

Perceptions of Senior Public Relations Practitioners Toward Academics and Public Relations Academics in Turkey

Kıdemli Halkla İlişkiler Uygulayıcılarının Halkla İlişkiler Akademisyenlerine ve Türkiye'deki Halkla İlişkiler Akademisyenlerine Yönelik Algıları

T. Serra GÖRPE¹, Burcu ÖKSÜZ²



¹Prof. Dr., University of Sharjah, Department of Mass Communication, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

²Prof. Dr., İzmir Katip Çelebi University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Media and Communications, İzmir, Turkey

ORCID: T.S.G. 0000-0002-9634-2827;
B.Ö. 0000-0003-4195-9261

Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author:
Burcu Öksüz, İzmir Katip Çelebi Üniversitesi,
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Fakültesi, İzmir,
Türkiye
E-posta/E-mail:
burcu.oksuz@ikcu.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

In many countries, there are many studies conducted on how different groups perceive the public relations profession. In addition, studies on how public relations professionals should be included in the relevant literature. However, there is very little research done on the perception of public relations academics. The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of public relations professionals toward public relations academics. Twenty semi-structured interviews are held with Turkish public relations practitioners from Istanbul and Izmir cities of Turkey who have at least ten years of work experience. The research conducted aims to understand the perception of Turkish public relations academics by the senior practitioners, including their opinions, strengths, and weaknesses. Findings show that academics are considered as reputable, but the negative image of public relations as a profession has been carried over to public relations academia. The participants value the contributions of public relations educators to the field, but similar to how they view themselves, they do not see educators as inseparable from the perception of public relations. The participants emphasized the educational role of public relations academics and attributed them a responsibility of preparing students for professional work life. They all agree that public relations academics must establish stronger ties with the sector. They also think that public relations academics should be more visible to practitioners and society. They assume that this visibility will create a bridge between society/industry and them.

Keywords: Academics, public relations profession, public relations academics, public relations education, public relations practitioners

Öz

Farklı gruplar nezdinde halkla ilişkiler meslek algısına ilişkin pek çok ülkede yapılmış çeşitli araştırmalar bulunmaktadır. Bunun yanı sıra mesleği uygulayan halkla ilişkiler profesyonellerinin nasıl olması gerektiğine yönelik çalışmalar da ilgili literatürde yer almaktadır. Ancak halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerinin nasıl algılandıklarına yönelik yapılan araştırmaların sayısı yok denecek kadar azdır. Bu çalışmanın çıkış noktası, halkla ilişkiler profesyonelleri ile ilgili yapılan çalışmalara benzer şekilde, halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerine yönelik algının da araştırılmasıdır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'nin iki büyük şehri olan İstanbul ve İzmir'de çalışan ve en az on yıl deneyime sahip olan yirmi halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcısıyla yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmada kıdemli uygulayıcıların, akademisyenlere ve halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerine ilişkin fikirlerini, akademisyenlerin güçlü ve zayıf yönlerinin ne olduğuna ilişkin algılarını ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada elde edilen bulgulara

göre, akademisyenler itibarlı olarak görülmektedir. Ancak halkla ilişkiler mesleğinin olumsuz imajının etkileri, halkla ilişkilerin akademik dünyasına yansımıştır. Katılımcılar halkla ilişkiler eğitimcilerinin alan katkılarına değer vermekle birlikte, akademisyenlerin de meslek algısından kendileri gibi etkilendiklerini vurgulamaktadırlar. Katılımcılar, halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerinin eğitici rolünü vurgulamışlardır ve onlara öğrencileri profesyonel iş dünyasına hazırlama sorumluluğu atfetmişlerdir. Tüm katılımcılar, halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerinin sektörel güçlü bağlar kurması gerektiğini vurgulamışlardır. Katılımcılar, aynı zamanda halkla ilişkiler akademisyenlerinin görünürlüğü'nün artmasını beklemekte ve bu görünürlüğü'nün akademisyenlerin halkla ilişkiler sektörü ve toplumla ilişkilerinin geliştirilmesi açısından bir köprü olacağını da düşünmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademisyen, halkla ilişkiler mesleği, halkla ilişkiler akademisyeni, halkla ilişkiler eğitimi, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcıları

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is generally seen as responsible for the production, protection, and distribution of systematic knowledge (Teichler et al., 2013, p. 11). Today, higher education institutions fulfill and at the same time discuss their responsibilities for research, education and contribution to society by providing mass education to more students, giving practical as well as theoretical knowledge, creating employment for their graduates, supporting research, providing quality assurance, and contributing to society. They also aim for international recognition, and creating an innovative and entrepreneurial structure for the higher education institution (Özkanal & Özgür, 2017, p. 6).

The function of universities and the role of scholars are also a debated issue. Universities are an integral part of the skills and innovation supply chain to the business world (Wilson, 2012). University education is not seen as just vocational education, but the system should take into consideration the social role of students as intellectuals, and this has been on the agenda for a long time (Atabek & Şendur-Atabek, 2014, p. 149).

“Being a scholar has been defined as a profession that fulfills the roles of teaching, research and social service and acquired through the specialized training required by these roles” (Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2018, p. 39). What about the public relations scholar?

How is a public relations scholar defined? As it has been in other fields, formal education has a very important place in the public relations field as well (Bakan, 2002, p. 64). There has been studies that looked at public relations education and industry demands from the perspectives of public relations graduates (Adams & Lee, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Kim & Freberg, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2020; Freberg, 2020; Özkoyuncu, 2015; Todd, 2014; Öksüz & Görpe, 2014; Shen & Toth, 2013; Paskin, 2013; Fitch & Desai, 2012; Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008), but the literature lacks studies on the perception of public relations academics by practitioners. This qualitative research conducted aims to investigate this, and this exploration can be useful for bridging the Turkish academia with the professionals, for stimulating discussions on the role of public relations scholars, and public relations education in our country.

Higher Education and Academics

As stated by Musselin (2013, p. 1165), "Higher education plays a major role in knowledge production and is expected to remain a major player in the development of knowledge economies. It is at the forefront in producing research which aids in technology transfer and start-up processes." The political environment has a strong influence on higher education. The higher educational institutions have been perceived as collective and rational actors who have been pushed forward to have an active role in the political and social construction of the market economy and create an entrepreneurial society (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010).

The structure and functions of universities have been affected and changed due to societal transformations, technological developments, and the rapid spread of knowledge (Yıldız & Gizir, 2018, p. 744). Universities are under increasing pressure for change. New forms of auditing are pushed to make them more accountable. The amount of state funding received by higher educational institutions used to be determined in general by the number of academic staff being employed, but today, the aid is linked with an output (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005). Organizational complexity and uncertainty are increasing in the higher education sector because the state is regulating higher educational institutions, including their governance, management models, students, and professional staff (Carvalho et al., 2016). Higher educational institutions are paradoxical: they are hierarchical organizations and also designed to provide individuals with autonomy and decision-making authority (Lechuga, 2017). "Universities are important institutional structures where knowledge is produced, shared and responsibility

is taken for it" (Aydın et al., 2011, p. 397). Today universities need to be more entrepreneurial in their organizational outlook and proposals (Miller et al., 2018, p. 11).

"The concept of academia which constitutes the root of the concepts of being a scholar or an academician, comes from 'Akademia', olive grove where Plato used to teach his students in Athens" (Gürkan, 2018, p. 441). Ivory tower is a term frequently used to characterize the life of academics (Dowd & Kaplan, 2005, p. 699). However, academics are also attributed several roles one of which is the societal role. A comprehensive definition of academia has been put forward by Akcan et al. (2018, p. 572). They state that academia is an organized structure for research, teaching, and social services. "An academic is a person working at a university and who gained a specialization by doing a postgraduate education on the same or different discipline of his/her bachelor's degree" (Gürkan, 2018, p. 441). Mengi and Schreglmann (2013) state that academicians who are open to development and capable of adapting to changing paradigms are needed in the country. They are also expected to have research productivity that will help the country progress in the international arena.

Public Relations Education and Academics

Public relations is described as a multidisciplinary discipline that emerged in the early 20th century, and it benefits from various disciplines such as psychology, politics, economics, and management (Akım, 2018, p. 214). Public relations education is provided both at undergraduate and associate degrees, but still there are questions in minds about the public relations profession (Arslan & Duğan, 2019, p. 189).

Public relations education started in the 1920s in the USA. The profession of public relations became widespread in parallel with the growth and development of the industry in the USA. The need for trained and qualified employees increased due to the establishment of public relations departments and demand for public relations services (Yılmaz-Sert & Pelenk-Özel, 2019, p. 683). The academic development of public relations in Turkey started in the 1960s (Becan & Yıldırım, 2020, p. 561). Today, public relations education is quite widespread (Engür & Engür, 2018, p. 339). A total of 68 of 207 universities in Turkey offer 77 undergraduate public relations programs (YÖK, 2020).

The aim of public relations education at undergraduate level is to prepare successful public relations experts both professionally and academically (Bakan, 2002, p. 64). The public relations departments should prepare their students for the sector (Becan &

Yıldırım, 2020, p. 560). Effective education that prepares communication professionals for the sector determines the success of public relations activities (Tellan, 2011, p. 12). Public relations, which has an interdisciplinary structure, should have dynamism, and it is important that educational institutions that prepare students for the field should have this dynamism as well (Becan & Yıldırım, 2020, p. 560). As underlined by many studies, public relations education should be geared towards preparing the students for the industry. In this respect, the qualifications of the public relations academics are becoming important.

A study conducted by Akgül and Akdağ in 2018 found out that the academic formation of most of the academics who work in communication faculties of public universities are from social sciences and natural and applied sciences. It is necessary to review the relationship between public relations academics and practitioners to compare industry expectations with the educational programs, to analyze priorities in educational programs, and to ensure differences and similarities between public relations and other communication strategies between marketing and advertising (Tellan, 2011, p. 12). Solmaz et al. (2017) drew attention to the importance of internalization of public relations and setting certain standards in public relations education today. It is imperative for public relations educators to design courses and curricula that reflect the needs of the profession and prepare students to enter the workforce with the basic tools and skills that are needed for success in their careers (Krishna et al., 2020, p. 34).

The 2009 survey conducted by Era Research Company and titled "Communication Services Perception Research" has been carried out in cooperation with the Turkish Public Relations Association (TÜHİD) and Communication Consultancies Association of Turkey (İDA). 92% of the academics who participated in the research state that they should be more in communication with the public relations professionals. The findings of another research titled "The Future of Public Relations and Education" and carried out by Bahçeşehir University, Faculty of Communication and İDA in 2018 had similar findings in this respect to the 2009 study. The participants of the study stated that it is important that public relations practitioners and academics should cooperate more and develop stronger relationships. In this study, the perception of the senior professionals on public relations academics is studied as public relations education has been viewed largely as recruiting public relations graduates who can easily adapt to the changing dynamics of the public relations sector. Also, the studies reveal that cooperation between the public relations academia and professionals is needed and expected. Therefore,

exploring the opinions of the professionals can shed light to the public relations education and qualifications of academics.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was used to identify the perspectives of senior Turkish public relations professionals on public relations academics. According to the September 2020 data of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), there are 622 academicians working in public relations departments. Semi-structured interviews with 20 Turkish public relations professionals were conducted. The interviews took place between May and July, 2020. Interviews were carried out on Zoom. The reason for carrying Zoom interviews was twofold. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of the researchers was employed abroad. Both researchers attended the interviews, and they were all video interviews except for one. One interview was a written exchange, an email correspondence with the researcher. Generally, the interviews are conducted face-to face, but in a broader sense, interviews can take place via other channels, such as phone or e-mail (Luo & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 248).

In semi-structured interviews, you know what you want to learn about, and thus, you have a good idea of which topics to cover and which questions to address. At the same time, you are free to exchange ideas with participants (Fylan, 2005, p. 65). Semi-structured interview is a popular data collection method because of its versatility and flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955). Interviews reveal what people have experienced, what they think and what they feel about something (Fylan, 2005, p. 65).

In semi-structured interviews, the interview is based on an interview guide that contains a coherent set of questions or topics, but provides the flexibility to go outside, and carry on with the research based on the interactions during the interview (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 92). Although the interviewer prepares a predetermined list of questions, semi-structured interviews develop in a conversational style that gives participants the chance to explore issues which they consider as important (Longhurst, 2016, p. 103). Semi-structured interviews give the interviewer the freedom to organize the questions while the interview is in progress and can go far beyond the responses of a respondent to the pre-determined questions (Luo & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 249).

The opinions of senior public relations professionals were important because they were the group who had been actively in the public relations industry for many years and working with and recruiting the public relations graduates. The participants of the study had at least 10 years of work experience. The maximum work experience of the participants was 33 years. The participants were all from the private sector except for two participants. The private sector participants were both from the corporate and agency side. Most of the participants were female; the sample only had three males (See Table 1). All the participants were sent the Informed Consent Form of Istanbul University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee. They were asked to sign the Consent Form. Before the interview started, the participants were also verbally informed about the research. The purpose and nature of the study were explained. They were reminded that their participation is on a voluntary basis, and they could withdraw at any time from the study or refuse to answer any questions. They were assured that the information provided would be treated confidentially, and the findings would be reported anonymously. The interviews lasted between 40 and 100 minutes. All interviews were recorded (audio and video) and transcribed.

The participants of the study were recruited from TÜHİD, İDA and Corporate Communication Professionals Association of Turkey (KİD). Invitation emails were sent to the potential participants after having looked at the member lists, and follow-ups have been made afterwards. The sample consisted of experienced public relations/communications professionals who are members of the three different types of professional public relations associations (agency, corporate, and all types of members). These experienced professionals are following professional publications more than academic journals; however, they are familiar with academia mainly through the internship programs and recruitment. Through the communication students and activities/events organized at universities, they have interactions with academics as well.

The aim of the study was to explore the perception of academics and public relations academics by the senior public relations professionals and similarly, the perceived differences and similarities between public relations academics in Turkey and internationally. Additionally, the strengths and weaknesses of public relations academics are investigated in the study. The research questions of the study are as follows:

RQ1: Who is an academic?

RQ2: Who is a public relations academic?

RQ3: What are the differences and similarities between an academic and a public relations academic?

RQ4: What are the strengths and weaknesses of public relations academics?

The study used a qualitative research method, which means the results cannot be generalized. The findings are reflected under three subtitles, namely, academic, public relations academic, and the strengths and weaknesses of public relations academics.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Academics

The participants associated an academic with keywords such as “scientific,” “teaching” and “research.” They considered academia as a scientific area, and the academics by conducting research and generating scientific data are seen as responsible for transferring knowledge. Also, being an academic is considered a tough duty because people want to trust the knowledge of academics. In the words of one participant, “[...] An academic is a visionary person who is one step ahead of the sector, is knowledgeable in its area of specialization, who has in-depth knowledge, deserves respect and to be respected, and has to open the way to the professionals.” (P1). Other visualizations of academics have also come up in the study: they are seen as both instructive and developers because they are considered to be responsible for teaching new trends in the academic world. They are interested in research, carry the notion of learning and share the knowledge as well. The love for teaching has also been brought up. In the visualization of the academic, reading, and keeping herself/himself updated have been emphasized. The participants claim that if academics do not update themselves, they cannot do the work. A strong quote by one of the participants has the analogy of a “cake.” “An academic is like a cake. A cake each slide of which tastes different. It has banana cream and strawberry...” (P2). Another analogy was made to a “farmer”: “The mind of an academic is like a farmer. The person who sows seed to get the best crop.” (P3). “Our world needs dynamic academics... more than ever.” (P18).

One important finding in the discussion of academic and public relations academics was that the perceptions of the participants about the academics were not highly linked to industry experience and collaboration, whereas these features were “musts” for the public relations academics.

As mentioned by many participants, being an academic is regarded as a very honorable post and a position that gives inner satisfaction. For the participants, the career of academia satisfies people who are prone to research and productivity. It is considered as being a nice profession which allows for lifelong learning and for people who enjoy sharing what they learned. Thus, it is considered as a reputable profession as well. In the discussions, the contribution of the academics to the students and their relations with them were mentioned and viewed as part of this valuable mission. In the words of one participant, "I am grateful to my teachers because I created my own maps with their support." (P4). "Youth is in your hands, mold in your hands like a dove. You should be a mother, father, brother, sister, teacher so that you would do the right counsel... These academics mention three or right things and guide us." (P5). All participants agree that being in academia is very respectful and honorable regardless of what type of field the academics are in, and nurturing students is one of the factors that gives this honorary mission to academics. They claim that raising of students happens with the help of visionary educators.

Similarities and Differences Between a Public Relations Academic and Academic

The participants identified the differences between an academic in general and a public relations academic. One of them was related to the scope of the role of a public relations academic. They all agree that the task of an academic extends beyond lecturing, but they still expect more from a public relations academic. "I think for each discipline nobody should be behind the table only. I think academics should not be lecturing only, they should be close to the sector. They should have a word in directing them." (P6). "They should not be drowned in books." (P19). "When academics stay in their own world, they cannot see outside." (P17). One of the participants suggested that at the entry level to academia, the research assistants with industry experience who have at least five years of experience in the private sector, or agency should be selected. A public relations academic is not just the one who reads and explains what he reads, but someone who does research seriously and prepares students for the professional sector. The academics should prepare future communication specialists based on the industry needs (P15). All participants agree and propose that public relations academics should reach out more beyond academia and toward the professional world. Their expertise should not be limited to the academic environment, but they should have a greater impact on the professional world and the public relations sector. Such an approach will, in turn, help their students. In this way, the students will benefit from

the networking of the public relations academic. The participants highlighted that public relations teaching requires a practice component and must be done with care. They also acknowledge that not all people with knowledge can teach. In the words of one participant, the importance of teaching has been highlighted:

Teaching is not something that everybody could do. You need to promote behavioral change. If you are not a mentor, it is like you put a video on and make them watch. The students can get the message or not. Teaching part is important. It is not that all people can do: to teach theory along with the things that they can apply in real life. If we do teach the way we learned, by memorizing, we cannot have input in today's students (P7).

The teaching of today requires less memorizing, but more link with professional life and a mentor role as well.

The collaboration of the public relations academic with the sector has been mentioned as a benefit for the students of academics. In addition, most of the participants agree that they (public relations professionals) themselves will also benefit from the public relations academics for the sector. They mentioned this need especially for social media strategies, crisis management, and strategic planning. "A public relations academic is someone educated in communication, and who has conducted scientific research in his/her area, has written articles, and has circulated these articles..." (P8). Thus, a public relations academic needs to reach out to practitioners by circulating and sharing their research as well.

In addition to the demand of learning from the public relations academics, a fewer number of public relations practitioners mentioned that the public relations academics should develop themselves by being in the industry. They think that the academics need industry experience, and the academics need professionals more than the professionals need them as guides. In the words of one participant:

The crisis communication is not similar to what is in the book. You cannot do this in real life, there is no time, not this type of planning in real life. He/She should learn how to read the issues, agenda. He/she has to learn where the profession is heading (P9).

As seen from this quote, a public relations academic should not be in his or her "ivory tower."

Another difference mentioned between an academic and a public relations academic was related to the image of the profession. Specifically, the image of the public relations profession affects the public relations academics in a similar way as it does the professionals and the society. In discussing the differences issue, some participants stated that the image of the profession itself is not good. "The word 'relations' is giving us another expectation. Our name does not match with what we do. The reputation of the profession is reflected in its academics. They are the department who cannot manage their reputation." (P10). A very strong quote from one of the participants to illustrate this point is as follows:

We cannot explain ourselves, our difference. What do we do in the sector, what is the difference between a communication graduate and not? We cannot explain this difference to the employer. The public relations academics should be concentrating on this respect (P11).

Our observation in the study was that a role has been attributed to public relations academics to shift the negative image of the profession. Public relations is not seen as a "decoration", and the responsibility of the public relations academics is to explain that public relations is a communication-based profession. Participants also stated that public relations in Turkey is not known by many, and there is a "concept turmoil" around it. It is confused with a secretarial job or a position in the human resources department. The participants believe that the public relations academics, compared to other academics, suffer from the image of the profession itself and are considered to be responsible for addressing this issue.

The unique role attributed to the academics for their students was highlighted even more for the public relations academics. In this respect, the responsibility of the public relations academic was seen as preparing the students for work. The participants suggested some assignments, and projects, such as practicing with students on how the declaration of a CEO during a crisis situation should be like. Participants mentioned that the public relations academics should be more involved in motivating students to undertake projects. "If a public relations academic does not send a student's public relations project to public relations competitions, there is a serious problem in this. I believe working on these types of projects add a lot to students." (P12).

As stated, when discussing the differences between an academic and public relations academic, more is expected from the latter. What is expected from the public relations

academics is to have good communication skills not only with the students, but also with all stakeholder groups and the society. The timely and correct use of all types of communication channels are also expected from them because public relations is seen as a powerful discipline to shape the society. The participants claim that the public relations academics should come out of their academic world, enter the business world and as stated by one participant, "should be nourished with the world with plazas." (P7). Furthermore, communication academics are viewed as more dynamic (and should be) because of the nature of communication. When compared with other academics, public relations academics use many communication channels and through these channels, they have the power to direct the public opinion. The participants claim that this brings a further responsibility to public relations academics since they are the people who "form" the public opinion. Thus, public relations academics are imagined as having a stronger role in society. They should also touch upon social issues and direct their students with projects to help solve these social issues.

Figure 1 highlights the three major differences between academics and public relations academics: it is expected that public relations academics should be closer to the professional sector. The image of a public relations academic is not as high as that of other academics. Although, two main differences were the focus of discussion, especially the first difference mentioned demanded the academics to have a wider reach out to many stakeholders.

When asked if they perceive any difference between Turkish academics and their counterparts from other countries, most of the professionals do not have a perception since they have not met with international public relations scholars. One difference mentioned was that the international scholars conduct more research. Another difference was related to the profile of their students and was that they are different. A third point brought up was that the international public relations academics are more modest, and there is no wall between them and their students. Another commonly perceived difference of the Turkish academics involved the lack of foreign language knowledge. It was claimed that the other academics' foreign language knowledge allows them to follow foreign language publications and research. They think that the public relations academic should be competent in at least one foreign language. The importance of foreign languages is summarized as follows by one participant: "...our academics have a language problem. They cannot read the publications in other languages. Others can. Their main language is English. Because of the language, they stay here and do

not develop themselves.” (P12). The participants also think that the communication scholars need to say more and be more articulate in our country. In sum, the major assumptions were that the Turkish public relations do not contribute significantly to the public relations scholarship and do not have much visibility in the professional world and the academia in comparison to the international public relations academics.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Public Relations Academics

In the study, more weaknesses than strengths of public relations academics were mentioned. The strengths specified include having book knowledge, the research aspect, and theoretical knowledge. “Very strong in theories. I believe that there is a network of academics in the world, and they are fed with this network and world literature. Theoretical knowledge.” (P7). At the same time, theoretical knowledge is not seen as enough because these academics grounded in theory are detached from the outside world. The participants claim that public relations is not all about theories and add that there are also academics who link theory to practice. In addition to the strength of public relations academics with their theory background, another strength was that the public relations academics are perceived as articulate. “The strongest side is communication skills, negotiation skills. When there is a conflict, they negotiate between the parties.” (P1).

As for the cited weaknesses, they heavily emphasized the lack of close ties with the sector and not having real life and private sector experience. Despite the numerous public relations programs, participants still mentioned the lack of ties between the academics and them. As observed by one participant:

Communication academics should be in the professional work life. Nothing is now as it is written in books. There is the human factor included. There is a course called crisis management. Now everything is a crisis in the world, each crisis is different and the social media crisis is different (P5).

One other weakness and criticism was that the Turkish public relations academics are not seen as collaborative as a way of development. The practitioners believe in the importance of learning from each other, and they claim that they have not heard of public relations scholars getting together to listen to each other’s issues and problems. They also add that this could be difficult to realize because of the high number of

faculties of communication in our country. They expect the public relations academics to work with the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and public sector entities. They think that this has not been accomplished yet. They claim that the public relations scholars are in a slightly more closed circle, and this needs to be overcome. In the words of one participant:

...I do not see academics who help the private sector by giving a hand and who try to do things with them. I do know that there are some academics who want to do things for their students and knock on our door (P13).

The participants think that the public relations academics should be doing more practical things and should be seen more on social platforms; however, the lack of this is attributed to losing reputation. In the words of one participant: "They think that to be in these platforms (social media), to be in dialogue with the students will decrease the reputation. There is a perception like this." (P8). Some participants think that the academics come from a traditional background, and therefore, their use of digital platforms is less.

The participants suggested very openly that public relations academics should have close working relationships with the professional associations and so far, that relationship has not been established. "They should be able to present their ideas to the sector." (P16). In the words of another participant, "(They) Should be able to develop joint projects with the sector." (P20). By following the professional associations, an academic can see the reflection and the developments. Some participants criticized that many public relations academics are also unaware of their professional associations:

...if you do not know your professional association, maybe you may say that the national professional association has not reached out to the public relations academics... Before I started my professional life, I had researched what was happening in the industry, if there was a professional association or not. I do not understand an academic who does not do this (P12).

In the discussions, the professional participants of the study also mentioned their need to have closer ties with the public relations academics. In this respect, only few participants mentioned that the academics are behind the professional sector. The professionals think that the academics lack the knowledge that the sector has, but

most of them still emphasized the need to be supported by the academics. The public relations professionals claimed that they need public relations academics knowledge and in the words of one participant, a public relations academic is considered her as the “third eye.” The academics who are like civil servants are not appreciated by the professionals. The benefits of the networking of a public relations academic is emphasized as well. The network establishment is considered to be more important in today’s world.

In addition to these heavily mentioned weaknesses, some participants thought that the academics do not update themselves enough. They are criticized because they do not take the “future” into consideration. In the words of one participant:

An academic needs to pay attention to the future, should not be focused on the existing system, should not be concerned with today- in the present. I think this is the missing point. The same lecture notes, same things are being discussed. I think it is very negative to show the things of 25 years back as being the same today- in the present (P9).

The participants agree that the academics have the knowledge, but they lack the practice component.

The impact of the evolution of the public relations profession on public relations academics has also been discussed. As stated earlier as well, according to the participants, some public relations academics have not developed themselves and stayed where they were. They have not kept pace with the changes happening in public relations. Conversely, other academics adapted themselves to the changes. “The name of public relations has been changed, and an integrated approach is brought to it. To change it foremost is in the hands of public relations academics.” (P14). In other words, public relations academics are seen as not adapting themselves to the changes that are happening. They are also considered as an important group to create the changes and alter the wrong perception of public relations. Participants also emphasized that the public relations academics should have an idea of his/her own, and they were criticized for using other people’s work, conducting literature review only, and knowing very little about what is happening in the industry. The participants’ perception of the role of the public relations academic is geared towards the employment of his/her students.

Figure 2 illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of public relations academics visually as well.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

According to the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) Report (2017, p.13), "There is a universal acceptance among practitioners and educators that the ability to move, be nimble and adaptable, is critical." Therefore, studies that explain the relations between academics and professionals in public relations are needed. This study is an attempt to fill the research gap within this context. Findings reveal that Turkish public relations professionals consider the job of academics and public relations academics as reputable and valuable. Therefore, studies that explain the relations between academics and professionals in public relations are needed. The current work is an attempt to fill the research gaps within this context.

Becoming an academic is not easy, and academics have to study long and conduct research. Moreover, they have an important mission of preparing students. However, these professionals mentioned two additional comments for public relations academics. One comment was related to the negative image of the profession being reflected on public relations academics. They stated that the negative perception of public relations affects the respectability of public relations academics. A study conducted by Sommerfeldt and Kent (2020) states that public relations falls under the least respected professions in the world. Limited research has been conducted to explain this observation further, and not much has been done to understand how this perception may create difficulties for public relations educators.

The second claim is that public relations academics must have industry experience on top of theoretical knowledge. In other words, public relations professionals cannot imagine public relations academics without any work experience. They see the practice aspect as a "must" and a "need" and consider this aspect as a prominent weakness of academics. They think that practice and industry know-how benefit academics. In return, this experience will be integrated into the curriculum, and the students will be enriched by the professional background of the academics. The findings of Cheng and de Gregorio (2008) regarding public relations academics show that participants generally support building close relationships with the industry to advance the field. Wright and Flynn (2017) state that in Canada and the US, opportunities for public relations educators to interact and network with practitioners are unfortunately rare. Most practitioners who took part in the study of Byrne (2008) think that academics add value to the field of public relations. Those who do not agree with this point claim that these academics

are those who do not have ties with the industry and remain unresponsive to the demands of practitioners.

In terms of practice areas needed, social media and crisis were the most frequently mentioned areas. They think that public relations academics should tie their course materials with a practice component. The professionals said that educators should lecture this way, but “cannot.” The important courses mentioned by the practitioners share similarities to international studies. For example, according to the research conducted by Krishna et al. (2020), practitioners state that writing, listening, and creativity are the basic skills needed in public relations. The study highlights the importance of creative thinking, online crisis management, effective communication in today’s disinformation environment, and preparation of crisis response plans. The findings of another study on public relations courses emphasize the integration of disciplines and technology, content production and strategic application of social and digital media, and applied learning approaches to promote professional development among students (McCollough et al., 2021).

Mules (2017) points out the importance of public relations educators as they have a significant role in influencing the next generation of public relations professionals. At the same time, he calls for a change in public relations education that includes a reflective practice. As stated in this study, the role attributed to public relations academics is to prepare future public relations/communication professionals for the sector by considering the changes happening in the world and the dynamics of the century being reflected on the society and the industry. For other academics, this role is limited to research and having a scientific approach.

The public relations professionals trust the theoretical knowledge and research skills of public relations academics. However, they see that their tie with the public relations sector is not established. The academics not having experience in the sector is the major criticism brought up against them. The public relations professionals also think that public relations academics are not updating themselves enough. They believe that the theoretical part should be supported with new trends and developments in the industry. In this way, practical and updated knowledge are embedded in public relations courses. A study conducted with 45 educators in Australia by Conrad (2020, p. 13) concludes that the degrees in public relations remain uninformed by the 20th century professional roots and that most participants state that these degrees are

vocational and thus deliver “training” and not “education.” Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2021, p. 161) argue that public relations education should move away from vocational training and be grounded in liberal arts education.

The interviews revealed that the senior practitioners attribute public relations academics and university education a responsibility to prepare students for the profession. Less is mentioned on their contribution to the scholarship/literature of public relations. The academics have been criticized for not updating themselves with the changes happening in the industry, making us wonder who is leading public relations, academia or professionals. The observation of the participants could be linked to the missing real cooperation between the parties since they are not actively following the academic publications. This could also be attributed to their experiences with the interns and graduates.

The majority of the professionals declare that they are not in a position to compare and contrast Turkish public relations academics with academics outside our country. However, they think that Turkish academics lack foreign language knowledge, which is a major issue that hinders them from following what is happening in public relations academia. They imagine that the Turkish public relations also do not produce scholarly work in other languages because of this weakness.

The senior public relations professionals did not criticize themselves, but mentioned the weaknesses and points that public relations academics need to improve. They shared more weak points than strengths. These weak points include their lack of close ties with the sector and not having real-life and private sector experience. Despite the numerous public relations programs offered in Turkey, the participants emphasized the lack of ties between public relations academics and themselves. They criticized their unawareness of the professional bodies in the industry. An interesting undertaking is to determine whether the results and analysis would be different when the study sample comprises public relations/communication professionals who are new to the sector and have few years of work experience. Considering both parties’ perceptions of each other and creating a sharing platform can be a basis for the future cooperation between public relations academics and professionals in Turkey. Such efforts may help us to take a comprehensive picture of the status of the Turkish public relations, including the two stakeholder groups.

The current study focused on how public relations professionals view academia and academics. Learning about the opinions of public relations professionals about public relations academics will facilitate the improvement and development of the public relations sector and academia. The findings of the study imply that public relations professionals want to benefit from the knowledge and original research conducted by public relations academics and expect further cooperation with the latter. The data indicate and further clarify the need to increase the efforts of collaboration between public relations academics and professionals.

Most of the participants of the study represent the private sector; in future research, obtaining the insights of public relations professionals in the public sector would offer great benefits.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Participant	Sex	Age	Work experience (years)	Sector	Corporate/ Agency
K1	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K2	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K3	M	30-40	10-15	Public	Corporate
K4	F	41-50	21-25	Private	Agency
K5	F	41-50	21-25	Private	Corporate
K6	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K7	F	41-50	26+	Private	Corporate
K8	F	30-40	16-20	Public	Corporate
K9	F	41-50	21-25	Private	Corporate
K10	F	30-40	16-20	Private	Corporate
K11	M	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K12	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K13	F	41-50	21-25	Private	Corporate
K14	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate
K15	F	51+	26+	Private	Agency
K16	F	51+	26+	Private	Agency
K17	M	41-50	16-20	Private	Corporate
K18	F	51+	26+	Private	Corporate
K19	F	51+	26+	Private	Corporate
K20	F	30-40	10-15	Private	Corporate

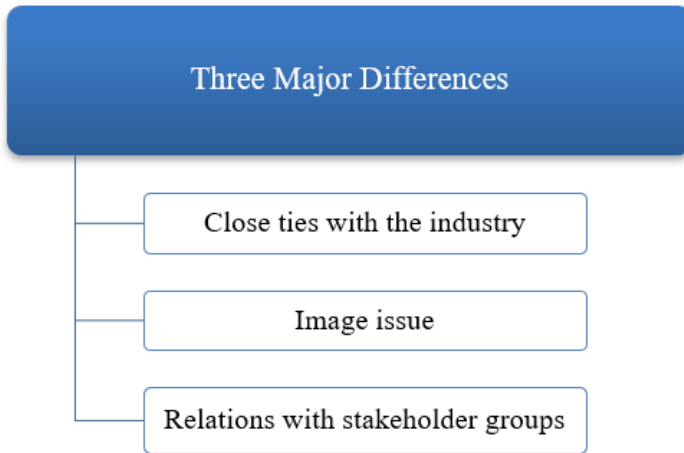


Figure 1: Differences Between Academics in General and Public Relations Academics

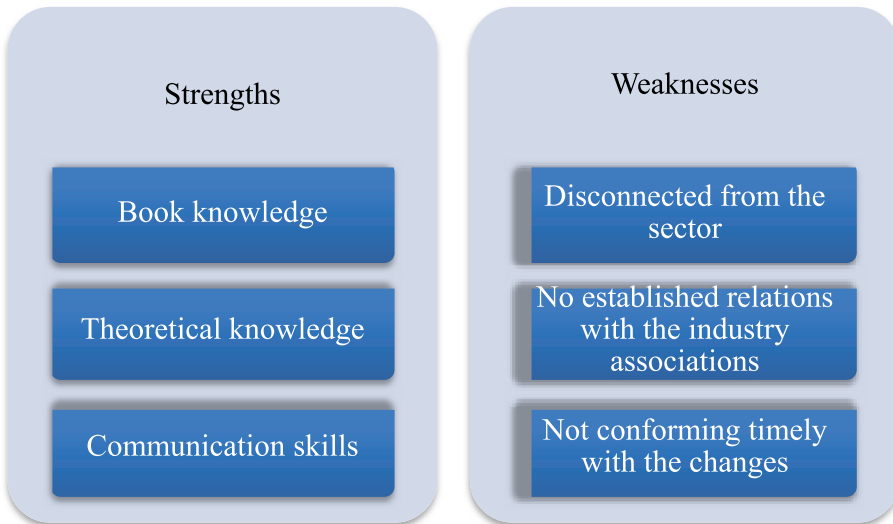


Figure 2: Strengths and Weaknesses of Public Relations Academics Perceived by Senior Public Relations Professionals

