

PERCEPTION OF AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY MASS COMMUNICATION UNDERGRADUATE TOWARD PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A CAREER

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of Mass Communication students of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, toward Public Relations (PR) as a career. Anchored on the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), the study employed a quantitative survey method using a structured questionnaire were administered to 196 final-year students from a population of 195. Findings reveal that while many students have a strong understanding of PR and show interest in pursuing it, barriers such as limited practical exposure, curriculum gaps, societal bias, and perceived low prestige or financial incentives discourage sustained interest. The study concludes that PR is acknowledged as a relevant and dynamic career but suffers from institutional and societal misconceptions. It recommends curriculum improvements, mentorship programs, and stronger industry-academic linkages to reposition PR as a viable and rewarding career path.

Keywords: Public Relations, Undergraduate, Career, Mass Communication, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Introduction

Public Relations (PR) functions as a strategic communication process aimed at building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In Nigeria, PR has undergone significant transformation, reflecting shifts in the media sector and socio-political environment. With the expansion of the Nigerian economy and diversification of communication industries, the demand for PR professionals has increased. However, PR continues to face an identity crisis among Mass Communication students, who often prioritize journalism and

advertising as more prestigious or rewarding fields (Olufemi, 2021).

At Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, one of Nigeria's leading institutions for media education, Mass Communication students are exposed to PR through specialized courses. Yet, questions persist about whether such exposure translates into positive career perceptions. This article examines ABU students' awareness, attitudes, and influencing factors toward PR as a career, addressing a significant gap in localized research.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following Research Questions:

1. What is the level of awareness and understanding of PR among ABU Mass Communication students?
2. What are the attitudes of ABU Mass Communication students toward PR as a career option?
3. What factors influence students' perceptions of PR as a career?
4. What are the Perceived Challenges in Pursuing a Career in Public Relations?

Conceptual and Literature Review

Public Relations

In Nigeria, PR is still often misunderstood as mere publicity, propaganda or crisis management (Otubanjo & Amujo, 2010). However, the 21st Century PR extend beyond media management to cover to reputation building, stakeholder engagement, and organizational strategy (PRSA, 2012). With the rise of digital platforms and the PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, Owned), PR has become increasingly dynamic and also a significant tool for national development (Turgeon, 2023). PR over the years has become a tool for reputation building and organizational success. The emergence of internet and has led to misinformation, fake news and hate speech, which if left unchecked can result to conflict and underdevelopment (Anran, 2024). Hence, the need to adopt a modern approach to address new challenges brought about by the internet.

Evolution of PR in Nigeria

The history of PR in Nigeria spans several stages, from the enlightenment efforts of *Iwe Irohin* in 1859 to the institutionalization of professional bodies like the Nigerian

Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in 1963 (Otubanjo & Amujo, 2009).

The earliest formal PR activities began during the colonial era, especially in 1943 when the British government established the Public Relations Department to disseminate wartime information and maintain public support (Asemah, 2011). After independence, multinational companies such as UAC and Shell BP helped expand PR practice by using structured communication to manage their operations and community relations (Yahaya, 2015).

The professionalization stage began in the 1970s with the formation of the Public Relations Association of Nigeria (PRAN), later transformed into the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). PR practice gained legal backing with the NIPR Act, Decree 16 of 1990 (NIPR, 1990). Over the years, PR practice expanded into politics, corporate communication, crisis communication, media relations, and digital PR, reflecting global communication trends (Asemah, 2011).

PR Education in Nigerian Universities

PR education in Nigeria started within the broader Mass Communication programmes introduced in the 1960s and 1970s. Early institutions like the University of Lagos (UNILAG), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), and University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) were among the first to teach PR as part of communication studies. PR courses typically covered media relations, copywriting, strategic communication, corporate image, and research methods. With the NUC's 2019 unbundling of Mass

Communication, Public Relations and Advertising became a standalone degree programme, allowing universities to offer more specialised PR training. Professional bodies like NIPR complement university education by offering certificate and diploma programmes to enhance practical competence (NIPR, 2020).

Although, Nigerian universities have integrated PR into Mass Communication curricula, but gaps remain in aligning theory with practice. Outdated curricula, insufficient internships, and limited faculty specialization contribute to weak professional preparation (Ekerikevwe, 2024). Stronger industry-academia collaboration is needed to improve career prospects.

Factors Influencing Career Choice

Career choice is shaped by multiple social, psychological, and economic factors. Personal interest and ability often determine an individual's preferred profession. Family influence is also significant, as parental guidance and socio-economic background can shape career aspirations (Okoye, 2016). In addition, peer influence, school exposure, and guidance counsellors help students form career goals (Ekundayo, 2012).

Other determinants include job availability, economic conditions, cultural expectations, gender norms, and media influence. With the rise of digital platforms, many young people now choose careers based on online exposure and perceived opportunities (Salami, 2008).

Mohammed & Malam (2015) argue that students' career choices are shaped by personal interests, societal recognition, peer influence, media representation, and financial considerations

Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) was developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) to explain how individuals form career interests, make career choices, and achieve career success based on personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. SCCT builds upon Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in shaping behavior and motivation. SCCT asserts that career development is influenced by the dynamic interaction between these three key elements: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994).

SCCT provides a useful framework for understanding the career perceptions and choices of Mass Communication students at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) regarding Public Relations (PR). By examining how students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence their perceptions and career decisions, SCCT offers insights into why students may or may not pursue a career in PR. SCCT helps explain how students' confidence in their PR-related skills, expectations about the rewards and challenges of a PR career, and alignment of career goals with PR opportunities shape their career choices.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform specific tasks or achieve goals (Bandura, 1986). In the context of career decision-making, self-efficacy influences whether individuals feel capable of pursuing a particular career and whether they will persist in the face of challenges (Lent et al., 1994). Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) argued that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to explore career options, set ambitious career

goals, and take proactive steps toward achieving those goals.

Students who have gained practical experience in PR, such as internships, participation in PR campaigns, or exposure to industry professionals, are likely to develop higher levels of self-efficacy regarding PR work (Betz & Hackett, 2006).

This study applies SCCT (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) to explain how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence students' career choices. SCCT emphasizes the interaction between personal beliefs, environmental factors, and career aspirations, making it a suitable framework for examining PR career perceptions.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative survey design using structured questionnaires as

Data Presentation

Key findings of this study are presented in tabular form based on study objectives.

Awareness and Understanding of PR

Table 4.1: Respondents' Understanding of What Public Relations Entails

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
All of the above	144	60.8
Corporate image management	9	6.9
Crisis communication	8	6.2
Managing media relations	33	25.4
None of the above	1	0.8
Total	196	100.0

Table 4.1 shows how respondents define or understand Public Relations. A significant majority (60.8%) selected *All of the above*, indicating they view PR as encompassing multiple functions such as corporate image management, crisis communication, and media relations. Meanwhile, 25.4% focused specifically on *managing media relations*, and smaller proportions highlighted *corporate image management* (6.9%) and *crisis communication* (6.2%). Only 0.8% chose *none of the above*. This reflects that most students have a broad and multifaceted understanding of PR, which may positively influence their perception of it as a dynamic and valuable career option.

instrument. The questionnaires were distributed to collect standardized data on students' perceptions of PR.

Population and Sample

The population comprised 195 final-year Mass Communication students at ABU during the 2023/2024 academic session. Using a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 130 students was determined through simple random sampling.

Data Collection

The questionnaire covered demographics, awareness of PR, attitudes toward PR, and factors influencing career choice. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS version six (6).

Table 4.2: Respondents’ Awareness about Public Relations

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family/friends	73	6.2
Internship experience	5	3.8
Media (TV, internet, etc.)	32	24.6
Other (please specify)	3	2.3
University courses	82	63.2
Total	196	100.0

Table 4.2 presents the distribution of sources through which respondents became aware of Public Relations. The majority of respondents (63.2%) indicated that their awareness was primarily through university courses, highlighting the pivotal role of formal education in shaping knowledge about PR. This was followed by media sources such as television and the internet, accounting for 24.6% of responses. Other sources included family and friends (6.2%), internship experiences (3.8%), and a small percentage (2.3%) who selected other unspecified sources. In summary, Over 63% of respondents reported being “very familiar” with PR, while most recognized its multiple functions (corporate image, crisis management, media relations). The primary source of PR awareness was university courses (63.2%).

Table 4.3 Respondents’ Level of Interest in Pursuing a Career in Public Relations

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not interested	12	9.2
Somewhat interested	42	32.3
Very interested	141	58.5
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.3 presents respondents’ level of interest in pursuing Public Relations as a career. The data reveals that a majority (58.5%) are *very interested* in PR as a career path, while 32.3% indicated they are *somewhat interested*. Only a small proportion (9.2%) reported being *not interested*. This suggests a generally positive perception of PR as a viable and attractive career option among Mass Communication students at ABU, which aligns with their educational background and exposure to the field.

Table 4.4: Perception of Public Relations as a Prestigious Career

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	2	1.5
Not sure	10	7.7
Yes	183	90.8
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.4 illustrates respondents' perception of whether Public Relations is a prestigious career. The overwhelming majority (90.8%) believe that PR is indeed prestigious. A small proportion (7.7%) were uncertain, while only 1.5% disagreed. This finding indicates that Mass Communication students at ABU generally hold Public Relations in high regard, which could positively influence their enthusiasm and willingness to pursue careers in the field.

Table 4.5: Respondents' Self-Confidence in Ability to Succeed in a Public Relations Career

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not confident	6	4.6
Somewhat confident	40	30.8
Very confident	149	64.6
	195	100

Table 4.5 shows that 64.6% of respondents feel *very confident*, while 30.8% indicated they were *somewhat confident*. Only 4.6% felt *not confident*. This shows that most Mass Communication students at ABU not only view PR positively as a career but also believe they possess the necessary skills and qualities to thrive in the field.

Table 4.6: Respondents' Perception of Financial Rewards in a Public Relations Career

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	7	5.4
Not sure	13	10.0
Yes	175	84.6
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.6 presents respondents' views on whether a Public Relations career offers good financial rewards. A large majority (84.6%) believe that PR provides good financial opportunities. Meanwhile, 10.0% were unsure, and only 5.4% felt PR does not offer good financial rewards. This suggests that most Mass Communication students at ABU not only view PR as a prestigious career

but also as one that promises attractive economic benefits, further contributing to its appeal as a career choice.

Table 4.7: Respondents' Likelihood of Recommending a Career in Public Relations to Others

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not likely	3	2.3
Somewhat likely	39	30.0
Very likely	153	67.7
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.7 shows how likely respondents are to recommend a career in Public Relations to others. The majority (67.7%) indicated they are *very likely* to recommend PR as a career, while 30.0% were *somewhat likely*. Only 2.3% reported being *not likely* to recommend it. This reflects the generally positive perception of PR among Mass Communication students at ABU, suggesting that they see PR as a career worth promoting to their peers and networks.

A majority (58.5%) were “very interested” in pursuing PR careers, while 90.8% considered PR prestigious. Furthermore, 84.6% believed PR offers good financial rewards, and 67.7% said they would recommend it to peers.

Perceived Challenges

Table 4.8: Respondents' Perceived Challenges in Pursuing a Career in Public Relations

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of job opportunities	31	23.8
Stressful working conditions	27	20.8
High competition	10438	29.2
Low starting salaries	28	21.5
All of the above	23	17.7
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.8 presents the challenges respondents perceive in pursuing a Public Relations career. The most cited challenge was *high competition* (29.2%), followed by *lack of job opportunities* (23.8%), *low starting salaries* (21.5%), and *stressful working conditions* (20.8%). Meanwhile, 17.7% of the

students indicated that they did not perceive all the four issues as challenges. This suggests that while many students recognize certain barriers, a good number remain optimistic about entering the PR field. Challenges included high competition (29.2%), limited job opportunities (23.8%), low starting salaries (21.5%), and stressful working conditions (20.8%).

Influencing Factors

Table 4.9: Respondents’ Most Important Factor When Deciding to Pursue a Career in Public Relations

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Financial rewards	11	8.5
Job stability	19	14.6
Opportunities for growth	36	27.7
Personal interest	113	55.4
Social impact	16	12.3
Total	195	100.0

Table 4.9 presents the most important factors considered by respondents in deciding whether to pursue a career in Public Relations. The majority (55.4%) identified *personal interest* as the key factor, followed by *opportunities for growth* (27.7%). Other notable factors included *job stability* (14.6%), *social impact* (12.3%), and *financial rewards* (8.5%). This suggests that passion and career development prospects are stronger motivators for Mass Communication students at ABU than purely financial or job security considerations.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What is the level of awareness and understanding of PR among ABU Mass Communication students?

Data in table 4.2 shows that majority of the respondents *are familiar* with the concept of PR, while one-third were *familiar*. This respondents demo indicates that more than half of the respondents demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of PR by selecting *all of the above* in relation to PR functions — corporate image management,

crisis communication, and media relations. In terms of sources of awareness table 4 shows that majority of the respondents cited *university courses* as their main source, followed by *media sources (TV, internet, etc.)*

These findings align with Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), where mastery experiences and vicarious learning, particularly from formal education and media exposure, build self-efficacy and shape outcome expectations (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994). The strong role of university courses underscores the importance of

structured learning in fostering understanding, consistent with Betz & Hackett (2006) who found that formal education enhances students' confidence in professional fields like PR.

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes of students toward PR as a career option?

Table 4.3 provides insights into students' attitudes towards PR as a career. Showing that more than half of ABU Mass Communication students. More than half of respondents indicated they are *very interested* in pursuing a career in PR, while one-third were *somewhat interested*. In terms of prestige, almost all the students believe PR is a *prestigious* career. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents reported being *very confident* in their ability to succeed in PR, and agreed that PR offers *good financial rewards*. The majority of respondents were *very likely* to recommend PR as a career to others.

These positive perceptions align with SCCT's premise that high self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations strengthen career interest (Lent et al., 1994). The high confidence levels also support Bandura's (2001) assertion that self-efficacy fosters ambitious career intentions and persistence. The perception of prestige and financial reward reflects favorable outcome expectations, encouraging students to view PR as a desirable and attainable career.

Research Question 3: What factors influence students' perceptions of PR as a career?

Table 4.6 shows that more than half of the respondents identified *personal interest* as the key factor, followed by *opportunities for growth*. Other notable factors with a very low response included *job stability*, *social impact*, and *financial rewards*. This suggests that passion and career development

prospects are stronger motivators for Mass Communication students at ABU than purely financial or job security considerations.

Social Cognitive Career Theory emphasizes how environmental factors (supports and barriers) interact with self-efficacy and outcome expectations to shape career intentions (Lent et al., 2000). The impact of media and mentorship reflects vicarious learning and social persuasion, critical sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Meanwhile, perceived barriers like competition may temper otherwise positive outcome expectations, as Lent et al. (2000) found in similar studies.

Research Question 4: What are the Perceived Challenges in Pursuing a Career in Public Relations?

Table 4.8 shows how several factors influence students' perceptions towards PR. The most cited challenges were *high competition*, followed by *lack of job opportunities*, and finally *low starting salaries*, while, only one-tenth of the students indicated that they perceive all the issues as challenges. This shows that while students view PR positively, they are aware of potential barriers.

Conclusion

PR is increasingly recognized by Mass Communication students at ABU as a prestigious and viable career. However, structural and societal barriers diminish its attractiveness relative to other communication fields. The study concludes that poor financial rewards can play a major role in promoting students' interest in career in public relations.

Recommendations

1. The need for Ahmadu Bello University and similar institutions to enhance students' practical exposure to the field.
2. Update PR courses to include digital communication, crisis management, and strategic leadership.
3. Strengthen partnerships with PR firms to expand internships and mentorship opportunities.
4. Encourage government and universities to support PR professionalization and industry growth.
5. Career counselling services within universities should be improved and tailored specifically to highlight the realities of pursuing a career in PR
6. Addressing issues such as low starting salaries and limited job openings would help reduce some of the key barriers discouraging students from pursuing PR as a viable and rewarding career path

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