



The Perception of the Public Relations Profession from the Perspective of Experts: The Case of Konya/Türkiye

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the perception of the public relations profession in Konya through the eyes of the professionals. In this context, the phenomenology design, which is considered within the framework of qualitative analysis methods, was used. In order to obtain the data, 28 public relations experts living in Konya, one of the major cities of Turkey, were selected using the criterion sampling method and in-depth interviews were conducted with them. The inclusion criteria for the experts were that they had worked in the field of public relations in Konya for at least 2 years, that their active work processes were ongoing, and that they had received an undergraduate degree in the field of public relations. The research seeks answers to the questions, “What are the concepts that come to mind when public relations is mentioned?”, “Do public relations experts see this field as prestigious?”, “What is professional prestige in Konya?”, “What is the professional image of public relations in Konya?” and “Who practices public relations in Konya?” The interviews lasted between 35-55 minutes and the data obtained was analyzed in the Maxqda 2024 program. It was observed in the data that the experts heavily emphasized the words communication skills, crisis management and being a good listener related to their profession. Public relations experts heavily view their field as prestigious. In addition, it has been highlighted that professional prestige is low in Konya and that in Konya, the public sector and those outside the field work in the field of public relations. In addition to these, it has been concluded that the profession of public relations is not sufficiently known in Konya, that it is difficult to do this job in Konya, and that professional prestige and ethical practices are a matter of debate.

Keywords: Public Relations Profession, Professional Perception, Türkiye, Konya, Konya and Public Relations Profession

1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) plays a vital role in the modern business world. Public relations, which is increasingly popular among communication professions, but whose professionalism and employment opportunities have not expanded to the desired level, continues its organizational function with new areas of activity (Röttger, 2010). Public relations practitioners help organizations manage their brand image, prevent crises, and find solutions by communicating effectively and strategically with the public. However, there are different perceptions about the public relations profession in society and even among professionals. Experts' perceptions of the public relations profession reflect the perspectives of both professionals in the sector and outside observers, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the profession. Understanding these perceptions will contribute to better defining the profession, creating effective strategies, and determining its future direction.

Although the scope of activities of public relations practitioners varies according to sector and function, they generally include; media relations, corporate social responsibility, issue and problem management, crisis management and communication, investor relations, reputation management, online - digital public relations, public health, internal communication and employee participation, change management, event management and strategic planning (Gregory, 2011, DTI/IPR, 2003, Coombs and Holladay, 2013, Petrovici, 2014). Despite the positioning in all these fields of activity and the collective expertise of a century, there is an obsession with professional legitimacy and a confusion of authority with close professions, and the sector continues to change and transform with new knowledge and skills (Bourne, 2019).

Criteria such as “specialized theoretical knowledge, university education, professional association, ethical codes of conduct and the ability to comply with these codes” are defined as requirements that symbolize professionalism and establish a positive image and sense of trust. Despite meeting these requirements, public relations practitioners still struggle with difficulties in terms of having their professionalism accepted in different parts of the world (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). In a study conducted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the National Trustworthiness Index results also report a negative perception towards public relations practitioners. The perception of “source married to the organization” serves the idea that public relations professionals try to communicate through the organization’s window and adopt a pro-company attitude. The fact that the unconcealed institutional connection confines professionals to the idea that their communication efforts will mostly be reflected in the organization’s bottom line disrupts positive perception attempts (Callison, 2004). Cameron et al. (1996), in their study investigating the basic elements contributing to the advancement and institutionalization of the public relations profession, explain eight elements such as “Technical Skills, Salary Levels, Research Competence, Organizational Status, Ethical Performance, Education, Gender and Race Equality, Accreditation” as elements that facilitate the standardization and professionalization of the profession. In the professional orientation index applied to public relations professionals in the United States, the results regarding the “ideal job in public relations” also indicate social responsibility. The results emphasize that it is not possible to be a professional without being socially responsible and that practitioners should always look out for the public interest (Wright, 1979). Professions gain their originality, professionalism, status and autonomy through the existence of a professional organization that determines and accredits historical knowledge, experience, education and expertise standards. Public relations, which is under the threat of organizational and economic changes, is included in the knowledge-based profession category when the profession definition of Evetts (2003) is taken into account, as it meets the criteria expected in terms of career trajectory, such as undergraduate

and graduate education, professional organization, professional training and expert experience process. Public relations, which is under the threat of organizational and economic changes, is included in the knowledge-based profession category when the undergraduate and graduate education, professional organization, professional training and expert experience process that Evetts (2003) expects it to have in terms of career trajectory are taken into account while defining the profession. The definitions of public relations by organizations such as PRSA (2024), CPRS (2009), and IPRA (2024), which are powerful professional organizations of the public relations profession, include the phrases “reliable, strategic, effective” “communication” process. In the interactive world of public relations, this magical “communication” proposition that will provide strong community ties constitutes the most attractive aspect of professional identity. Beyond a simple definition, this phrase serves as a dominant force in the construction of social legitimacy, the enhancement of the image of the public relations sector and the rise of the prestige of practitioners, while it is seen as the key word that will correct all kinds of negative associations and misperceptions between the public and private sectors and the public relations industry.

All kinds of communication activities carried out to inform the public during the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and its institutionalization as a state are shown as the first steps of public relations in Turkey (Ünal, 2023). However, it is observed that public relations in Turkey has grown both as an industry and in academic terms since the 1960s. The establishment of the State Planning Organization created a Rosetta Stone effect in terms of the institutionalization of public relations. The public relations course was first given by Edward Bernays in 1923 at New York University, USA (Peltekoğlu, 2009), and it was first seen in the curriculum of the “School of Journalism and Public Relations” at Ankara University in Turkey in 1966 (Hof & Tuncer, 2011). In terms of professional organization, the establishment of the Public Relations Association in 1972 and the opening of the "Public Relations and Publicity" departments in the Press and Broadcasting Schools in 1988 are important development steps in the historical process (Gülsünler, 2008). After the decision to establish public relations units under the name of "Press and Public Relations Consultancy/Directorate" in public institutions with the laws enacted in 1984, the public has dragged the private sector behind. The involvement of large holdings in public relations studies has made public relations application areas visible in the private sector, and the development of public relations has accelerated with newly established private agencies (Akın, 2021).

Konya province has a great potential in terms of population, industry, education and public institutions, as it is a metropolitan city. Public institutions communicate with citizens through public relations units, evaluate complaints and suggestions, receive feedback through satisfaction surveys, organize events to promote Konya's historical and cultural heritage, and conduct public relations activities with local and foreign visitors. Selçuk University and Necmettin Erbakan University provide undergraduate and graduate education with their Public Relations departments. Local and foreign large industrial organizations located in Konya continue their public relations functions in an organizational structure that facilitates two-way communication through increasing brand awareness, crisis management, establishing effective relations with the media and corporate social responsibility projects. Although there are local agencies that provide consultancy for public relations activities, there are no established professional organizations yet.

This study aims to examine the views of public relations experts working in Konya regarding their profession and the effects of these views on professional practice. The dynamics of each city are different. Since there is no previous study in the literature on public relations in Konya, the data to be obtained is important. Therefore, investigating how the public relations

profession is perceived by experts is of great importance both academically and practically. This research will contribute to a better understanding and development of the profession and will help public relations professionals and institutions make more effective and conscious decisions. Within the scope of the purpose, the following questions were sought to be answered in the research:

- What are the concepts that come to mind when public relations are mentioned?
- Do public relations experts see this field as reputable?
- How is the professional reputation in Konya?
- What is the professional image of public relations in Konya?
- Who is working as a public relations professional in Konya?

2. Method

Konya, an ancient city, is the 6th largest city in Turkey in terms of population (2024, www.saraymedya.com). Konya, which has a low earthquake risk due to its geological structure (TMMOB, 2021), along with the earthquake disasters experienced in Turkey in recent years, is on its way to becoming an industrial center in many areas. In this sense, new production facilities, factories and organizations are being built in the city, which is rapidly industrializing. In this direction, the current situation of public relations in Konya is gaining more importance. In this direction, the purpose of this study is to determine the perception of the public relations profession in Konya.

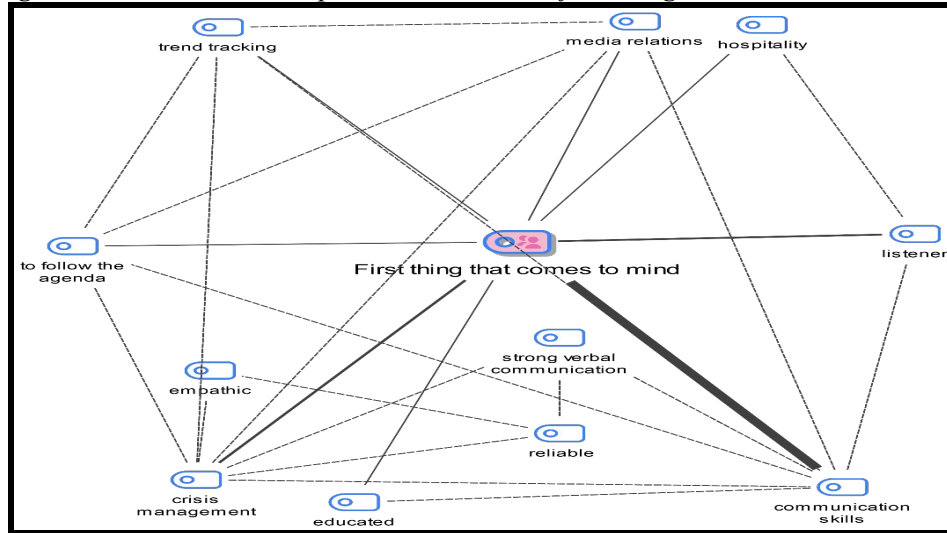
For this purpose, the phenomenology design was used within the framework of qualitative analysis methods. In order to obtain the data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 public relations experts living in Konya. The interviewees were selected according to the criterion sampling method. In this sense, having at least 2 years of field experience in Konya, having a bachelor's degree in Public Relations, and actively working in an institution were taken as criteria.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the researchers' offices. The interviews lasted between 35-55 minutes. The findings obtained from the interviews were transferred to the Maxqda 2020 program in document format and examined with content analysis. The reason for examining the data in the Maxqda program is to see the connections that exist in the background in addition to the visible details. As a result of the examination, 3 themes, 19 categories and a total of 169 codes were formed. No template was used for the themes, categories and codes formed, and the researcher categorized them in line with the information emphasized in the data.

3. Results

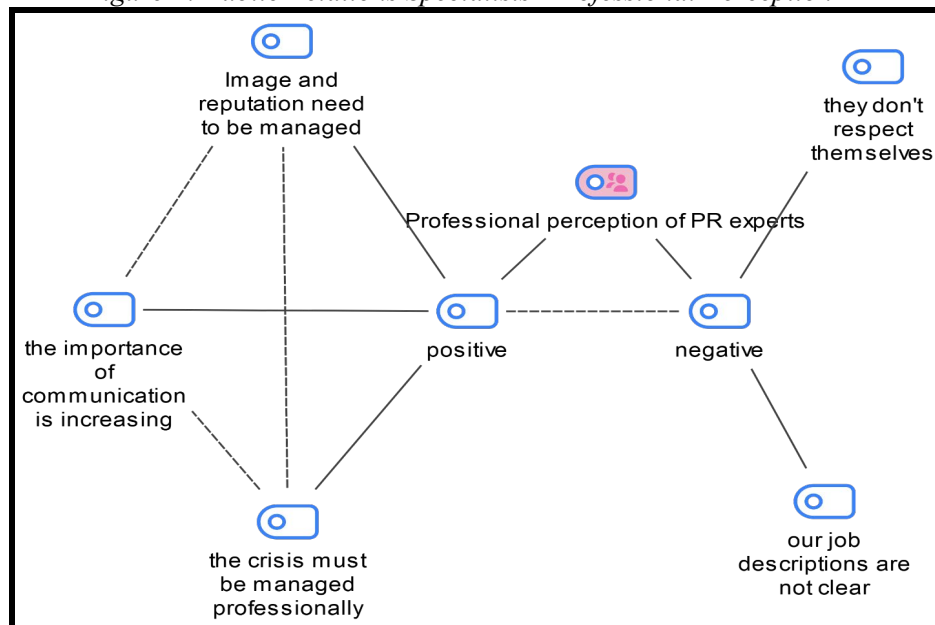
All participants have an undergraduate degree in public relations. 14 participants work in the public sector and 13 participants work in the private sector. 12 participants have 1-5 years of work experience, 10 participants have 6-10 years of work experience, 3 participants have 11-15 years of work experience, 1 participant has 16-20 years of work experience, and 2 participants have more than 21 years of work experience. 15 of the participants are female and 13 are male. 14 participants are between the ages of 24-30, 5 participants are between the ages of 31-40, 7 participants are between the ages of 41-50, and 2 participants are between the ages of 51-60. 13 participants are married, 15 participants are single.

Figure 1: When it comes to public relations, the first thing that comes to mind is



From the data obtained, it is seen that the participants emphasize communication skills in their explanations about the public relations profession. Despite the ever-increasing range of topics in the public relations profession, the dialogic communication ecosystem created by the digital revolution shows that the ability of institutions to interact with their publics is still an indispensable reality in the public relations profession (Cernicova-Buca, 2016). In addition, the fact that the public relations specialist is a crisis manager and a good listener are other codes that stand out in the data. Although two-way interactive communication enabled by Internet-based technologies has fundamentally changed institutional approaches to crisis communication through methods such as critical data collection, search engine optimization, and web and social media analytics, it continues to be the core business of public relations (Alfonso & Suzanne, 2008). In addition, media relations, hospitality, trend following, agenda following and being educated are other concepts emphasized (Figure 1).

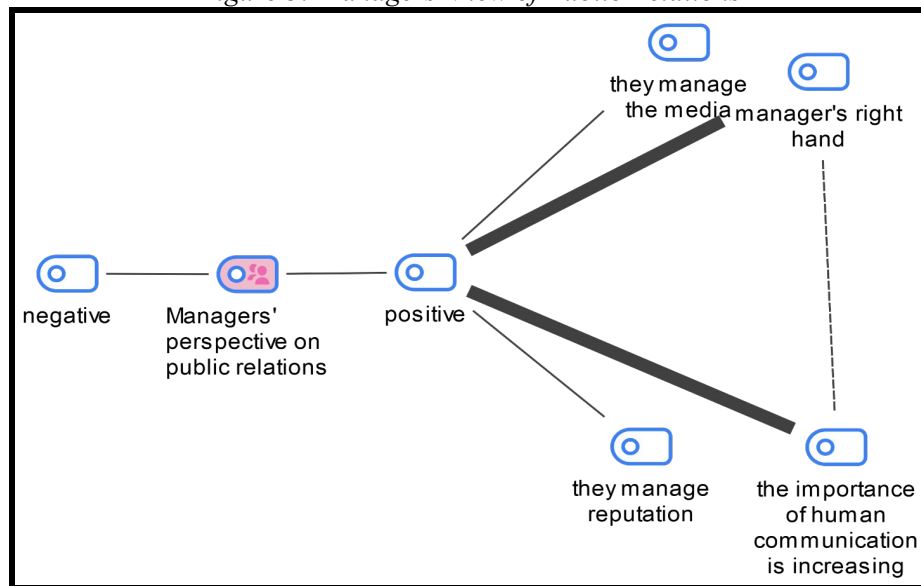
Figure 2: Public Relations Specialists' Professional Perception



In the data obtained from the participants, codes such as public relations experts not respecting themselves and their job descriptions not being clear were formed. In addition, codes such as being able to manage the crisis professionally, increasing the importance of

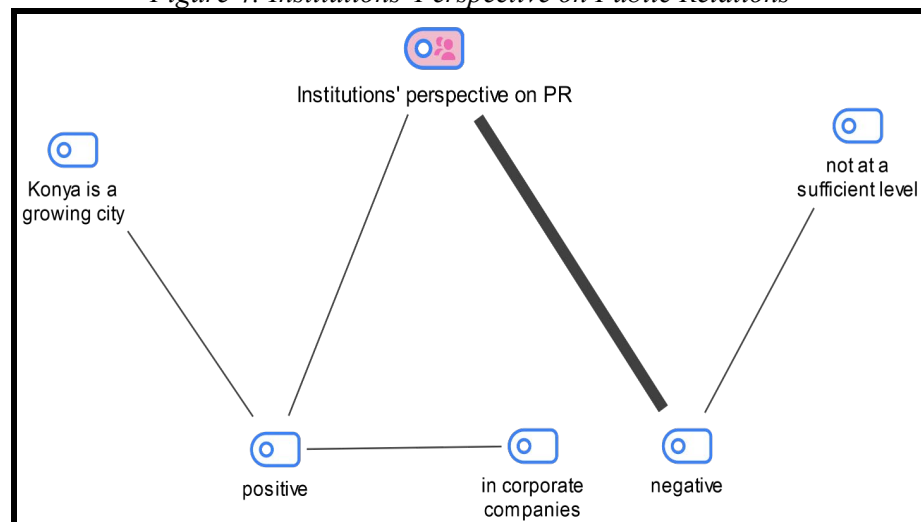
communication, and managing the image and reputation of institutions were also emphasized positively (Figure 2). Organizations that want to benefit from digital transformation efficiently are expected to position public relations departments in their organizational charts that are staffed with experts who know communication management techniques and strategies and are competent in these areas. It is said that public relations will take its place as an academic-based profession in the future as a unit that manages issues that require expertise and provide added value, such as "reputation management, issue management, change communication" (Wehmeier, 2003).

Figure 3: Managers' View of Public Relations



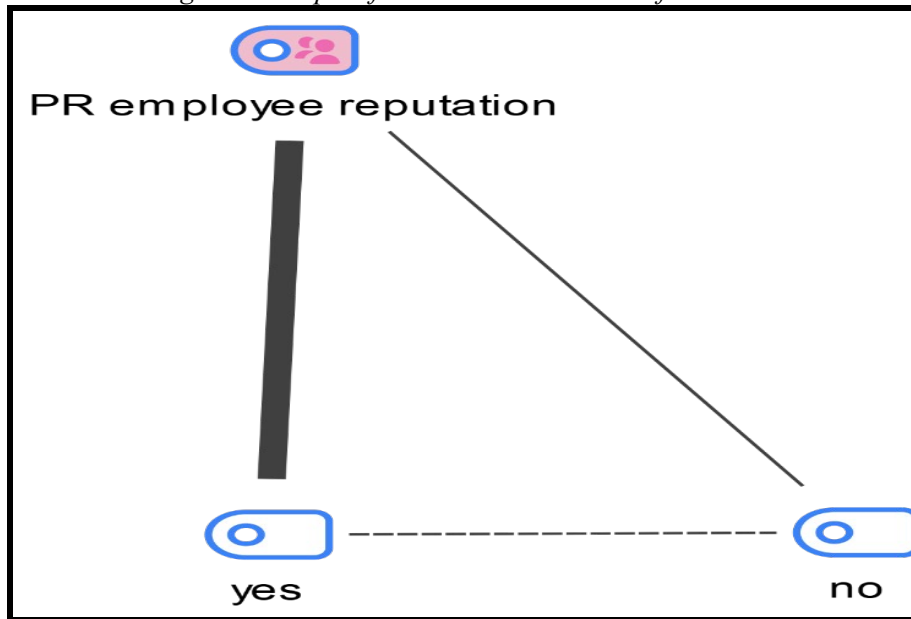
In the data obtained, it is seen that managers emphasize that public relations experts are the right arm of the management and that the importance of communication with people is increasing. In addition to these, it is seen that public relations experts' management of relations with the media and their management of reputation also constitute a code. There was no negative emphasis on the field of public relations in the managers' statements (Figure 3). Top managers or owners of companies maintain a positive image of public relations professionals, believing that they have a moderator role combined with communication functions (Wehmeier, 2003).

Figure 4: Institutions' Perspective on Public Relations



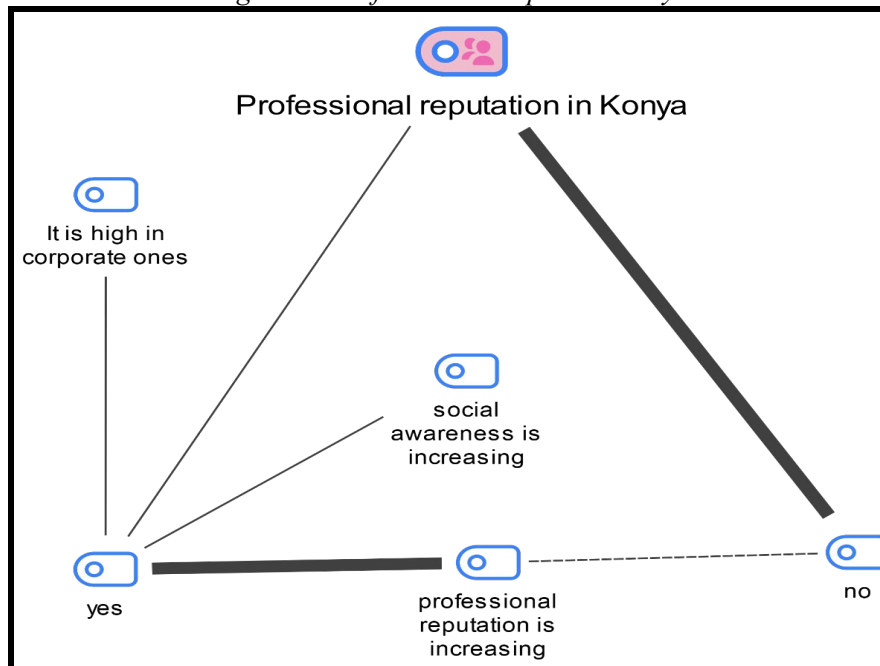
In the data obtained, it was emphasized that the institutions' perspective on the field of public relations was negative. The reason for this is explained as the lack of understanding of its importance at the desired and sufficient level (Figure 4).

Figure 5: Respect for Public Relations Professionals



In the data obtained, it was emphasized that there is respect for public relations workers. A code that does not have respect was also formed, but it was understood that it has a weak code relationship. It is also noteworthy that a sub-code was formed in which the profession is both respectable and not respectable (Figure 5).

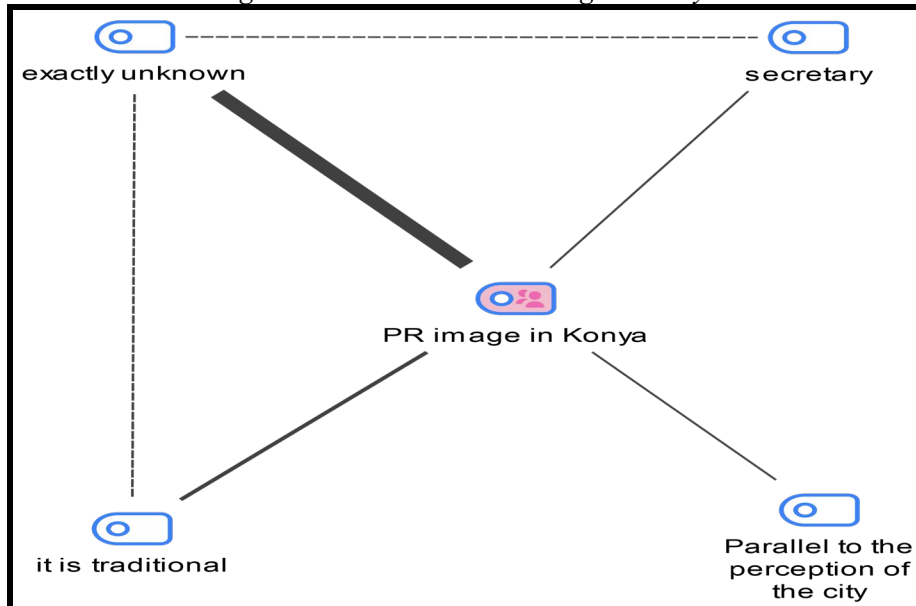
Figure 6: Professional Respect in Konya



In the examined data, it is seen that the category of no respect for the profession in Konya is heavily emphasized. There are also problems with public relations not being seen as a full-time profession due to reasons such as the lack of consensus on clarifying professional

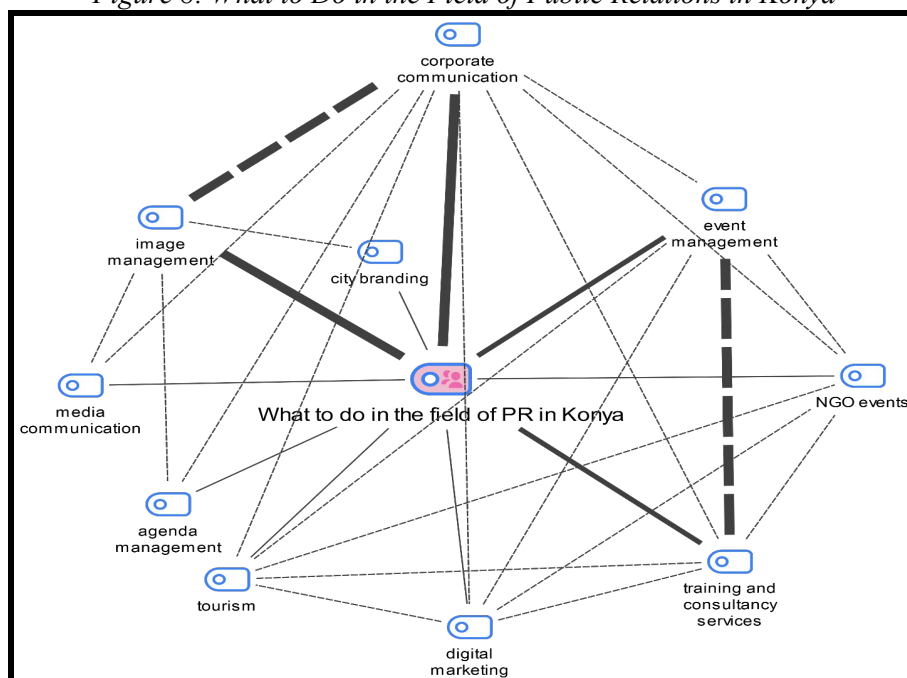
standards and the lack of a universal accreditation and licensing standard (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008). This reputation problem, which is also experienced in Konya, stems from the existence of multiple perspectives on the profession. In the data regarding the professional respect, the emphasis on the increase in professional reputation comes to the fore. In addition, it is seen that the codes of increasing social awareness on this issue and being more in corporate firms are also emphasized (Figure 6).

Figure 7: Public Relations Image in Konya



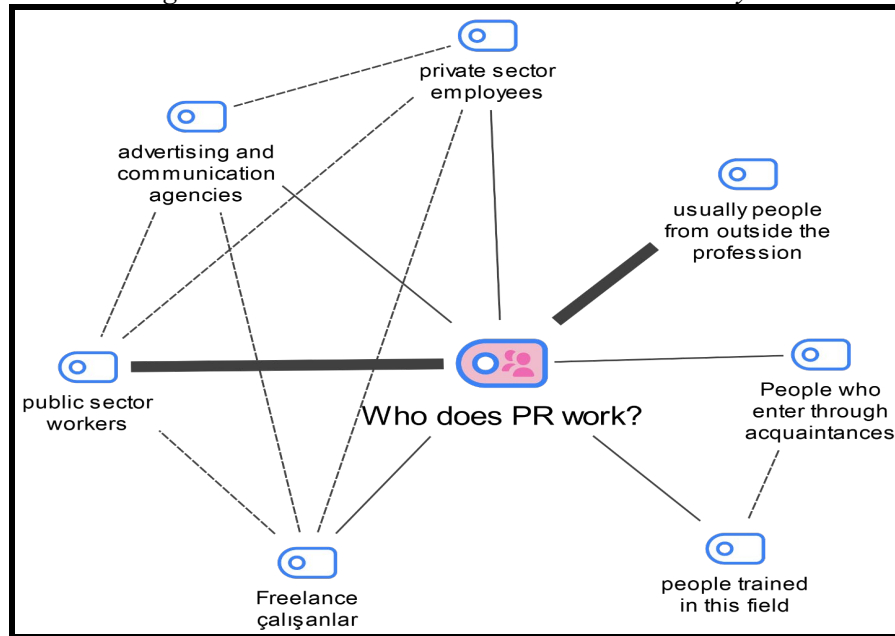
In the data obtained, it is emphasized that the image of public relations in Konya is not fully known and is based on traditional thought. It is also emphasized that the public relations specialist is seen as a secretary and that it is parallel to the perception of the city. In addition to these, it is also noteworthy that there is a sub-code among the codes of not fully known, traditional and seen as a secretary (Figure 7).

Figure 8: What to Do in the Field of Public Relations in Konya



In the data obtained, it is seen that the codes of corporate communication, image management and event management are prominent in the field of public relations in Konya. It has also been determined that the code of education and consultancy is also emphasized. When the connection between the codes is examined, it is seen that there is a sub-code connection between the codes of image management and corporate communication and event management and education and consultancy service (Figure 8).

Figure 9: Who Does Public Relations Work in Konya?



The data obtained emphasizes that in Konya, those in the public sector and those outside the field work in the field of public relations. In addition, it was stated that those who entered an institution through acquaintances, those who received training in the field, those working in advertising and communication agencies, and private sector employees also work in this field. (Figure 9). In a study that attempted to determine the common professional performance standards of the profession of public relations, the importance of education and accreditation was emphasized among the eight basic elements of professionalism. It is stated that a strong approach to continuing education will increase the strategic importance of public relations for institutions, professionalize the profession and contribute positively to the perception of the profession (Cameron et al., 1996). In this sense, it is thought that both universities and professional organizations that will provide accreditation will train qualified professionals and provide a visible decrease in external employment in the sector.

4. Discussion

The image problem of the public relations profession is known by experts in the field and experts outside the field who discuss this field. Henderson (1998) examined the concept of "public relations" by examining 240 issues of The New York Times between January and December 1995. He found that only 5% of the articles used "public relations" correctly and 37% of the citations had a negative perception of public relations. A study was conducted on job postings in 5 online human resources sites in Turkey that included the concept of "public relations" in their content. In this study, the terms "public relations" were largely used for different concepts such as "sales", "registration, acceptance, secretariat", and "customer relations" (Türkal & Taşcıoğlu, 2020). Similarly, in this study, it was observed that the image of public relations in Konya was not fully known and was perceived as "secretary".

Public relations is shown as one of the professional fields in the influence area of new media (Tokatlı, 2016). In this study, it is seen that one of the first concepts that comes to mind when it comes to public relations in the perception of professionals' profession is "communication skills". Thanks to the widespread influence of the digital age, communication and reputation management have become a continuous effort rather than a one-time initiative. Narratives constructed dialogically are effective in social communication and connecting people (Aydın, 2021). In order to reduce uncertainties about the profession, it is necessary to be inspired by the power of well-told stories to turn perceptions positively. It is necessary to increase the positive perception and prestige of the profession by developing storytelling and narrative models and creating impressive collaborations through online public relations strategies.

In a study that attempted to measure the public's attitudes towards the public relations profession in Turkey, it was suggested that there were no negative attitudes towards the profession, but there were uncertainties regarding the fields of activity of the profession (Badem & Akyol, 2023). The professional experts interviewed in this study emphasized that there was no respect for the public relations profession in Konya, but respect for public relations professionals had developed. The perceptions of public relations experts regarding their profession determine the general reputation and identity of the profession. While a positive perception increases the prestige of the profession, negative perceptions can lead to misunderstandings about the profession. In this sense, it can be said that there is a lot of work to be done regarding the public relations profession, and that these studies should be carried out by academics and private sector employees together.

5. Conclusion

The public relations (PR) profession, despite its critical duties such as strategic communication management, crisis management, protection of brand reputation and media relations, is not appreciated enough by the general public. This situation leads to PR not gaining the importance it deserves in professional business life. The public relations profession is not known enough and is confused with other professions. This situation damages the reputation of the profession. The public relations profession is often incorrectly or incompletely represented in the media. The public learns what the public relations profession is from the media. Therefore, the media needs to be informed correctly about the public relations profession. In order to overcome the perception that the profession is limited to "PR campaigns" or "media relations," more awareness-raising efforts should be made about the strategic importance and broad scope of public relations. This can be achieved through joint campaigns organized by media outlets and PR organizations. Concrete examples that demonstrate the success of the public relations profession can positively change the perception of the profession. These success stories should be supported by examples of how PR professionals protect the reputation of brands in times of crisis, increase customer satisfaction, and influence public opinion. Such stories can help people better understand the value of public relations.

The interviewed professionals generally stated that external employment is common in the profession, even if they have received public relations training at relevant faculties. In order to prevent this, the roles and competencies of PR specialists in the business world should be clearly defined and emphasized. It should be emphasized that public relations is not just about simple communication activities, but also a critical discipline that contributes to the achievement of an organization's strategic goals. The competencies that PR specialists possess, such as communication, crisis management, and strategy development, should be made more visible.

In order to build social legitimacy, practitioners should establish their own organizational structures in the first stage of the professionalization process and gain the ability to represent the public and other professional organizations. A certification process should be planned with the professional organization to be established. Comprehensive programs should be created at the education level to understand the importance of the public relations profession. The content of PR programs at universities should be expanded to include topics such as strategic communication and modern media management, and the real-world effects of the profession should be explained to students through these programs. In addition, it should be emphasized to professionals that public relations is a strategic function through in-service training.

In conclusion, strategic steps such as education, awareness, media representation, promotion of professional competencies and technological integration should be taken to positively change the perception of the public relations profession. In this way, it will be better understood that PR is not only a communication tool but also a strategic discipline that plays a critical role in the success of an organization.

Recommendations within the Conclusion Framework

- Professional unity is very important. A unit or branch can be established in Konya under the roof of the Turkish Public Relations Association (TUHİD) for the field of Public Relations. Because unfortunately, the work carried out by TÜHİD is not reflected much on the employees of the institutions in Anatolia.
- On social networks (Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.), a page can be created with the title of public relations experts living in Konya.
- Field academics in Konya can organize trips to relevant sectors and work to both promote the profession and increase interaction.
- Compulsory internships can be introduced for public relations students to gain industry experience (and also to promote the profession in the industry).
- A public relations symposium/congress centered in Konya can be organized once a year.
- Competitions can be organized among students to present creative ideas to further promote the profession in Konya.

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