

## THE IDEA OF STUDYING PUBLIC RELATIONS: PERCEPTIONS AND PERSONAL EVALUATIONS THAT LIE BEHIND

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the choice of major and in particular to the choice of a major in public relations. The paper first summarizes the literature on the broad area of choice of major and then on the decision of studying public relations. It presents a phenomenological qualitative research in the empirical setting of Turkey to understand how bachelor degree students decide to study public relations and how the perceptions of students at different years of study change. Findings clustered into seven themes representing the perceptions and experiences of informants about the phenomenon of interest 'the idea of studying public relations'. Results show that salient referents (people and media), career-oriented reasons, expected earnings and perceived compatibility with the job are effective determinants on the choice of studying public relations. Results also show that misperceptions about public relations decrease and ethical considerations increase in the latter years of study. Furthermore, internship turned out to have a critical role during the public relations education since this experience changes students' perspectives about the profession, mostly leading to disappointments.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Public Relations Education, Choice of Major, Phenomenology.

### HALKLA İLİŞKİLER OKUMA FİKRİ ARDINDA YATAN ALGI VE KİŞİSEL DEĞERLENDİRMELER

#### ÖZ

Bu makale, başta halkla ilişkiler alanı özelinde olmak üzere, branş seçimi alanyazınına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makalede, öncelikle branş seçimi alanında yapılmış çalışmaların genel bir özeti sunulmakta, daha sonra halkla ilişkiler okuma kararına dair çalışmalar ele alınmaktadır. Öğrencilerin lisans eğitiminde halkla ilişkiler okuma kararları ve farklı sınıflardaki halkla ilişkiler öğrencilerinin mesleğe dair algılarının nasıl farklılaştığı hakkında olgubilim desenini kullanan Türkiye'de yapılmış nitel bir araştırma sunulmaktadır. Bulgular, ilgili fenomen olan 'halkla ilişkiler okuma fikri' ne dair görüşmecilerin algı ve deneyimlerini temsil eden yedi tema halinde sunulmuştur. Sonuçlar; öne çıkan referans kaynaklarının (kişiler ve medya), kariyer-odaklı nedenlerin, beklenen kazanımların ve kişinin kendisi ve iş arasında algıladığı uyumun halkla ilişkiler okuma kararının ardındaki belirleyiciler oluşunu göstermiştir. Bir başka sonuç, öğrencilerin lisans yıllarında ilerledikçe halkla ilişkiler ile ilgili doğru olmayan algılarının azaldığı ve etik kaygılarının yükseldiğidir. Ayrıca, staj deneyiminin öğrencilerin meslek ile ilgili algılarını değiştirmesi dolayısıyla, halkla ilişkiler eğitiminde önemli bir rolü olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Halkla İlişkiler, Halkla İlişkiler Eğitimi, Branş Seçimi, Olgubilim.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the broad field of public relations (PR), research on public relations education is important since education contributes to defining the scope, operation, standards and ethics of the profession and contributes to legitimizing the occupation at a societal level by increasing its social acceptance and status (L'Etang, 1999: 262). Brown, White and Waymer (2011: 522) cite that according to academic administrators, PR is an advantageous major since it attracts many students and has a lower cost per student than many disciplines. Herein, the authors underline the importance to explore the reasons behind the major's popularity among students and their perceptions about the field.

A considerable amount of research has focused on the facts that lie behind the choice of a major (e.g. Berger, 1988; Galotti & Kozberg, 1987; Holland 1973; 1997; Larkin, LaPort & Pines, 2007; Malgwi, Howe & Burnaby, 2005; Montmarquette, Cannings & Mahseredjian, 2002; Pike, 2006). Previous studies provide results on what leads students to studying a PR major (e.g. Brown, White & Waymer, 2011; Bowen, 2009; Gleeson, 2013; Hoag, Grant & Carpenter, 2017). These research have focused on the perceptions that lead students in different settings and from different nationalities to study PR: in USA (Bowen, 2003: 2009), in Australia (Gleeson, 2013), African American students (Brown et al., 2011).

As Gleeson (2003: 15) suggests, further research that focuses on the relationship between PR education and student perceptions is needed. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the choice of a major and in particular to the choice of a major in PR. In this line, the paper summarizes the relevant literature and presents a qualitative research on decision of studying PR in Turkey, an empirical setting where to the best of researcher's knowledge, this question has never been directly explored. Following a phenomenological qualitative inquiry, this paper seeks to understand how bachelor degree students decide to study PR and how the perceptions of students at different years of study change. Research data has been collected through in-depth interviews with 18 PR bachelor degree students.

## 1. Literature Review: Choice of Major and Public Relations

In a wide array of research, there are many papers on the choice of major. Holland's frequently cited theory on vocational preferences (1973: 1997) evaluates the interaction of personality types and environments. It suggests that individuals try to select environments that are congruent with their personalities (Pike, 2006: 591). Hence, it is likely to say that students select their university degree because they expect the environment to be congruent with their personalities.

Past experience is cited as a factor that determines the choice of a major. It guides students in the selection of a congruent academic degree however, expectations are also dynamic, they evolve during the time that the students experience their selected degrees (Pike, 2006: 598).

Galotti and Kozberg (1987: 322) approached to the choice of a major as a commitment and found that the drivers of the students' commitment are; her/his interest in the subject, potential of doing it well, good instructors, willingness to work on it after graduation and career opportunities it offers.

Larkin, LaPort and Pines (2007: 86) emphasized the importance of choosing a university for career-oriented reasons. According to Berger (1988: 418), students tend to choose majors with greater future earnings. In a similar vein, Montmarquette, Cannings and Mahseredjian (2002: 544) remarks that the expected earnings are an essential variable when choosing a major.

In Malgwi, Howe and Burnaby's (2005: 275) quantitative research on business school students' choices of major, interest in the subject turned out to be the most important factor for both female and male freshmen. The second most influential factor for women was aptitude in the subject while for men it was the major's potential for career and job opportunities.

In particular, for the decision of studying a PR major, Brown, White and Waymer (2011) investigated the motivations of minority students. Their results show that many students were not even informed about PR before they actually started to study it. The decisions of those who were informed, were mostly inspired by family, friends and television shows. The knowledge of those students that knew about PR

before starting their major was limited to crisis management (mainly celebrity) and event management. Moreover, they used to associate PR with the adjective ‘glamorous’. However, their perceptions about PR have changed after they started to study it. Their focus has shifted from the glamorous lifestyle towards writing, research and strategy.

In Brown et al.’s (2011) research, informants underlined that PR is a woman-dominated career that should be done by extroverted women. In line with this, their informants frequently cited popular TV show characters (e.g. Samantha in *Sex and the City*) who demonstrate this characteristic and live a glamorous lifestyle.

Bowen (2009) carried out focus groups among university students to see their knowledge of public relations. According to the results, the PR students did not have a complete knowledge of the discipline since their views did not include subjects such as issues management and ethics. Moreover, the researcher encountered misperceptions about public relations since students equated it with marketing, image enhancement, manipulation and glamour. The misperceptions were mainly affected by television shows and films and according to the researcher, they have a negative effect on the credibility of the profession.

Gleeson (2013)’s research questioned why students decide to study PR in Australia. His results show that friends, family and business or government activities do not have a strong effect on choosing PR major while the stereotypical mass media images of PR have a very strong effect. In his findings, glamour of public relations was prominent as well as in the works of Brown et al. (2011) and Bowen (2009). Gender was an important variable in Gleeson’s research and he found that glamour was mostly related with fashion PR and event management by females and with sports PR and the entertainment industry by males. In terms of ethics, many students agreed that an Industry Code of Conduct would be an important asset that influence their attitudes and underlined the importance of personal values to guide the practice.

Hoag, Grant and Carpenter (2017), focused on communication majors including PR and investigated the impact of media on students’ choice of major. Authors underlined that as well as people who influence a student’s choice, media

exposure is an important salient referent. The authors differentiated media effects from people's influence as being mediated effects rather than direct effects. They mentioned that students who do not have direct support within their social circle may be looking for mediated effects through media in their choice of major (Hoag et al., 2017: 7-11).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, a research on the decision of studying PR does not exist within the empirical setting of Turkey. However, existing research on PR education in Turkey<sup>2</sup> provides an important background for the scope of this paper.

Solmaz, Urhan Torun, Tarakçı and Yüksek (2017) carried a quantitative study and evaluated 400 bachelor degree students' (Selçuk University) perspectives on PR education. Their study provides some findings on students' decision of studying PR (Solmaz et al., 2017: 256-265) . According to their results, 74.3% of students selected the department consciously and 67.5% of them decided on their own to enter a PR degree. 51.8% of students have a positive view about their department and 40.3% percent believe that it has a positive image. The researchers underlined the importance of having an internship that they define as the first interaction that a bachelor degree student has with the sector.

Tekvar (2018) carried on a qualitative research on senior year PR bachelor degree students about their perceptions on their university education. This research was directed to students who study PR at the Faculty of Management<sup>3</sup>, rather than the Faculty of Communication. Her research aims to understand students' evaluations and satisfactions about their education but it also provides results about the decision of students' degree choice (Tekvar, 2018: 142-143). The sample included 15 students; 12 selected to study PR consciously, eight decided on their

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<sup>2</sup> By 2019, there are 93 PR programmes at Turkish Universities (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>).

<sup>3</sup> By 2019, three Turkish universities offer a PR program within the Faculty of Management while 58 universities offer the program within the Faculty of Communication (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>).

own to enter a PR degree, seven were influenced by the suggestions of their teachers and seven chose the program for work opportunities.

Koç, Alnıaçık and Çetin (2017) evaluated PR students' perspectives of the profession in the framework of person-job fit. Their quantitative study consists of 271 students that study PR at a vocational school of higher education<sup>4</sup> at Kocaeli University. Their results indicate a high person-job fit (the congruency of the occupation with the characteristics of the individual) among PR students.

Koçyiğit, Aktan and Çakmak (2018) investigated bachelor degree PR students' (Selçuk University) metaphorical perceptions of PR and their content analysis revealed 37 metaphors. Among these; bridge, mirror, art of persuasion, water, have right conduct and screwdriver were the repetitive metaphors mentioned by the students (Koçyiğit et al., 2018: 167-168). Their results show that the PR education strongly affects the metaphors that students generate. Students' metaphors include both positive and negative attributions and prove the existence of a conceptual confusion.

Following the suggestion of Gleeson (2003: 15) to carry more research on the relationship between PR education and student perceptions, this paper attempts to present further results on the argument. In particular, the research aims to explore the phenomenon of "the idea of studying PR" through the perceptions of those who experienced it. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the choice of a major and in particular to the choice of a major in PR that represents a relatively unexplored field for the public relations research in Turkey.

## 2. Methodology

This paper seeks to understand the lived experiences of students about a phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007: 253), that is "the idea of studying PR". It aims to explore, how students decide to study PR and how their perceptions and expectations of the PR profession differ before and during their bachelor's degree. Following a phenomenological qualitative inquiry, it seeks to

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<sup>4</sup> By 2019, 14 Turkish universities offer a PR program within vocational schools of higher education (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>).

identify how things and experiences show themselves concentrating on the deeper meanings of individual experiences (Creswell et al., 2007: 253), through the perceptions of its actors themselves (Sanders, 1982: 354). In particular, it aims to answer the following questions about the participants lived experiences: (1) What attracts students to studying PR? (2) How do students' perceptions about the PR profession and career change in different years of study? (3) How do students evaluate themselves for this occupation? (4) How do their career goals evolve?

### 2.1. Data Collection

The unit of analysis consists of the bachelor's degree PR students at Ege University, Izmir, Turkey. Ege University is a state university, by 2019-2020, it is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> among Turkish state universities in terms of academic performance (<http://tr.urapcenter.org/2019/>). In 2019, Ege University's department of PR is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> among other state universities that offer the program according to students' university entrance choices. The department of PR (full name: Public Relations and Publicity) operates at the Faculty of Communication and accepts approximately 80 students each year ([yokatlas.yok.gov.tr](http://yokatlas.yok.gov.tr))

Interviews took place through a period of three weeks in September 2018. A purposive selection using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2005: 1635) was used to ensure the inclusion of female and male students from all years of the PR bachelor degree with various GPAs. The students that carry the relevant characteristics were contacted first with an informative e-mail about the study and then face-to-face to ask for their voluntary participation. A total of 18 students were interviewed and the average length of the interviews was 45 minutes (See Table 1 for informant profiles). Since the aim of a phenomenological research is to examine the phenomenon in-depth, what matters is the sample adequacy rather than the sample size (Bowen, 2008: 140). Sample sizes in phenomenological studies typically range from one to 10 informants (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007: 1375). The decision of using a relatively larger sample than a generally expected sample of a phenomenological study depends on the search for data saturation (Akın, Yıldırım & Goodwin, 2016: 777) that continued until the completion of all interviews.

Data gathering in phenomenological research aims to collect experiential descriptions of the phenomenon of interest (Polkinghorne, 1989: 46). In-depth interviews that include the following questions were used to gather data: (1) What is the main reason behind your decision of studying PR? (2) What makes you feel like you are compatible for this job? (3) How would you define your negative sides/characteristics for this job? (4) Why do you think that it is attractive to become a PR professional? (5) Did your perceptions about PR changed throughout your study, how? (6) How would you define your dreams for your PR career? During the interviews, the researcher ensured to not to expose her scheme of thought to the informants by having no constraints about the order of the questions and making them freely shape the conversation to create a natural flow (Gibson & Brown, 2009: 88). Therefore, though a scheme was followed, interviews were flexible to ask different questions and making informants express themselves as they wished.

**Table 1. Informant Profiles**

Informant	Year of study	GPA (on 4.00)	Gender	Internship experience
1	2	2.80	F	-
2	4	2.12	F	Municipality
3	3	2.30	M	-
4	3	2.28	M	Hospitality
5	1	-	F	-
6	3	3.10	M	-
7	4	3.68	F	Newspaper, Municipality
8	4	3.55	F	Municipality
9	4	3.60	F	Advertising agency
10	4		M	-
11	3	3.47	F	Chamber of Commerce
12	3	3.56	F	Corporate Communication
13	2	2.50	F	-
14	2	2.95	M	Municipality
15	2	2	M	-
16	2	3.17	M	-
17	1	-	M	-
18	1	-	M	-

(Ranked according to the order of interviews.)



## 2.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried according to the phenomenological design. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the texts were coded using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. Given that the study was carried by only one researcher, she asked a colleague who is experienced in qualitative research at the department of PR to code the interview data. Two researchers discussed their codes and maintained an agreement on the interpretation of data to ensure intercoder reliability (Holsti, 1969: 137). The researcher has used the process of phenomenological data analysis suggested by Creswell (2007: 61): First, she went through the data and generated an understanding of how informants experienced the phenomenon of interest. Then, she determined significant statements and finally created clusters of meaning into themes. Indeed, phenomenology is not only a description but also an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation (i.e., the researcher “mediates” between different meanings; van Manen, 1990: 26) of the meaning of the lived experiences.

## 2.3. Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor in qualitative research, trustworthiness is a critical issue. Trustworthiness can be assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 323). The researcher ensured the credibility of this study through expert consultations about the interview questions, in-depth data collection through open-ended questions, using researcher’s notes along with the verbatim transcriptions, iterative coding, checking the data with selected participants to make sure that there were no errors in the interpretation of data and finally with peer and expert debriefing about the methodology and the codes. Open-ended question form was prepared based on the on the broad literature on the choice of a major (Berger, 1988; Galotti & Kozberg, 1987; Holland 1973; 1997; Larkin, LaPort & Pines, 2007; Malgwi, Howe & Burnaby, 2005; Montmarquette, Cannings & Mahseredjian, 2002; Pike, 2006) and the literature on the choice of a PR major ( Brown, White & Waymer, 2011; Bowen, 2009; Gleeson, 2013; Hoag, Grant & Carpenter, 2017). Given that the study was carried by only one researcher, peer and expert debriefing were used and the emergent codes were

discussed with two Public Relations scholars who are experienced in qualitative research (Kannan-Narasimhan, 2014: 491). Transferability was ensured through thick description of the context, participants characteristics and through purposeful sampling. As Patton (2005: 1634) mentions; “the logic and power of purposeful sampling in qualitative research lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth”. To ensure dependability and confirmability, feedback from a qualitative researcher was provided constantly throughout the research.

#### 2.4. Findings

Results clustered into seven themes representing the perception and experience of informants about the phenomenon of interest “the idea of studying PR”. They reflect a general structural description of experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989: 51). They are presented by significant statements and bracketing out informants’ experiences (Creswell, 2007 :60).

##### *Attractiveness of PR*

Informants<sup>5</sup> were attracted to study PR for various reasons.

They seemed to be amazed by PR’s strength to shape a brand. According to I2, being a decision maker for a brand and an initiator in its activities give an allure to the profession. Another aspect that seems attractive for the informants is PR’s comprehensive nature; PR’s wide array of content, including perception management, social responsibility, ethics, interpersonal communication and corporate communication. I10 and I12 were attracted by the opportunity to choose among the wide field of work that PR offers.

I5 – a female freshman admiringly said: “I imagine a beautiful, well-dressed lady informing people”. This stereotype was very influential for her decision of studying PR.

I9 underlined the existence of an ethical side of the PR occupation. For I2 and I16, PR’s relation with social benefit was attractive.

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<sup>5</sup> “I” will be used as a shortcut for “informant”.

I18 was attracted by the idea that PR is an easier job than other regular jobs. He did not think that PR had all this interdisciplinary nature. I18, who is a freshman further explained his opinion as: “Well, I thought like this before coming here, most probably I will soon find out that it is not easy at all”.

I1, I8 and I12 were attracted by PR’s constantly developing, dynamic nature. PR’s creative and innovative nature was attractive for I8 and I16. I1, I6 and I16 underlined the permanent opportunity of developing one’s self when studying PR. I6 cited that: “Being a person upfront is very attractive to me”.

Informants also raised the thoughts of other people about PR. I6 cited that “PR is quite interesting and attractive to me but it is not like this neither for the community nor for my family”. I14 said that: “PR is important in the eyes of those that respect its necessity and when the company gives importance to it”. Though they underline negative evaluations, I7 said: “PR is currently an attractive profession for many people”.

#### *Decision of studying PR*

When making the decision of studying PR, almost all informants Googled the occupation. Many of them discussed their choice with their families and a few of them asked suggestions from their friends who have already started their PR degree. Some students also listened to the suggestions of their high school teachers in making their university choices. I7 contacted graduates of PR to ask about their suggestions.

I5, a freshman encountered US based PR companies during her Google search and they amazed her: “I found these American PR companies which are so big and successful! They created willingness in me to do this job”.

Some informants pointed out their compatibility with PR as a reason for deciding to study PR. I3 and I12 said that PR fits their personality. I10 said that PR fits her versatile identity. I3 cited that an existence of a business network of his family was a reason to study PR. I15 was influenced by his father who works in political communication. I1, I8, I17 and I11 said that they chose to study PR due to

job opportunities. On the contrary, I13 said that she was afraid of studying PR because of the lack of job opportunities.

Though PR was not the first choice of the major for most of the informants, they all seem to be happy with their decision, except for I17. He just chose to study PR due to family pressure and especially because of his mother who told him that after this degree he would easily find a job. Informants' families had different roles in their children's decision of studying PR. On the contrary to I17's case, some informant's families were against their children's decision of studying PR due to the lack of job opportunities and the occupation's low status in the society. However, many of the informants mentioned that their families were supportive in their decision.

#### *Perceived compatibility with PR*

Most of the informants find themselves quite compatible with the PR profession. Six informants underlined their extroverted personality as a great advantage for a PR career, which makes "extroversion" as the most raised personality trait in this research.

Informants raised their capabilities in: getting along with people, self-expression, networking, conversation, listening skills and empathy ability. I11 cited that: "My extroverted personality together with my empathy skills will allow me to bridge the publics and the company".

Personality traits as being ambitious, curious, patient, sincere and self-confident were underlined. The characteristic that is underlined the most is being talkative. I6 cited that: "I'm a talkative person and it is very interesting for me to have intimate relations with people and talk to them".

Informants also indicated occupational skills that make them suitable for this job: analysis and research skills, creativity, staying calm in crisis, agenda tracking, leadership skills, writing skills, observation skills, organization skills, persuasion skills and being result-oriented. I2 cited that: "I am able to create a synthesis out of thesis and antithesis".

I7 emphasized the importance of a PR professional being ‘open to innovations’. She cited that: “A PR professional should be open to innovations and should always track new things. I love following new trends and innovations and I think that this is something that makes me compatible for this job”.

Referring to the halo effect, I3 underlined the importance of physical appearance and he expressed his opinion as: “Should I be honest? Please don’t think that I an egoist but people tend to listen to me and believe in me more because of my physical appearance. Even if they want to say no, they can’t. I think this is a huge advantage for PR”.

I3, I5 and I15 underlined their compatibility with PR due to the capability of ‘showing things as if they were interesting and talent in manipulating people’. This answer drew the interview to talking about informant’s comprehension of ethics in PR. I15 said that “Showing things as if they were interesting is fine if you do not lie”.

#### *Perceived non-compatibility with PR*

When informants were asked about their compatibility with PR, they started listing many things in a quite fast and a certain way. When it comes to how students perceive themselves as not being compatible with PR, for most of them, it took a while to find an answer. I15 answered with a surprised look on his face: “Well, actually I never thought about it!”

For some informants, their non-compatibility with PR seems to be related to the features of the profession that they don’t like. Corporate and formal side of PR bothers I2 who says that she was expecting a less formal job and she is disappointed with the formal side of PR. I2 said that she was expecting a job that carries a non-profit logic and is full of social responsibility. However, she was very disappointed with all the marketing and positivist courses that she had to take and had a big decrease on her GPA at the end of the first year. Now that she is a last year student, she says: “I learned PR with all its aspects I learned the pros and cons, why PR exists and why it will always exist. I really went down in the beginning but now I found the good in my profession”.

Being impatient, disordered, gloomy, nervous, shy and emotional were indicated as the characteristics that are not compatible with PR. Lack of interpersonal communication skills and ambition were raised as other disadvantages.

I2 and I7 said that they prefer individual work to teamwork and even if they work in a team it takes time for them to get used to it and trust their colleagues. They both evaluated this characteristic as a disadvantage for a PR professional.

#### *Expectations and satisfactions*

Personal growth was an expected and a satisfied aspect of many informants. Informants underlined the intellectual perspective the PR degree made them gain. I3 cited that: “Our courses help us with all aspects, we learn about everyday life. It is not just about a profession. I am immediately able to use what I learn every day here within my relations with my family, partner and friends”. I1 cited that: “Since I started my degree, I learned many up-to-date things. I got aware of subjects and places I never heard of. This drew me to think more. I really want to become a PR profession but even if I can’t, I will have the skills to create new opportunities for myself”.

I6 and I12 underlined that they found PR to be more multi-dimensional and richer than they have expected. I 12 said: “We started with sociology, law, economics, marketing, then we were introduced to more specific fields as corporate communication, marketing communication, and research. It seems that PR includes a bit of everything”. I6 said that: “The rich nature of PR also creates confusion”.

Most of the informants seem to agree that success in PR does not only depend on the degree, but on how much you invest in yourself. As informant I1 cited: “Though courses teach you a lot, success in PR depends on your extra work in following the agenda, traveling, reading and language skills”. In line with this perspective I3 cited “Don’t ever trust the diploma, you should build yourself up!” I8 cited: “At the end, we are not receiving a diploma to become a doctor or a lawyer, it does not open you a gateway to anything unless you dig it with your own hands”. I16 underlined the importance of studying PR at a good university. According to his perspective: “If you study PR at a good university it will help your career a lot, but if

you study in one of the many poor ones, it will be a waste of time”. According to I16, all these universities that teach public relations in Turkey<sup>6</sup> are not needed.

### *Disappointments*

Disappointments of the informants are either about the education they get or about the sector and the reality of the profession.

About the education, what seems to be disappointed the most is the repetitive and theoretical curriculum. A total of nine informants complained about the theoretical education. I14 specifically criticized the lack of technical opportunities and education on digital communication. Another worry is the lack of a real field to perform the PR profession. I8 cited that: “Many firms are not corporate so I am not really sure about where we are going to perform all these ideal practices that we learned at school”. I12 said that: “Unfortunately, when you go to work in firms, PR is usually treated as a secretary”. I17 shares similar worries and complains that: “The sector does not give the necessary importance to PR”. I9 also raises her worry as: “I am afraid I will never find a job where I can ‘really’ do PR”.

Informants are concerned about the job opportunities and conditions. I8 seems to be very pessimistic about the future career because of her worries about the employee selection procedures: “I contacted and applied to many firms last summer for my internship. I did not even get an answer from many of them even though I was in fit with their expected characteristics. However, I witnessed several times that a friend of mine easily found an internship just with a call, even though she/he had no extraordinary skills”. I8 also raised her worries about the salaries: “Let’s say that I found a job in PR, how will I manage to afford my life with that salary?” Sharing I8’s worries, I10 also cited that: “Firms are always hiring a family member, a friend or a friend of a friend to do PR. If you do not have a network, you are in trouble”. I10 was also very skeptical about the qualifications that firms look for when hiring for a PR position. I2 – a female senior student said: “The thing that bothers me the most about PR is the stereotype of that lady who always goes around in a mini skirt and heels and just thinks about the profit of her company”. Another worry that I6, I8 and

14 shares is the various amount of people studying PR. As I6 cites: “I really don’t know where all these firms exist to hire us”.

### *Dream career*

I9 sets a very precise target of becoming the PR manager of an art gallery. Similarly, I3 says that he certainly wants to work in the field of e-sport. I12 wants to work in corporate communication and I1 wants to work in a field where she can effectively use interpersonal communication skills.

For some students working in PR seems to be a second choice, just as it was for their choice of studying PR. Their real dreams were studying advertising, cinema or human resources. Some informants are willing to work in a related field as advertising. I9, I11 and I16 are dreaming of launching their own advertising agency.

Nine of the informants say that they want to become a PR scholar. However, for none of them this was a real dream. They say that after facing the challenges and disappointments of the sector, they had to change their career goal. I7 explains how she feels with these words: “First year, my dream was becoming a rich and a super cool PR manager, if you ask me now I would say, well, hopefully a scholar”. I12 seems to be more optimistic than the other informants about the sector: “Yes, it is true that the sector is hard, however, if you are really good, you can find yourself a job that satisfies you”.

I5 – a first year student says that she definitely wants to work abroad in an international firm and says that she is very optimistic about her future career. Also I8 shares the dream of working in an international firm. She says that: “International firms value their employees more, they provide more opportunities and they pay better”.

I4 designated a scene that he dreams for his career in a very theatrical way “I am the PR manager of a very big and an important company and the board has gathered to solve a very critical problem. The CEO and all top managers are very depressed because of this big problem. Suddenly, I stand up and present them the solution. This would be a point that I would like to achieve in my career”.



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, either through family, friends, teachers or media, all informants were somehow informed about the field before they actually started studying it. This result differs from those of Bowen (2009) and Brown et al. (2011) who both found that many students do not choose to study public relations intentionally but they stumbled into it.

Results show that salient referents have an important effect on the choice of the PR major (Downey, McGaughey & Roach, 2009; Hoag et al., 2017; Simpson, 2003) who found an effect of family, friends and teachers on the choice of major. However, on the contrary to existing research (Brown et al., 2011; Bowen, 2009, Gleeson, 2013), this study did not directly encounter a finding that students were inspired by television shows, movies or mass media images of PR. Nevertheless, they were inspired by information on digital media since almost all informants mentioned that they Googled the occupation before they decided to study it. This finding is partially in line with the findings of Hoag et al. (2017) who proposed media exposure as an important salient referent, since students only mentioned the influence of digital media but not that of mass media on their choice of major.

Career-oriented reasons (Larkin et al., 2007: 86) and expected earnings (Berger, 1988: 418; Montmarquette et al., 2002: 544) are found to be important reasons on students' choice of major. Similarly, Malgwi et al. (2005: 275) found that the major's potential for career and job opportunities was the second most influential factor for men's choice of a major. In this research, on the one hand, I1, I8, I17 and I11 indicated that they chose to study PR due to job opportunities. On the other hand, I13 said that she was afraid of studying PR because of the lack of job opportunities. Furthermore, the negative job conditions seem to be one of the biggest disappointments of students (for I4, I6, I8, I10). An important worry that students raised, was their future career and employment. I3 and I8 said that the diploma will not let a PR graduate on its own to find a job. This finding is in line with the words of Arceo (2004: 300) who mentioned that: "it is perhaps a question of educational orientation, and a consequence of the reality that everyone can be a public relations practitioner without having a degree from an educational institution".

This research also generated results on students' misperceptions of PR (Bowen, 2009). I5 – a 1<sup>st</sup> year female student was amazed by the beautiful look of women in PR. Her statement is in line with Brown et al.'s (2011) informants' perception about PR being a woman-dominated career that should be done by extroverted women. Differently in this study, beauty was also mentioned by a male student (I3 – a third year student) as an advantage. He mentioned the advantage of his physical appearance for PR and explained it though a theoretical construct he learned during his study – the halo effect.

I5 has also mentioned her admiration for US based PR companies. Her statement puts forward the US dominance and visibility on the field. Indeed, Sriramesh (2003), draws attention to the US bias on the PR body of knowledge and education and he draws attention to the importance of integrating knowledge from other continents of the world in PR education.

Usually (though not always), results show that the more students study PR, the more their knowledge about the field increases and misperceptions decrease. As an instance, while the stereotype of a beautiful lady was very attractive for a first year female student, it was very bothering for a fourth year female student who said: "The thing that bothers me the most about PR is the stereotype of that lady who always goes around in a mini skirt and heels and just thinks about the profit of her company". These two views, the prior coming from a freshman and the latter from a senior year student, indicate a strong confusion between PR's real content and image. I2 who is a 4<sup>th</sup> year student was attracted by being a decision maker for a brand and an initiator of its activities. I10 and I12 who are consecutively 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students were impressed by PR's comprehensive nature that includes; perception management, social responsibility, ethics, interpersonal communication and corporate communication. Students seem to understand and appreciate the versatile nature of PR. Some informants precisely cited in which field they would like to work in: I9 in art communication, I3 in e-sport, I12 in corporate communication and I1 in interpersonal communication. This finding is encouraging for the development and enrichment of the field of PR.

As the literature on vocational preferences suggests (Holland, 1973; 1997; Pike, 2006), most of the informants chose to study PR because they find themselves to be quite compatible with it. Indeed, all informants had to think for a while about their characteristics that are non-compatible with PR. Extroversion turned out to be the most related personality trait with the PR profession (similar to Brown et al., 2011). Occupational skills were also brought forward by students in advanced years of study to explain their compatibility with the job. As Pike (2006: 528) cites, past experience is a factor that determines the choice of a major. For I3, the existence of a business network of his family and for I15 the influence of his father who works in political communication reveals the influence of past experiences.

Informants' statements led to results about ethical considerations. An important aspect that students valued after years of study, seems to be the importance of ethics and social benefit for the PR occupation. Two 4<sup>th</sup> year and one 3<sup>rd</sup> year students mentioned that the ethical side and social benefit make PR more attractive. On the contrary, three students (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year) stated manipulation as a talent that makes a person successful in PR.

L'Etang (1999), underlined that PR education turned into a training process and students' expectations became purely instrumental. Results of this research turned out to be different. Students mentioned that they expected and received an education with an intellectual content. Informants were aware of the importance of intellectual development to become successful in PR. Although students were happy with their self-development, they were disappointed with the repetitive and theoretical curriculum.

An interesting finding of this research is the difference of perceptions between students who had an internship experience and who didn't. Informants who have at least once faced the sector with an internship seemed to be very worried about the lack of job opportunities or about the job opportunities that are way far from what they have expected. I7 – who had an internship at a municipality and a newspaper said that she had many challenges and disappointments after her internships and they caused her to change her initial dream of becoming a rich and a cool PR manager. After her internship at a corporate communication department I12

– a third year student accepted the hard circumstances of the sector but also kept her optimism that one can find a job. According to the results of this research, internship has a very critical role since all informants who had this experience has somehow changed their perspective of the PR profession. This result supports the suggestion of Solmaz et al.'s (2017: 256) research that underlined the importance of having an internship to get to know the sector.

An interesting, yet sad finding is that after seeing the sector, nine of the informants decided to become a PR scholar even though this isn't what they really want. Disappointments after the contact with the sector raises questions: How and why is the sector so devastating for young PR practitioner candidates? What does the PR education present that is so different from the reality? Further research could focus on these questions.

Finally, the limitations of this research mainly depend on the nature of qualitative inquiry. First of all, unlike quantitative findings, qualitative findings are not generalizable in understanding the world. However, qualitative generalization should be looked for in idiographic knowledge of the human experience that are applicable to other humans in similar conditions (Sandelowski, 1997: 128). A limitation of this research is that the researcher was also a professor of the students in the sample. To overcome this possible bias, she tried to not reflect her scheme of thought and the let the informants speak freely.

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