (Umit).

It was not surprising to discover that the participants imagined that the public relations practitioner spends their day solving different types of problems. In their perception, public relations was problem-solving. "Gets the feedback of the customers, collect complaints and suggestion, he is in communication with the audience that the company targets" (Berke).

The participants thought that the public relations practitioners conducted research and placed it as one aspect of their daily routines. "Research" has been either mentioned or implied by the participants. Some of their statements on how research is integrated into their work are as follows: "They conduct research; they do not solve problems always. They look at the details. They look at the law. They do a lot of work" (Aydan). "They work research-based most of the time. They evaluate the behavior of people and interpret them. They need to develop strategies according to it" (Suna). It was a surprise to hear research being linked to public relations practice by the participants.

One other account on the day of a public relations practitioner was based on the participants' "personal experiences" but not from their observation of public relations at their workplaces or from their imagination. "I had a problem with the product I bought. I took it to the store. They are called public relations" (Nilhan). "What do they do? They communicate with people, try to understand what they want, and also what he/she wants. Does this for himself and the person next to him. . .For example, I make a phone call, it says, I am contacting you to public relations, I need an appointment from the doctor, they direct you to talk to public relations" (Saniye).

4.3. Need for Public Relations

The participants mentioned two main reasons for public relations. One stems from their need, and the other one stems from the perspective of the organization. The participants explained why they need public relations and why the organizations need it as well. From their point of view, the public needed to explain their needs and complaints to the organization. However, the participants elaborated more on the need of the organizations for public relations than the other. The main comment on this aspect was the power of communication and what could be achieved through it. The underlying issue is that the companies should explain their products to people, which is done for an image. In the words of one participant, "We as Turkish society, we are emotional society, we like contact, talking. These types of things are valuable for us. We even joke about this. If he liked me, can pay 10 TL more and buy from me" (Emre). "Public relations is developing 'sales strategies' especially for 'the private sector' and also for creating a competitive advantage" (Suna).

The need for public relations for companies is mentioned in terms of its power in awareness and perception/image. Participants think that public relations is needed because,

in this way, the organizations can explain themselves outside, and as the voice and face of the corporate public relations create awareness.

The positive influence of communication/public relations is illustrated in these words by the participants. "...Communication affects company success...Increases loyalty, affects employee satisfaction. Important for international competition" (Nevin). "To sell something is not easy, selling is as problematic as production. When you are selling, you need to influence people, you need to gain them...Public relations has become important for people" (Soner). "Wish there should be more value attributed. Every company had a department. The companies could have managed the crises better and they could send the messages better as well" (Ulku). One participant talked about the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate what she meant. "Especially in the pandemic period, you have to give priority to public relations...Advertising has lost its credibility. In the background, public relations should continue without timelessness. If there are two products with the same price, you find one more sympathetic, and this is achieved by public relations" (Nurdan).

The need for public relations from their point of view was related to public relations solving their problems. In this respect, they see public relations as a contact point directing them to hospitals, banks, shops, etc. In addition to the need for public relations as the touchpoint in places that people go, the other need was more in terms of psychological consultancy. "...If people go, there are people like this in my environment, they went and got help. Not all people go, where will he find public relations. It has to be more spread" (Haluk). "It takes away the sorrows of people. It has to increase. We need to speak comfortably..." (Aydan).

Figure 3 provides a visual snapshot of the need for public relations as expressed by the participants.



Figure 3. Need for public relations.

4.4. Contribution of Public Relations to Society

The participants agree that public relations provide information that society needs. Public relations also unites the company and society in terms of social responsibility projects. Public relations is important for understanding the values of the public and their preferences so that the organizations know they are doing the right things. The majority of the participants agreed that public relations have a "value" for society. The contribution of public relations to society is grouped as providing information to society, influencing/directing society, contributing through social responsibility projects, and solving the issues of society. "Society needs communication. In a larger family, there is someone who provides communication. In society, this is public relations" (Aslan). "It can influence society, direct and make them gain a point of view" (Ulku). "If there are no public relations, the society can be directed in a wrong way. Public relations know what should be said, where, when, and how. It knows what the public wants to hear and manage the perceptions well" (Nevin). "They can do social responsibility projects, and these can be projects identified with the country. Education, planting trees, and more. The emotions that are felt by the consumers in these social responsibility projects can be transferred to society" (Umit).

When discussing the contribution of public relations to society, some of the participants related to the company, particularly to the relationship between the company and society. Except for one participant, the majority recognized this contribution. "They do not have any benefit to society because they just care about their interest" (Hakan).

4.5. Public Relations and Ethics

When ethics and public relations were addressed, the participants discussed the contribution of public relations again. Although the participants view public relations as contributing to society in several aspects, when it comes to ethics, public relations, and public interest, almost all the participants think that company interest is chosen over the public interest.

Participants think that in all professions, including public relations, public relations practitioners should act ethically, but they think that this may not be possible at all times. "They should not lie, but all lie, pink lies, I think everyone lies even though we do not want to lie. Sure, they lie" (Laughs) (Yıldız). The participants mentioned that acting ethically is a character issue too. Some state that public relations professionals do not lie, but they may not share the complete information; they intentionally miss some parts of it and leave the reality in the dark. "If there is conflict, takes the side of the company" (Asli). "I do not know about lies, but they can leave it vague, open-ended" (Ulku). Manipulation has been explained by one participant by stating that the public relations person may not really support the idea or the service or the product, yet by manipulating people in different ways, they conduct public relations. They also differentiated which type of organization is likely to lie or act unethically. The distinction was made between a private corporation and a foundation institution. In general, participants mentioned their concerns about the corporate world. "I think in general people who work in corporate firms, care more on the about the interests of the corporation. This is what I saw in practice, the interest of the corporation is more important. . ." (Gungor). They also think that the personal ethical principle is ignored when they are working in the corporate world. If it is a private company, then the interest of the company is favored, but if it is a foundation, then it can be different. In the end, they think that the public relations person will surrender. ". . .a foundation may resist about the principles and morality of the society, but a public relations person is the face representing the company and has to do whatever the company asks- bad or good" (Nurdan). There were also a few participants who claimed that it is indeed the small organizations that will engage in unethical practices.

The participants also provided some examples of unethical practices. "When you communicate with media, if you are a woman, you can use your sexuality. You may be in a accepting a dinner invitation if you want your news to be published. Going to holidays in marketing sector are not exceptional. Maybe you may say this is unethical. To whom this is ethical or not, you can say I am doing my job" (Nurdan). "What else? Gifts. Giving gifts is always good, but what if it is above the limit or gives money secretly. . ." (Ulfet). One of the participants used an analogy for public relations as the perfect person in a family. What is expected from this family member is to make correct decisions; however, the participant adds that he/she can act unethically because this is the business of sales and marketing, and in competition, this is unfortunately acceptable. ". . . if you are the public relations manager of a night club, the entertainment event you organize maybe against the morality of the society, but still the public relations person has to sell it" (Nurdan).

Very few people mentioned that public relations professionals act unethically or that even if they do, they try to balance it. In the interviews, the consequences of acting unethically are mentioned as well. Because public relations is in communication with all and represents the organization, it has to have ethical values and act accordingly. Otherwise, this will damage the reputation of the organization and the practitioner. In the words of one participant, "The task of public relations is to create images, but this could be the opposite if he/she does not behave ethically, the image could be damaged" (Berke).

5. Discussion

Fall and Hughes (2009, p. 2) stated that "the public relations industry's image problem is no secret. The term is like a Pandora's box of preconceptions—and misconceptions—in the minds of many". In this study, the same pattern is also witnessed. People view public relations as having a very important function for the organization and society. They talk about it respectfully and have knowledge and awareness of public relations, but their knowledge of public relations sometimes differs significantly from what public relations really is. They can provide accurate descriptions of some of the aspects of public relations, such as communication, representation, awareness creation, and problem-solving. Participants also view public relations as being carried out to help an organization. That is, it was carried out for a reason: that of promoting the image of the corporation or for brand-product promotions. From the perspectives of the company and individuals, public relations is employed to solve problem. These perceptions are not negative ones, they are neutral and leaning toward positive when all their accounts on public relations are taken into consideration.

Little can be accounted for the media portrayal of public relations in creating the perceptions in the study. The perceptions of the participants were derived from their work and life experiences. Although the literature attributed the perception of public relations to media portrayals, there was not much mention of this fact in this research.

One way of learning about professions is through direct encounters. We go to a bank and experience the job of a bank teller. We go to a doctor and derive firsthand what it is that a doctor does. In this study, the problem solvers of any issue or the first contact point/points where you can address your complaints and the person who helps you in any way are associated with public relations. In this respect, an information desk staff, customer relations, or the person who talks to you is identified as the public relations person.

How public relations practitioners spend their workday is reflected in their perceptions. It was interesting to observe that they included a research component in the daily routines of public relations practitioners.

The participants think that public relations contributes to society because it provides information to society from organizations. In their view, public relations must be concerned with the values of society. However, when a conflict between the organization and the public occurs, the public relations practitioner is perceived to favor the interest of the organization. Public relations has been defined, but this definition involves the mention of other disciplines.

Studies conducted in various countries show that the public relations profession is still redefining itself, changing and adapting what it represents, what practitioners do, and what they are expected to do, and ultimately redefining public relations (Tsetsura 2010). The poor reputation and low image of public relations likely hinder its development (Pritchitt 1992, p. 45). The changing role of business has important implications for public relations and provides opportunities for a strategic role. The importance of stakeholder engagement is widely recognized in this new interconnected world (Steyn 2009). As stated by Callison (2001, p. 219), "An industry that focuses on the creation of positive relationships between various publics faces the real challenge of maintaining its reputation before the same publics it tries to influence".

Brunner and Smallwood (2019) claim that the focus of today's public relations and scholarship is on the objectives and activities of the organization, and the public interest should be repositioned in that matter. As stated by Johnston (2017, p. 5), "public relations may benefit from a deeper understanding of the complexity of the public interest and how it is viewed and adopted in other fields to more robustly connect with democratic processes and social change agendas". Public relations practitioners are the public face of their institutions, and they find themselves in pressure between serving the people who employ and pay them or doing the "right thing" for society (Jackson and Moloney 2010). It was added that advancing and prioritizing the public interest changes how we do and understand public relations (Brunner and Smallwood 2019).

The discussions on public relations and its public interest in the literature are a dimension that the participants touched upon. Their views on this dimension were clear, and they were naturally expecting public relations to be on the side of the organization when there is a clash of interests. In other words, they did not view public relations as not caring about public interest, and violations regarding this did not make them have a negative perception of public relations. For them, public relations was no different than other professions in this respect.

When we consider established professions like doctors or lawyers, the perception of these fields tends to be relatively consistent across various groups. However, studies from different parts of the world reveal that the perception of public relations varies significantly among groups such as customers, employees, business leaders (CEOs), and journalists. For instance, journalists often view the profession less favorably compared to other groups. The perception of public relations differs across various segments of society and is shaped by a wide range of experiences. What causes this discrepancy, and how can it be addressed? One possible explanation lies in the working dynamics between public relations professionals and other groups or the influence of negative portrayals of the profession in the media. Further research is needed to explore these underlying factors and identify strategies for improving the perception of public relations.

This study suggests that the public's understanding of the public relations profession is limited, shaped primarily by media exposure and information from friends, resulting in a superficial awareness. Due to this lack of in-depth knowledge, individuals tend to hold a neutral stance toward public relations, neither strongly positive nor negative, as indicated in other studies. Additionally, they often associate the profession with roles such as marketing and advertising rather than recognizing its distinct functions and contributions.

Compared to previous studies (White and Park 2010; Frimpong 2021; Muturi and Njoroge 2022) on this topic, the study conducted in Türkiye reveals that, due to the public relations profession being relatively unknown, perceptions of it are neither strongly positive nor negative. Instead, people tend to view public relations as a helpful profession based on their experiences with functions they associate with it, such as customer relations, communication, and problem-solving. These encounters shape their understanding, even though they may not fully grasp the scope of the profession.

Public relations is an evolving profession that can only be explained accurately if we can increase the number of public relations professionals with the right knowledge and competencies. Establishing better relations with the media and public relations practitioners can result in the media seeing public relations as more of a credible source. If the profile of public relations practitioners projected was in a good way and the benefits of the profession to the institutions and society were covered by the media, it could clear up misconceptions about the profession. Public relations academics can be more vocal and educative on public relations. The existence of professional public relations associations is tied to all that has been discussed in this paper, so they can also address the issues that have been brought up by the participants. As one final point, the perception of public relations is a global and local issue; therefore, work and support from all concerned parties at the national and international levels is a necessity to overcome the issues. The research tried to understand the perception of the public relations profession and its contribution to society from the Türkiye context. Would there be differences or similarities in this perspective if the study is conducted by public relations professionals and/or journalists? Hearing about the contribution of public relations to society by the Turkish public relations professionals by themselves and the Turkish journalists' perception of this contribution could provide us with further insights as well. The findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to the broader population. Additionally, the small sample size limits the ability to capture the full range of societal perspectives. There is also a risk of sampling bias if certain professional groups are overrepresented or underrepresented. However, the qualitative research captures the perceptions of public relations as expressed by the study participants. This phase provides valuable insights that inform the future quantitative component of the

study, the survey. It lays the groundwork for developing the survey instrument, which will facilitate the generalization of findings based on its large-scale data.

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