



Students' perceptions of public relations in Kuwait: Disparities and ambiguities of a communication field

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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed for a better understanding of public relations as the field has always been controversial among educators and professionals. The field generally suffers from misperceptions which consequently reflects on its stakeholders such as students. However, student enrollments in public relations programs are growing. This study examined students' understanding of public relations in terms of work assignments, body of knowledge and views in relations to major, gender, and university years. **Method:** The findings, based on a non-random sample of 439 Kuwait University students. **Results:** Revealed that students who major in public relations, are female, and have more university years were more likely to understand the field. Work assignments and knowledge such as writing, media relations, and crisis communication were the most prevalent while research, strategic planning, and communication models were visibly less prevalent. Perceiving public relations as a glamorous field, about damage control, and involving manipulation persisted among students. The media was the main source of influence that contributed to students' impression of public relations. **Conclusion:** The findings show that disparities in understanding and misperceiving public relations are universally similar to a large extent. Including strategic knowledge and

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qualified educators in public relations curricula and pedagogy is needed to elevate the field to a reputable level of more understanding and less misperceptions.

Keywords: Student perceptions, public relations, Kuwait

Introduction

Confusion about the nature of public relations has caused uncertainty in understanding its purpose and functions. The field has not been successful in demonstrating its potential as a vital organizational function (Grunig, 2009). The mass media have also played a role in perpetuating the negative stereotypes. Public relations ([PR] hereafter) as a field, an academic discipline, and a profession is often misunderstood and misperceived by numerous stakeholders (Kirat, 2006; 2016; Bowen, 2009; Macnamara, 2009).

Some research areas of PR remain in need for further empirical investigations. Among these areas, which is the overarching concern for this research, is how the PR field is being perceived in Kuwait. After an extensive review by the author, no study has investigated perceptions toward PR in the Middle East, including Kuwait. Several research studies in the region have uncovered different aspects of the field in Egypt (Keenan, 2003; Barry, 2005), Qatar (Kirat, 2015; Almutairi et al., 2019), Kuwait (Gaither & Al-Kandari, 2014; Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Bashir, 2019), Bahrain (Alsaqer, 2018; Alsaqer & Alhashimi, 2019), Saudi Arabia (Al-Shohaib et al., 2009; Almahraj, 2017; 2019), and the United Arab Emirates (Kirat, 2006; Badran, 2019), among others. However, a scholarly investigation of perceptions toward PR is yet to exist in the region.

Several scholars have indicated that the field in the Middle East, as in some other regions, is perceived negatively and has a low status in general (Kirat, 2016; Alsaqer & Alhashimi, 2019). It suffers

a wide range of problems, malpractices, and misconceptions (Al-Yasin, 2013; Kirat, 2016). These observations are correct to a large extent, yet they are not based on empirical evidence.

Despite the global expansion of PR research, most studies have investigated Western nations, and particularly the United States (Yoo & Jo, 2014). Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) have indicated that a constant drawback of PR is that its developments in terms of theories, models, and research are based on Western contexts. The lack of empirical studies from different parts of the world hampers PR research and practice (Bashir, 2019). This is not to disparage these studies' contribution to PR literature. In proportion, however, there are far more PR studies in different parts of the world than others. Almutairi and Kruckeberg (2019) believe that international PR literature remains sparse, and the current international PR literature is broadly discussing cultural differences. Several scholars have addressed the lack of international PR research (Van Ruler et al., 2001; Gupta & Bartlett, 2007; Kirat, 2016). For example, the PR literature in Asia has witnessed some developments in the last two decades (Sriramesh, 2004) yet the majority of the published knowledge is limited to a few Asian countries such as South Korea, China, India, and Japan (Lim et al., 2005; Yue, 2016). In the African continent, PR research and practice are not visible to the rest of the World (Akpabio, 2009). The Middle East is not an exception. Kirat (2016) believes that PR research in the region lags behind to draw a picture for the research community to see how PR is taught, perceived, and practiced in the Middle East.

There are multiple stakeholders to PR, and this study focuses on students. By understanding how students perceive PR, PR scholars and practitioners can improve curricula and provide better guidance for the field. Current students are the future leaders of PR and knowing their perception toward the field would uncover the

discourses that hinder its development. Rather than dedicating the time and effort to refute misperceptions, such as PR as spin doctors and about secretarial work, students need to learn how PR contributes to organizational communication in strategic and tactical forms. The significance of this study resides on the scarcity of research on how students in Kuwait perceive PR. It is hoped that such knowledge can help PR educators create new generations of well-informed PR practitioners who can elevate the level and status of the field, rather than being trapped in the never-ending cycle of PR misperceptions.

Stakeholders' Perceptions of Public Relations

The relevant literature identifies several key stakeholders of PR: media, general public, PR professionals, educators, and students. Each group of stakeholders holds complex perceptions of the field. The following provides an overview of the existing literature focusing on how each stakeholder perceives PR.

Several studies found that the media, particularly journalists, maintain a negative attitude toward PR and its practitioners (Spicer, 1993; Bowen, 2009; Waters et al., 2010; Tsetsura et al., 2014). These studies found a reoccurring pattern of journalists' negative attitudes toward PR practitioners starting from Aronoff's study (1975) of Texas journalists and its later replication by Kopenhaver et al. (1984) in Florida. The negative attitudes and even the mistrust between the media and PR practitioners are due to the belief that the latter is believed to intentionally hide or disguise the truth from the former, PR's aim to get media coverage at any cost, as well as PR's attempts to advance a company's agenda (White & Lambert, 2006; White & Park, 2010). Spicer (1993) studied print media in the United States and found that 83% of the sample portrayed negative or pejorative depictions of the PR industry, using such terms as "hype", "distraction", or "disaster". Keenan (1996) and Park (2001) used Spicer's categories to study American network newscasts and

Korean reporters and editors, respectively. The findings of these two studies showed that negative biases toward PR exist among journalists regardless of the type of media, print or broadcast, and country.

In their analysis of news articles by *The New York Times*, White and Lambert (2006) found that PR was used in a negative context in almost all the articles even when the issue was not related to PR. According to White and Park (2010), journalists have consistently used the term public relations in a negative context; for example, as “an attempt to sidestep or manipulate the truth” (p.320). Tilley and Hollings (2008) found that journalists expressed their concern toward PR practitioners because they become information subsidies who can shape and frame news material in particular ways.

The entertainment media follow similar patterns with the news media in portraying PR negatively. As Bowen (2009) noted, the “entertainment media are also responsible for perpetuating many of the negative stereotypes about PR that those outside the discipline often hold” (p.403-404). The classical example of media portrayal of a PR professional is Samantha from *Sex and the City*, where the character does not seem to do any demanding tasks but rather takes part in special events. A study by Tsetsura et al. (2014) found two new portrayals of PR professionals: idealistic and conflicted. Idealistic portrayal refers to PR practitioners who pursue “high ideals” despite any challenges and obstacles. Conflicted portrayal depicts PR professionals who need their PR job but at the same time feel they cannot remain good people because of their occupation. Examples of such media portrayals include Ray Embry (*Hancock*, 2008) and Nick Naylor (*Thank You for Smoking*, 2005), respectively (Tsetsura et al., 2014).

As to the public’s perception of PR, earlier research highlighted negative public perceptions of PR practitioners (Eagly et al., 1978; Callison, 2004). PR practitioners as news sources were more asso-

ciated with dishonesty and mistrust (Callison, 2004). Interestingly, college-educated respondents were more critical of PR as information sources for their companies than the general public (Callison, 2004). A survey distributed to the general public revealed positive personality and intellectual traits of a PR practitioner (Callison et al., 2014). Nevertheless, describing the ethical side of a PR practitioner remains predominately negative (Callison et al., 2014) since the loyalty of PR practitioners is perceived to be on the side of employers (Olatunji, 2014).

In terms of PR practitioners' perception of themselves, Black (1993) found that the use of the abbreviation "PR" instead of the term "public relations" creates and connotes unfavorable attitudes to the field. Hence, part of the negative perception is derived from the abbreviation itself because it prevents PR from being accepted as a true profession (Black, 1993). White and Park (2010) found that PR practitioners hold the same negative perceptions of PR as the public. Practitioners were found to associate their field with publicity and media relations as the public perceived them (White & Park, 2010). Austin and Toth (2011) interviewed 20 PR educators from 19 different countries. All interviewees agreed that the field remains suffering from a reputation problem due to how it is perceived as negative and involving manipulation.

In a similar vein, PR educators' perceptions of the field have not created positive impact. These perceptions have been historically derived from the educational process found in mass communication curricula (Cline, 1982). Four decades ago, introductory mass communication texts were found to confuse PR with advertising, describe PR with an anti-stance and present the field as lacking historical background (Cline, 1982). Macnamara (2008) found a similar pattern where contemporary PR textbooks heavily focus on publicity and media relations as comprising the main roles and practices of the profession.

Students as PR Main Publics

In relation to students' perceptions, recent research reveals that many students who major in PR hold stereotypical images and attitudes which resonate with media portrayals of the field (Bowen, 2003; 2009; Yoon & Black, 2007; Gleeson, 2013; Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015). Yoon and Black (2007) identified the characteristics of PR characters in television shows and found them to be mostly women who engage in undemanding tasks of publicity and event planning. Gleeson (2013) confirmed some perceptions among students when he found that students in Australia chose PR as a major because of its glamorous nature in the fashion, event management, sports, and entertainment industries. Fullerton and McKinnon (2015) also found student perceptions of PR were largely shaped through negative portrayals from the mass media. Bowen (2009) found that students confuse PR with marketing, promotion, image enhancement and manipulation. Misconceptions of PR's tasks and responsibilities are common among students majoring in mass communication, but less so by those majoring in PR (Bowen, 2009).

The relevant literature demonstrates that PR is negatively perceived by multiple stakeholders. This study attempts to shed light on how students in Kuwait perceive PR in terms of its tasks, the knowledge it involves, and their views about it. The scope of this study, therefore, is limited to students whose major is PR and those who are taking PR classes as an elective or part of fulfilling a minor. Understanding how students perceive PR can enable educators to provide better assessment on current problems and provide guidance on what the field should do. As mentioned, several studies found that students have misconceptions about the field. Students are affected by these misconceptions and can be repulsed from the field by them. Gleeson (2013) has indicated there are few international research attempts investigating the perceptions of students toward PR. Also,

students are part of the ongoing development of PR and they are the future generations of practitioners and educators. Current and future educators are directly responsible for PR's status quo and pursuit for its betterment. Lastly, student enrollments in PR programs are growing despite the misconceptions. In the United States, PR is among the most popular majors in American journalism/mass communication colleges (Vlad et al., 2012, as cited in Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015). In the Middle East, PR is growing rapidly in university programs, student enrollments, job opportunities, training workshops and professional associations (Kirat, 2016). The increasing enrollments might be due to PR's multi-faceted nature as a profession, integrating between some roles and responsibilities from journalism, marketing and management.

PR in Kuwait

The Middle East has witnessed an expansion of PR in the forms of university departments, agencies and as a profession (Kirat, 2016). In 1992, Kuwait University, a governmental university, opened its mass communication department with two majors: journalism as one major, and TV production and radio broadcasting as another. In 2006, PR and advertising were introduced as a major. In the same year, Gulf University for Science and Technology, a private university, established its mass communication department with the three majors mentioned above. American University of Kuwait also has a mass communication department but offers PR classes as electives, similar to the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training.

Universities in Kuwait have witnessed a steady growth in the number of students pursuing PR as their major (Almutairi & Dashti, 2019). According to the Student Information Center at Kuwait University, 81% of students in the mass communication department at Kuwait University are majoring in PR and advertising (personal

communication, October 25, 2020).. As part of the College of Arts, the department has the highest number of students compared to the other five departments: Arabic literature, English literature and linguistics, French literature, History, and Philosophy. It also has the highest number of students outside the College of Arts choosing PR/ Advertising as a minor, compared to the other five departments (Student Information Center, 2020).

Despite the few PR research in Kuwait, the last few years have witnessed numerous scholarly attempts to describe the field in the country and explain some cultural factors affecting it (Gaither & Alkandari, 2014; Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Almutairi & Dashti, 2019; White & Alkandari, 2019). PR remains lacking the understanding and professionalism emanating from higher management and the practitioners themselves (Al-Yasin, 2013; Kirat, 2016; Bashir, 2019). In Kuwait, Bashir (2019) found PR practitioners mainly handle technical tasks and simple administrative work. Higher management perceives PR as less important than other departments and does not rationalize why PR should be strategic, empowered and/or symmetrical (Bashir, 2019). In Bashir & Aldaihani's (2017) study, PR practitioners in Kuwait believe that their educational background was insufficient to work in PR as well as to manage social media in a professional manner. PR practitioners in Kuwait prefer to use asymmetrical online communication due to their lack of knowledge of the symmetrical model as well as the managerial style of their organizations which tend to be authoritarian and centralized (Al-Kandari et al., 2019). Several areas of research in Kuwait remain in need for a scholar investigation, among which is students' perceptions of PR. Therefore, to address the limited empirical research in how PR is perceived in general, as indicated by Callison et al. (2014), and the lack of such research about students in Kuwait in particular, this study attempts to investigate students' perceptions of PR in Kuwait.

Methodology

Research Questions

Reviewing the relevant literature reveals that PR in Kuwait has not been investigated from the perspective of students. This study chose students to address the following questions and hypotheses. It developed the questions and hypotheses based on the relevant literature where gender, major, university year, views of PR, influence on shaping impression of PR, and ethics were measured (White & Park, 2010; Gleeson, 2013; Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015).

RQ1: What is students' perceived importance of PR in terms of:

- a) Work assignments?
- b) Body of knowledge?
- c) Views?

H1: Student demographics influence their perception of PR:

H1a) PR students are more likely to perceive work assignments and knowledge as more important, and less likely to agree with the view statements than non-PR students.

H1b) PR students with more university years are more likely to perceive work assignments and knowledge as more important, and less likely to agree with the view statements than PR students with less university years.

H1c) Among PR students, gender influences students' perceived importance and level of agreement toward work assignments, knowledge, and views.

RQ2: What has influenced students on shaping their impression of PR?

H2: Non-PR students are more likely to get their impression of PR from the mass media than PR students.

Adopted from the research of Bowen (2003; 2009), Shaw and White (2004), White and Park (2010), and Gleeson (2013), this study sought to identify the current state of students' perceptions of PR. It employed survey research to answer the questions and hypotheses. The survey used demographic variables and items pertaining to PR's work assignments, knowledge, and views. The survey items were measured by using a 5-point Likert scale as follows: very important, important, neutral/undecided, unimportant, very unimportant for the work assignments and knowledge scales, and strongly agree, agree, neutral/undecided, disagree, strongly disagree for the perceptions scale. The relevant literature offers some measurement items for PR views such as those found in White and Park (2010) and Gleeson (2013). However, measurement items pertaining to PR's knowledge and work assignments remain scarce in the literature.

This study compiled two separate measurement items based on the works of *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations* (Broom & Sha, 2012), Grunig et al. (2002) excellence theory project and Sriramesh and Vercic's (2009) *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research and practice*. These books have been universally used as textbooks and reference books for their discussion of a range of issues in PR (Macnamara, 2010). The first measurement used Broom and Sha's "Work Assignments" (2012, p.29) to pertain to PR's work assignments scale. Broom and Sha (2012) provided a list of 11 diverse assignments in the day-to-day practice of a PR practitioner⁽¹⁾.

As for the knowledge scale, The authors compiled a list based on *Cutlip & Center's effective public relations* (Broom & Sha, 2012), Grunig et al.'s (2002) excellence project and Sriramesh and Vercic's (2009) *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research and practice* to pertain to the fields of knowledge a PR

(1) Writing and editing, media relations and social media, research, management of clients and staff, strategic planning, counselling, special events, speaking, production, training, personal contacts.

practitioner is expected to know⁽²⁾. To measure students' views, this study used similar survey items from White and Park (2010) and Gleeson (2013) where respondents would state their level of agreement toward particular statements about PR⁽³⁾. Cronbach's alpha was executed to measure the internal consistency of the scales. PR's work assignments scale produced .79 (n = 61), PR's knowledge scale produced .76 (n = 61), and views of PR scale produced .74 (n = 61). The values are acceptable to infer internal consistency among the items in each scale.

The study used self-administered surveys to collect data from students taking mass communication classes at Kuwait University. Sixty-one surveys were pretested to verify the categorical representation as well as responders' comprehension to the questions. The study used a non-random sampling technique where 500 surveys were distributed during the fall semester from October to December 2019. A non-random sample was used due to logistical and technical issues related Kuwait University's recent relocation to a new campus where students remained having classes between the new and old campuses. The surveys were distributed in mass communication classes that were 200-level and above and ranged between introduction to PR, introduction to advertising, news writing, multi-media production, mass communication theory, PR campaigns and management, PR writing, advertising creativity and research methods. Among the 500 surveys, only 439 were eligible for the analysis. The data were entered using SPSS and due to the nature of the non-random sample, nonparametric tests were used to answer the research questions and hypotheses.

(2) Public opinion, PR communication models, corporate social responsibility, crisis communication, PR campaigns, image and reputation management, integrated marketing communication, research, ethics, and budgeting.

(3) PR is a glamorous field, PR is damage control, PR is a marketing tool, PR is about publicity, PR is about non-substantive activities, PR is an easy field, and PR involves manipulation.

Results

Most students were majoring in “Public Relations & Advertising” (78.6%), followed by “Not A Mass Communication Major” (10.3%), “TV & Radio” (6.4%), “Journalism” (3%), and lastly by “No Major Yet” (1.8%). The distribution of mass communication students reflects a current reality in the department where the great majority of students are majoring in PR. It also reflects a global reality that students around the world favor PR as a major over other majors within mass communication departments (Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015; Kirat, 2016). For the “Not A Mass Communication Major”, these students were taking mass communication classes as part of their minor and they could be students from any department at the university.

Among PR students, 73.9% were female, which is another reality reflection that females are more into PR as a major than other mass communication majors (Almutairi & Dashti, 2019). In terms of university year, most students were in their fourth year (32.6%), followed by the third year (27.1%), second year (18.9%), fifth year (11.8%), sixth year and above (6.4%), and lastly by first year (3.2%). In terms of age, the majority were in the 19-20 (29.6%) and 21-22 (37.4%) age groups, followed by the 23-24 (17.3%) and 25-26 (9.3%) age groups. The few remaining age groups were spread between 27-28 (3.2%), 29-above (1.8%), and 18-below (1.4%).

RQ1: What is students’ perceived importance of PR in terms of Work assignments? Body of knowledge? Views?

(a) Work Assignments

Table 1 shows the mean scores for PR’s work assignments for the sample and between PR and non-PR students. In general, most of the mean scores indicate that students have ranked most of PR’s work assignments as “Very Important” and “Important.” Only

“Personal Contacts” was in the bottom half of the scale. Consistent with the relevant literature, event planning and media relations were perceived as the most important work assignments to PR.

Looking at the scores separately, PR majors have higher scores for all PR’s work assignments than non-PR majors, indicating that PR students are giving higher significance to the work assignments than non-PR students. This can be attributed to more knowledge of the field by having taken more classes in PR and mass communication. The highest mean scores, regardless of major, were for the following work assignments: “Media Writing & Editing”, “Media Relations & Coordination”, “Managing Social Media”, “Event Planning & Management”, and “Speaking”. “Counseling”, “Training Employees”, and “Personal Contacts” work assignments were the least important. Fluctuating in importance were “Conducting Research”, “Strategic Planning”, “Production”, and “Management of Staff & Clients”. It was surprising to see that PR students did not rank “Conducting Research” and “Strategic Planning” as important which is discussed further in the discussion.

Table 1

Mean Scores for PR’s Work Assignments

Work assignments	Sample (n = 439)		PR students (n = 345)		Non-PR students (n = 94)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Media Writing & Editing.	4.12	1.124	4.13	1.121	4.11	1.140
Media Relations & Coordination.	4.87	.377	4.90	.306	4.77	.557
Social Media.	4.92	.275	4.93	.250	4.86	.347
Conducting Research.	3.03	1.265	3.13	1.223	2.69	1.360
Management of Staff & Clients.	3.09	1.056	3.21	1.035	2.67	1.031
Strategic Planning.	3.33	1.116	3.50	1.043	2.71	1.160

Cont. Table 1*Mean Scores for PR's Work Assignments*

Work assignments	Sample (n = 439)		PR students (n = 345)		Non-PR students (n = 94)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Counseling.	2.58	.840	2.65	.819	2.31	.868
Event Planning & Management.	4.90	.315	4.93	.255	4.79	.461
Speaking.	4.60	.755	4.64	.722	4.44	.850
Production.	3.44	.991	3.53	.976	3.13	.986
Training Employees.	2.56	.770	2.60	.779	2.41	.725
Personal Contacts.	2.42	.739	2.45	.738	2.31	.734
Total Mean Score.	3.37	.435	3.43	.422	3.17	.420

b) Fields of Knowledge

Table 2 shows the mean scores for PR knowledge for the sample and between PR and non-PR students. In general, the direction of most of the mean scores is geared toward “Very Important” and “Important”. Looking at the mean scores separately, PR students have higher averages for most of the knowledge items than non-PR students, except for “Budgeting”. Similar to the work assignments, the higher mean scores for PR students can be attributed to more knowledge of PR than for non-PR students. The highest mean scores, regardless of major, were for the following knowledge items: “Media Campaigns”, “Integrated Marketing Communication”, and “Ethics”. Among the lowest mean scores were for “Research”, “Public Opinion”, and “Public Relations Communication Models”. It is also surprising to see these lower mean scores for such items, considering that PR is a profession highly based on research and communication. That is, while students indicated “Crisis Communication”, “Media Campaigns” and “Image & Reputation Management” as important, these exact knowledge items require, as prerequisites,

immense knowledge and familiarity with research, public opinion and PR's communication models in order to practically execute them. For example, without the knowledge of the communication models, among which is the two-way symmetrical communication, PR cannot build relations and execute reciprocal relationships between an organization and its publics. Without the proper knowledge to conduct research, PR cannot build an effective media campaign or a crisis communication plan and response without the prior research of the audience's demographics, psychographics and media consumption habits.

Table 2

Mean Scores for PR Knowledge

Knowledge items	Sample (n = 439)		PR students (n = 345)		Non-PR students (n = 94)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Corporate Social Responsibility.	3.83	.825	3.94	.748	3.44	.968
Crisis Communication.	3.99	.652	4.09	.559	3.64	.828
Research.	2.77	1.194	2.82	1.207	2.61	1.138
Public Opinion.	2.76	1.180	2.78	1.219	2.69	1.027
Media Campaigns.	4.95	.223	4.95	.211	4.93	.264
Image & Reputation Management.	3.95	.628	4.00	.550	3.74	.829
Integrated Marketing Communication.	4.37	.621	4.41	.603	4.26	.671
PR Communication Models.	2.92	1.235	2.99	1.240	2.66	1.187
Ethics.	4.20	.903	4.46	.655	3.24	1.044
Budgeting.	3.55	1.190	3.53	1.225	3.62	1.059
Total Mean Score	3.72	.444	3.79	.440	3.48	.410

c) PR Views

Table 3 shows the mean scores for the sample's level of agreement toward views on PR. Regardless of major, the level of agreement for the majority of the sample geared more toward "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" for PR as a glamorous field, about damage control, a marketing tool, about publicity, and less so for involving manipulation. PR as an easy field and about non-substantive activities had lower mean scores that were directed toward disagreement. These findings indicate that PR remains viewed as a field that involves glamour, publicity and manipulation as well as a field trapped in being subordinate to marketing and a tool for damage control. The findings also indicate that the sample disagreed with viewing PR as an easy field that involves non-substantive activities. The latter findings provide hope for a better understanding of the field.

However, slight mean differences are worth noting in how PR students and non-PR students view the field. On one hand, PR students were more likely to show higher levels of agreement than non-PR students toward PR as a glamorous field, about damage control, and manipulation. On the other hand, they were also more likely to show higher levels of disagreement than non-PR students toward PR being an easy field and about non-substantive activities. The former finding could indicate that PR students are as likely as others in misperceiving the field. The latter finding could be attributed to PR students' deeper knowledge of PR or it could be a defense mechanism to their field of study.

Table 3*Mean Scores for Level of Agreement toward PR*

Views items	Sample (n = 439)		PR students (n = 345)		Non-PR students (n = 94)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
PR is a glamorous field.	4.28	.803	4.30	.819	4.19	.737
PR is about damage control.	4.00	.762	4.02	.789	3.96	.654
PR is a marketing tool.	4.27	.707	4.26	.715	4.33	.678
PR is about publicity.	4.40	.530	4.38	.537	4.46	.501
PR is an easy field.	2.33	1.106	2.10	1.021	3.19	.976
PR is about non-substantive activities.	1.93	1.018	1.64	.770	2.99	1.112
PR involves manipulation.	3.58	1.103	3.59	1.151	3.56	.911
Total Mean Score	3.54	.448	3.47	.432	3.81	.455

H1a. PR students are more likely to perceive work assignments and knowledge as more important, and less likely to agree with the view statements than non-PR students.

A Mann-Whitney test was used to test the hypothesis. As shown in Table 4, the mean ranks confirm the findings in RQ1 that PR students have ranked many work assignments and knowledge as more important than non-PR students which was statistically significant ($p = .000$). Testing for views, non-PR students ranked higher in their level of agreement toward the statements which geared toward misperceiving the field than PR students. It was also statistically significant ($p = .000$). This finding supports the hypothesis that although both PR and non-PR students remain misperceiving the field, it was less so from the former than the latter.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney Mean Ranks for PR's Work Assignments, Knowledge and Views

	Major	N	Mean Rank
PR Work Assignments.	PR Students	345	237.25
	Non-PR Students	94	156.70
	<i>Sig. = .000</i>		
PR Knowledge.	PR Students	345	235.00
	Non-PR Students	94	164.96
	<i>Sig. = .000</i>		
PR Views.	PR Students	345	206.04
	Non-PR Students	94	271.22
	<i>Sig. = .000</i>		

H1b. PR students with more university years are more likely to perceive work assignments and knowledge as more important, and less likely to agree with the view statements than PR students with fewer university years.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to look for any difference in university years among PR students toward work assignments, knowledge, and views. Based on the mean ranks (Table 5), PR students with more university years, starting from the third year, ranked higher in their perceived importance of the work assignments than students with fewer university years. However, it had an insignificant p level ($p = .183$). As for knowledge, the same university years have higher mean ranks, with a significant p level (.001), indicating a higher perceived importance of PR's knowledge than students with fewer university years. For views, PR students with more university years showed lower mean ranks than students with less university years with a significant p level (.000), which indicates less agree-

ment to the statements than students with fewer university years. Therefore, this hypothesis was partially supported.

Table 5

Kruskal-Wallis Mean Ranks for University Year and Work Assignments, Knowledge and Views

		Work Assignments		Knowledge		Views	
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>
University year	First	4	121.25	4	21.75	4	133.75
	Second	65	145.98	65	138.68	65	167.15
	Third	91	183.30	91	179.47	91	218.98
	Fourth	116	177.59	116	188.40	116	145.25
	Fifth	46	177.53	46	185.21	46	173.39
	Sixth & Above	23	185.37	23	168.61	23	153.63
Total		345		345		345	

Note. Work Assignments ($p = .183$), Knowledge ($p = .001$), Views ($p = .000$).

H1c. Among PR students, gender influences students' perceived importance and level of agreement toward work assignments, knowledge, and views.

A Mann-Whitney test was used to look for any gender difference among PR students toward these items. According to Table 6, female students ranked higher in their perceived importance of PR's work assignments and knowledge than their male counterparts with significant p levels (.001 and .028, respectively). In terms of views toward PR, male students ranked higher than female students in their level of agreement to the statements, indicating higher levels of misperceptions toward PR than female students. However, the difference was insignificant ($p = .167$). Therefore, this hypothesis

was partially supported. There were significant gender differences in the perceived importance toward work assignments and knowledge, but an insignificant difference in the level of agreement toward PR views.

Table 6

Mann-Whitney Mean Ranks for Gender and Work Assignments, Knowledge and Views

	Gender	N	Mean rank
Work Assignments	Female	255	183.91
	Male	90	142.10
	Total	345	
Knowledge	Female	255	180.02
	Male	90	153.11
	Total	345	
Views	Female	255	168.62
	Male	90	185.42
	Total	255	

Note. Work Assignments ($p = .001$), Knowledge ($p = .028$), Views ($p = .167$).

RQ2: What has influenced students on shaping their impression of PR?

As Table 7 demonstrates, most of the influence on shaping students' impression of PR was from the "Mass Media" (63.8%), followed by "Own/Self Impression" (31.9%), and "Job Market" (27.1%). "Family" and "Friends" were the least influential of the impression (10% and 14.8%, respectively), and only two responses indicated "Other" (.5%), and they both referred to "a university professor". When the numbers are separated between PR and non-PR students, the "Mass Media" remains the most influential in shaping

students' impression of PR. The "Job Market" was the second most influential for PR students and "Own/Self Impression" was the second most influential for non-PR students. Despite the differences, these findings indicate the mass media have greatly contributed to shaping students' impression and understanding of PR.

Table 7

Sources Influencing Students' Impression of PR

Impression from	PR students (n = 345)	Non-PR students (n = 94)	Whole sample (n = 345)
Mass Media*	59.1%	80.9%	63.8%
Job Market*	30.7%	13.8%	27.1%
Own/Self Impression*	35.4%	19.1%	31.9%
Family	11.6%	4.3%	10%
Friends	15.9%	10.6%	14.8%
Other	.6%	0%	.5%

Note. *Significant at the .05 level.

H2: PR students are less likely to get their impression of PR from the mass media than non-PR students.

Chi-Square tests were computed to test if PR students are less likely to get their impression of PR from the mass media. According to Table 7, PR students were less influenced by the media in shaping their impression of PR than non-PR students. Chi-square tests with significant p levels ($p < .05$) showed that the "Mass Media", as well as the "Job Market" and "Self/Own Impression", as sources of influence are significantly associated with being a PR or non-PR student. Therefore, this hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

How Do Students Perceive PR?

Generally, both PR and non-PR students are aware of the field's tasks and knowledge, and more so for particular items than others such as social media, event-planning, writing, media campaigns, corporate social responsibility, and crisis communication. Surprisingly, both PR and non-PR students did not highly perceive some items as important such as conducting research, strategic planning, public opinion, and PR communication models. Lack of knowledge toward these items from non-PR students might not be a concern. However, they are of immense concern to PR students since these items have been highly regarded as integral to PR education and practice (Lim et al., 2005; Kirat, 2016). When students perceive these items as less important, it is vital to identify the contributors to this perception. The curriculum is expected to be among the contributors which is discussed further below. Also, if students still understand PR within the tasks and knowledge of event planning, media campaigns, writing and crisis communication, it means PR as a field of study and industry remains trapped into being a profession of traditional roles and administrative functions.

In terms of views toward PR, both PR and non-PR students remain misperceiving the field, but less so from the former than the latter. Students agreed to PR as a glamorous field, involves manipulation, a marketing tool, about publicity and damage control. Some of these misperceptions are in tandem with the literature in the United States (Bowen, 2003; 2009; Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015), Australia (Gleeson, 2013), Nigeria (Olatunji, 2014), and New Zealand (Sterne, 2008; 2010). A positive sign in the findings is that most students did not agree with the statements that PR is an easy field and involving non-substantive activities, which indicates a sufficient recognition of PR as an established field of study and career.

Also, PR students with more university years showed higher perceived importance to most of PR's work assignments and knowledge requirements than PR students with fewer university years. The former agreed less toward statements that pertain to PR misperceptions. A contributing factor to these findings is that as students involve into more classes throughout more years, they accumulate more information about the field and, consequently, would have a better understanding of it. This is similar to Bowen (2003) where most students who were new to PR believed that PR involved little other than media relations and event planning. New students are unaware of the strategic and managerial roles required for the practitioner which they learn more about throughout the years in advanced PR courses.

In terms of gender, female students showed higher perceived importance to PR's work assignments and knowledge than male students. While this research did not address the "why" aspect of such finding, several factors can contribute to it. First, Almutairi and Dashti (2019) found that due to the cultural perceptions of women working in TV and the preconceived notion of the masculine orientation of the media industry in Kuwait, PR has become more attractive to women. PR has a range of tasks and responsibilities that are perceived as more suitable for women than men. According to Alsaqer and Alhashimi's (2019) study in Bahrain, female PR practitioners believe that women are more suitable to work in PR because they are precise and attentive to details. PR requires flexibility and multi-tasking, and women tend to be more flexible and better at multi-tasking than men (Alsaqer & Alhashimi, 2019). Therefore, women and PR constitute the perfect interconnection and it is not surprising that globally the PR industry is dominated by women where they occupy 70% to 75% of the jobs (Shah, 2015). In the US, for example, 62,000 people were employed as PR practitioners in 2016, more than 70% of which were women ("U.S. Bureau of the Census", 2017).

Lastly, the mass media was the main source of students' impression of PR for both PR and non-PR students, and more so for the latter than the former. While causation cannot be inferred, the mass media have aggressively contributed into shaping students' impression of PR. The image, attitude and understanding of PR become largely vulnerable to media portrayal of the field. This finding is consistent with several studies who found the media to be among the main contributors to PR perception (Bowen, 2003; 2009; White & Park, 2010; Gleeson, 2013; Callison et al., 2014; Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015).

Several findings in this research can be added to the relevant literature. First, the findings suggest that the disparities in understanding PR as a field of study and career are to a large extent universally similar. As the literature and this study have shown, students misperceive the field as do journalists, the public and PR practitioners. One positive sign in the findings is students' perceived importance toward ethics, which was highly ranked from both PR and non-PR students. Ethics has always been an issue of controversy in PR where the field has been perceived as unethical by the general public (Callison et al., 2014), the media (Shaw & White, 2004), and educators (Kirat, 2016). Also, the sample highly ranked social media as part of PR's work assignments. This finding demonstrates students' awareness toward social media and the role they play as part of organizational communication.

New Direction

Despite the persistence of PR's stereotypical tasks and misperceptions, the findings provide a glimpse of hope for PR in general and PR in Kuwait in particular. Regardless of major, students are aware of most of PR's technical aspects and some of its strategic ones, which implies that they have a sufficient understanding of the field. The persistence of the stereotypes and lack of understanding strategic aspects of the field requires more research to uncover the

contributing factors to these findings. In this study, the media was found to influence students' impression of PR, which was also found in previous research. The questions here become: what kind of media content do students consume that influences their impression of PR? And what are the flaws in the curriculum that create simplistic understanding of PR and lack of its strategic aspects?

No research has investigated how PR is portrayed in Kuwaiti media. As mentioned previously, research about PR in Kuwait remains in its early stages. Thus, a conclusion cannot be attained if the mass media are directly influencing students in their impression of PR. However, like many countries around the world, Hollywood movies and streaming services such as Netflix are widely consumed in Kuwait, making Kuwaitis as vulnerable to the same media portrayal of PR as people around the world, which makes the stereotypes spread and persist globally.

In terms of lack of strategic knowledge, most of the current curriculum being taught at Kuwait University does not include strategic aspects of PR. The following explains the situation at Kuwait University, which is similar in many universities within Kuwait and beyond. First, some PR classes, particularly principles or introduction to PR, are taught by non-PR professors whose academic backgrounds are in journalism or radio and TV. The teaching rules and regulations at Kuwait University allow all professors to teach any 100- and 200-level classes regardless of their expertise or academic background. Second, in these classes, most of the assigned, and already few, PR books are relatively old in a field that is continuously evolving. Third, some instructors do not use books, but rely on a collection of notes that consist of different chapters from different books, PowerPoint slides, and articles, creating a scattered curriculum in its scope and focus. Fourth, most of the curriculum being taught focuses heavily on the traditional and technical roles and

responsibilities of PR that range from writing news releases, event planning to arranging hotel accommodations. Combining all these current realities together, the persistence of stereotypes and students' lack of strategic knowledge are not surprising. If students do not learn the foundations of PR thoroughly, are not exposed to updated curricula, do not follow a textbook purposefully organized, and are not shown the strategic aspects of PR, graduates of these programs will always be trapped in the technician roles, and the field will be eternally misperceived.

Therefore, general and specific measures should be taken. PR education, in Kuwait and globally, should include more strategically focused content or courses that involve PR communication models, public opinion, and research. Because these specific fields of PR knowledge are integral to organizational communication, failing to include them in PR curriculum puts PR students at a disadvantage in a demanding and competitive job market. The decision on teaching PR should not be arbitrary or susceptible to a university's rules and regulations. Instructors, therefore, should have sufficient academic backgrounds or professional expertise in the field to teach PR courses. The curriculum should also be organized in a way where a compilation of content is purposefully presented to students in a step-by-step approach.

Conclusion

In light of the findings, this research provides implications for PR education and practice. Educators and practitioners need to realize that PR curriculum requires an immediate overhaul where a shift from the traditional roles to more strategically and technologically oriented education and practice are needed. Students are affected by the status of their major and can be repulsed from it, from the persistence of stereotypes to the confinement of traditional roles. Achieving this shift would contribute to elevating the status of PR and

eliminating its misperceptions. Some universities around the world have already made changes to PR curricula and integrated strategic aspects to it. Advocacy, social media management and digital analytics have become integral parts of PR's current curricula. Although the outcome of these updates would require some time to witness their effects, not doing so would be a great disservice to the field.

PR students are a great asset for the field. Investing in them with the right education would have a direct impact on their productivity in the workplace and how their organizations perceive their profession. Failing to equip them with the strategic aspects of PR would only pass the misperceptions and the limited roles of PR from university to corporate levels. Students' lack of understanding strategic PR during their university education might have led to the lack of involvement in strategic management in the workplace. In Kuwait, several studies have found that PR practitioners in governmental and private organizations are less empowered in the dominant coalition and less involved in strategic management (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Bashir, 2019). While the provided reasons from these studies were higher management's lack of understanding PR, lack of understanding strategic management by the practitioners themselves cannot be ruled out which could be directly related to their college education.

This study has several limitations. Despite the author's attempt to distribute the surveys to different mass communication classes for students with different majors, university years and gender, it remains a convenient sample that did not assume randomness. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized but can at least provide a preliminary description of PR perceptions and some of the contributing factors. Also, creating an exhaustive list of options in survey research is hard to attain. "Other, specify:" as an option can be a helpful tactic, however, no one would genuinely choose it. For example, among the

439 students surveyed in this research, two to three respondents chose “Other, specify:” for some questions and none for other questions. This might indicate that the lists of answers were exhaustive but can also indicate students’ unwillingness to answer the survey questions. Another limitation is the disparities in understanding among the respondents themselves. PR has various definitions and application and the disparities in understanding PR is likely to have occurred among students in this sample.

Considering these methodological limitations, future researchers have a handful of research inquiries to tackle. Employing a theoretical framework can provide more explanations for findings of similar research topic and scope. For example, some of the findings in this study have some traces of the third person effects theory where PR students were less likely to be influenced by the mass media in their impression of PR than non-PR students. PR students in the study might have felt that media portrayal of PR does not influence them as much as non-PR students. Cultivation theory can also be helpful in explaining the findings as it suggests that the media contribute to our beliefs about social reality by creating assumptions and judgments.

In-depth examinations are needed to uncover why students choose PR as a major and among other mass communication majors. To the author’s knowledge, only one recent study has looked at why students choose mass communication majors in Kuwait (Alkazemi et al., 2017), without providing specific details toward each major. Research is needed to understand why female students choose PR as a major and why there tend to be more female than male students majoring in PR. Also, research is needed to identify the media content students consume and how that content contributes to the construction of their impression of PR.

Lastly, in Kuwait and beyond, a closer look at PR curricula would identify any flaws that hinder PR education to its potential

and how it affects students after graduation. It is hoped this study offers increased potential for PR as a field of study and career to expand its status and reputation within universities, organizations, and societies. The increasing number of university enrollments in PR should be a warning sign to educators and practitioners to improve curricula and instill more professionalism to the field. By doing so, it would be expected to witness graduates who are equipped with more knowledge and skills, and less stereotypes or misperceptions.

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إدراك الطلاب للعلاقات العامة في الكويت: تفاوت وغموض لمجال إعلامي

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ملخص

الأهداف: هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى فهم ومعرفة مجال العلاقات العامة، الذي يعتبر من أكثر الموضوعات الجدلية في الأوساط الأكاديمية والوظيفية. يعاني هذا المجال من سوء فهم في معرفة دوره، الذي ينعكس سلباً على جماهيره وخاصة الطلبة. على الرغم من ذلك، تشير الإحصائيات إلى أن عدد الطلبة المسجلين في برامج العلاقات العامة الجامعية في تزايد مستمر. حللت هذه الدراسة مدى إدراك الطلبة للعلاقات العامة، وآراءهم تجاه هذا المجال باستخدام متغيرات التخصص العلمي، السنوات الدراسية والجنس. **المنهج:** طبقت استبانة على عينة من 439 طالباً وطالبة من جامعة الكويت. **النتائج:** بينت النتائج أن طلبة تخصص العلاقات العامة - وخاصة الإناث منهم ومن قضي سنوات جامعية أكثر- لديهم فهم وإدراك أفضل لمجال العلاقات العامة عن غيرهم. ولكن النتائج التفصيلية تشير إلى سياقات أكثر تعقيداً. كانت العلاقات الإعلامية، وإعداد الفعاليات، وإدارة الأزمات، من أكثر الوظائف تكراراً للعلاقات العامة، وكانت البحوث، التخطيط الإستراتيجي واستخدام نماذج الاتصال أقلها تكراراً. بينت النتائج أيضاً أن معظم الطلبة يعتبرون مجال العلاقات العامة مجال الشهرة والأضواء والمراوغة والتضليل. كانت وسائل الإعلام أكثر مصدر للمعلومات عن إدراك الطلاب لمجال العلاقات العامة. تؤيد هذه النتائج بأنه لا يزال هناك إدراك خاطئ وسطحي لمجال العلاقات العامة في الكويت والعالم. **الخاتمة:** هناك حاجة ملحة لتغيير جذري في كيفية تدريس العلاقات العامة من حيث المنهج والكادر التدريسي، ويحتاج المجال إلى دمج مفاهيم إستراتيجية في المنهج الحالي للعلاقات العامة وليس الوظائف التي تقتصر على النواحي التنسيقية فقط. كما يحتاج المجال أيضاً إلى متخصصين ذوي كفاءة علمية وخبرة عملية لتدريس العلاقات العامة. تطبيق هذه التوصيات سيتيح مجالاً أكثر فهماً وأفضل سمعة في الأوساط الأكاديمية والمهنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إدراك الطلاب، العلاقات العامة، الكويت

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