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## **THE VIEWS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TOWARDS PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSION AND ITS PRACTITIONERS**

### **Abstract:**

Numerous studies was carried out to explain the concept, function and profession of public relations. Public relations is a concept that is perceived differently by different segments of the society. To reveal the views of university students on public relations is important to understand the image of public relations. This study has been conducted to determine the image of public relations profession and practitioners in the eyes of university students. A face to face survey was carried out on 514 students from Selcuk University. Several statistical tests were used to analyze the obtained data. Results of the study reveal that most of the respondents have positive views towards the concept of public relations profession and its practitioners. Most of the respondents stated that the public relations profession requires expertise and this job can only be performed by people who have finished their university education in the field of public relations.

### **Keywords:**

public relations, public relations practitioners, university students

## Introduction

In historical process public relations profession has improved significantly but it is thought that the reputation of this profession has not improved at same level. Versatile become a professional public relations profession has remained a so faced with ethical questions (Sayimer, 2006: 16).

Bowen's study (2009: 408) illustrated that the common misperceptions of public relations as marketing or promotion, image enhancement, manipulation, and an overall veiled idea of the responsibilities of the function are prevalent.

Gleeson (2013: 14) found that the mass media strongly influences at least one-in-two students' perceptions of public relations. For this reason students have mixed preconceptions about public relations and intended careers.

According to Gleeson's study Australian students held either a stereotypical mass media image or ambivalent attitudes about public relations practice. Findings about why students choose to study PR indicated that the "glamour" of public relations and careers in fashion, music or sports appeal to most students. When asked about professional ethics, participants said that they would combine personal values with industry codes. It was suggested that both professors and professional associations need to better inform students entering the field about the industry (Fullerton and McKinnon, 2015: 3).

According to Oksuz (2015: 261) public relations has a negative image and in Turkey it is not fully recognized as a profession yet. She has mentioned the factors causing this situation are as follows:

- The idea that PR is not targeting public interest.
- Any hindrance to the exercise of the profession to people who do not have a specific training and competence
- Inability of licensing and accreditation procedures
- Failure to check compliance with the code of ethics

Public relations experts to be organized as an international organization, improving and increasing the effectiveness of the quality of professional practice in different countries will give credibility to the public relationships discipline (Güllüoğlu, 2006: 163).

Public relations profession, carries the distinction of being a structure that requires interdisciplinary knowledge. A public relations specialist needs to have knowledge in every area of social sciences. These include economics, sociology, psychology and political science (Ustakara, 2011: 171).

Some research has been focused on the place of women in public relations profession. In the studies it was found that the number of the women in public relations profession has increased in the 1980s. It was determined that the role of women is different from the role of men in this profession. It was found that female public relations practitioners earn less than male practitioners (Peltekoğlu, 2014: 152-153).

It is possible to say that in Turkey the number of the women in public relations profession is higher than men as it is in other countries. But women from this profession don't agree that there is a very big difference between women and men practitioners working in public relations profession in Turkey (Tanyıldızı, 2011: 80).

In Turkey, the number of the studies to determine the perceptions of students towards public relations profession and its practitioners are limited. Perceptions of students on these subjects are critical for public relations professionals and academicians. This study is important in this regard.

## **Methodology**

In this study, survey method was used. A face to face questionnaire was conducted with 514 students from Selcuk University between 1-31 March 2015. Selcuk University is one of the biggest university in Turkey with its student population.

Convenience sampling method was used in the study. Frequencies, One Way Anova and T Test were used to analyze data.

The data was collected from 514 students from 22 different academic units and 48 different departments. In the questionnaire eight questions were asked to determine the attitudes of students towards public relations profession. Seven questions were asked to determine the attitudes of students towards public relations practitioners.

This study seeks to find answers to the answers to the following questions:

- What are the like or dislike levels of public relations profession among the participants?
- How are the students' attitudes towards public relations profession?
- How are the students' attitudes towards public relations practitioners?
- What is the most important function of public relations department according to the students?
- Are the attitudes of students towards public relations profession and its practitioners differentiate according to their gender, faculty and department?

## Findings

This section includes the findings of survey about the attitudes of university students towards public relations profession and its practitioners.

### Some Characteristics of the Participants

The distribution of participants by gender shows that 50.8 percent of the students are male and 49.2 percent of the students are female.

**Table 1: Distributions of the Students According to Their Gender**

Gender	n	%
Male	259	50.8
Female	251	49.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>100</b>

The students are from 22 different academic units (faculty, vocational school and conservatory) and 48 different departments.

### Attitudes of University Students towards Public Relations Profession

The judgment which has the highest average in respondents' opinions on public relations profession is "PR profession requires expertise" (M=4.13). The judgment which has the second highest average is "PR can be performed by people who receive university education in this field" (M=3.96) and the judgment which has the third highest average is "PR provides an essential service to community and publics" (M=3.88). The judgment which has the lowest average is "PR is a profession specific to men" (M=1.82). The judgment which has the second lowest average is "PR is a profession specific to women" (M=2.12).

**Table 2: Mean Scores of Attitudes towards Public Relations Profession**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
PR profession requires expertise	511	1,00	5,00	4,13	1,03
PR can be performed by people who receive university education in this field	514	1,00	5,00	3,96	1,25
PR provides an essential service to community and publics.	512	1,00	5,00	3,88	,85
Public relations is a reputable profession	514	1,00	5,00	3,68	1,01
PR profession can be performed by people who specialize in different area	512	1,00	5,00	2,90	1,32
PR is a profession specific to women	512	1,00	5,00	2,12	1,29
PR is a profession specific to men	507	1,00	5,00	1,82	1,11

According to these findings it can be stated that most of the participants think that public relations profession requires expertise and it can be performed by people who receive

university education in this field. Furthermore, public relations profession is not perceived as a job specific to men or women.

Male and female students does not differentiate according to their views on the judgment that public relations is a profession specific to men or women ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### **Attitudes of University Students towards Public Relations Practitioners**

The judgment which has the highest average in respondents' opinions on public relations practitioners is "PR practitioners serve the interests of boss rather than the interests of public" ( $M=3.56$ ). The judgment which has the second highest average is "PR practitioners are successful in private sector" ( $M=3.52$ ) and the judgment which has the third highest average is "PR practitioners obey ethical rules" ( $M=3.51$ ). The judgment which has the lowest average is "PR practitioners are successful in public institutions" ( $M=3.18$ ). The judgment which has the second lowest average is "PR practitioners always give accurate information to the target audiences" ( $M=3.19$ ) and the judgment which has the third lowest average is "PR practitioners are honest in doing their job" ( $M=3.37$ ).

**Table 3: Mean Scores of Attitudes towards Public Relations Practitioners**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
PR practitioners serve the interests of boss rather than the interests of public	513	1,00	5,00	3,56	1.11
PR practitioners are successful in private sector	512	1,00	5,00	3,52	,95
PR practitioners obey ethical rules	511	1,00	5,00	3,51	,90
PR practitioners are well-intentioned people	513	1,00	5,00	3,47	,90
PR practitioners give priority to public interest	504	1,00	5,00	3,40	1.03
PR practitioners are honest in doing their job	511	1,00	5,00	3,37	,99
PR practitioners always give accurate information to the target audiences.	509	1,00	5,00	3,19	,98
PR practitioners are successful in public institutions	511	1,00	5,00	3,18	,95

According to these findings it can be stated that most of the participants think that public relations practitioners serve the interests of boss rather than the interests of public. Most of the participants believe that public relations practitioners in private sector are more successful than the practitioners from public institutions.

## The Most Important Task of the Public Relations Unit According to Participants

The most important task of the public relations unit by more than half of the respondents is to learn the desires, expectations and complaints of public. 18.4 percent of respondents stated that the most important task of the unit is consulting and application. According to 12.7 percent of respondents the most important task of the unit is to create a positive image of the organization.

**Table 4: The Most Important Task of the Public Relations Unit According to Participants**

Tasks	n	%
To learn desire, expectations and complaints of public	262	52,9
Consulting and application services	91	18,4
To provide a positive image for an organization.	63	12,7
To organize en event	26	5,3
To promote the organization	20	4,0
To provide information to the press	19	3,8
To provide secreterial services	14	2,8
<b>Total</b>	<b>495</b>	<b>100</b>

## Liking Level of Public Relations Profession

The majority of respondents indicated that they like the profession of public relations. Percentage of people who do not like the public relations profession accounted for only the 6,5 percent.

**Table 5: Liking Level of Public Relations Profession**

	n	%
I definitely like	43	8,4
I like	275	53,7
I have no idea	161	31,4
I dislike	26	5,1
I definitely dislike	7	1,4
<b>Total</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>100</b>

According to the results of t test, there is a significant differentiation on liking level of public relations profession according to gender ( $t=3.22$ ,  $df=506$ ,  $p<0,01$ ). Female students ( $M=3.73$ ) likes public relations profession more than male students ( $M=3.52$ ).

There is a significant differentiation on liking level of public relations profession according to academic units of students ( $F=2,37$ ,  $df=19$ ,  $p<0,01$ ). It was seen that Vocational School of Social Sciences and Faculty of Letters students like public relations profession more than the Faculty of Agriculture and Faculty of Veterinary students.

Liking level of public relations profession is differentiated according to departments of students ( $F=1,66$ ,  $df=47$ ,  $p<0,01$ ). Department of Public Relations and Publicity ( $M=4.40$ ) and Department of History students ( $M=4.20$ ) like public relations profession more than the Department of Horticulture ( $M=2.50$ ) and the Department of Chemical Engineering students ( $M=3.00$ ).

## Conclusion

According to the results of the study it can be stated that most of the students believe that PR profession requires expertise and this job can be performed by people who receive university education in this field.

Public relations profession has not been perceived as a profession specific to men or women.

Most of the participants believe that PR practitioners serve the interests of their bosses rather than the public interest.

Most of the participants think that PR practitioners in private sector are more successful than the practitioners in public sector.

More than half of the participants think that the most important task of public relations department is to learn desire, expectations and complaints of public.

Most of the participants like the profession of public relations. Female students like the profession more than the male students. Students from Vocational School of Social Sciences and Faculty of Letters like public relations profession more than the students from the other academic units. Students from Department of Public Relations and Publicity and Department of History like public relations profession more than the students from other departments.

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