

## Perceptions of Public Relations Practice and Professionals in Kenya: A Public's Perspective

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### Abstract

As organizations become more global and establish linkages in other countries, the need for public relations (PR) practice at local, national, and international levels and to understand how it is perceived has become evident. The goal of this study was to examine how PR practice and practitioners are perceived in Kenya. Data were gathered through a self-administered survey (n = 355). Results showed trust in the PR profession was a significant predictor of how PR is viewed in Kenya ( $\beta = .173$ ,  $t = 2.261$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Social media usage (low vs. high) also played a key role in participants' positive perceptions of PR practice ( $t = -2.268$ ,  $df = 353$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and in the perceptions of PR professionals ( $t = -2.378$ ,  $df = 353$ ,  $p < .01$ ) where those with low usage had more negative perceptions. The study suggests further research on people's actual knowledge about PR and its role in society to have a better understanding of the source of their perceptions. This includes a better understanding of the background of PR professionals and strategies necessary to enhance public trust. Furthermore, it is important to understand how PR professionals can use social media to influence positive perceptions of the practice given the high usage of social media platforms in the country.

**Keywords:** PR perceptions, PR framing, trust, transparency, Kenya

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### Background

In the early 1960s, Marshall McLuhan coined the term "Global Village" to refer to the global interconnectedness of human beings through electronic technologies (Gibson & Murray, 2012). Today, the global village has become a reality with the advancement in digital technologies, which have enhanced global communications, organizational networks, and consequently the role of public relations (PR). As agencies expand to reach global markets, so is the need for PR practice at local, national, and international levels where practitioners emerge as social intermediaries in the new economies as organizations develop relationships with their publics (Piore, 2001). Other needs for PR have developed as the world becomes aware of the need for global collaboration for security reasons. Since the 2001 terrorist attack in the United States and the consequent attacks in many countries, specifically in Africa, Canada, Europe, and the Asian countries, nations have sought international collaboration (Molleda & Ferguson, 2004), which has also emphasized the need for PR practice.

The recognition of the role of PR has been accompanied by debates about how it is practiced and whether different countries should have the same method in their PR activities.

Researchers have proposed a normative model of global PR that contains generic principles and specific applications (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). These principles emphasize the PR management function, strategic planning, symmetrical communication and stakeholder engagement, empowerment, diversity, and mutually beneficial relationships between agencies and their stakeholders. Informed by a global study, these principles reflect how PR is practiced globally (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Vercic et al., 1996), and are used to inform the framework for excellence in PR practice (Dozier et al., 1995). Trust, credibility, and transparency are also emphasized as key components of excellence in PR practice, specifically in building and strengthening relationships between organizations and publics (Grunig et al., 2002).

With the global acknowledgment of the role of PR, scholars have focused on the application of the generic principles in various countries and contexts, for example, Ghana (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009), Kenya (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012; Mbeke, 2009), Nigeria (Molleda & Alhassan, 2006), South Africa (Holtzhausen et al., 2003), South Korea (Rhee, 2002), and Japan (Cooper-Chen & Tanaka, 2008). Furthermore, proponents of the cultural relativist perspective have proposed that PR should be practiced differently in every society (Botan, 1992; Rhee, 2002). This is in consideration of the cultural environment of the country, as well as the extent of activism present, levels of development, and media systems available (Vercic et al., 1996). In the African context, offering a historical perspective is also critical in determining the emergence of PR practice, which in some instances is associated with the colonial era. In Kenya, for example, early publicists, who led movements for independence, used media as tools for propaganda (Kiambi, 2014; Mbeke, 2009). Similarly, in Uganda, PR was used during Idi Amin's regime for propaganda and intentional manipulation of public opinion (Natifu, 2014). As Molleda (2007) observes, there are many countries whose PR histories and evolving industries have not been systematically documented. Like in other regions, the success of PR in Africa and other emerging economies is dependent on the organizations and their public's views of the practice as an industry.

The credibility of the PR profession is also challenged when the public does not see their value within and outside the organization they represent. Over time, studies have associated negative PR perceptions with media portrayals. For instance, television characters have often portrayed the practice as mainly involving media relations, publicity, and event planning, both of which require very little work and are usually performed by women (Bowen, 2009; Brown, et al., 2011; White & Lambert, 2006). Similarly, journalists have historically viewed PR contemptuously without considering it as a profession (Bowen, 2009). Such media perception influence how the public views its credibility as a profession, and the importance people ascribe to its value in society (Van Gorp, 2007; White & Park, 2010). As Muturi and Zhu (2019) have noted, such perceptions also impact recruitment and enrollment in PR education programs.

The goal of the current study is three-fold: 1) to understand how the Kenyan public perceives the PR practice; 2) to understand the public's perception of practitioners in terms of trust and transparency; and 3) to examine if the media, specifically social media usage, influences people's perceptions of PR practice and the practitioners.

### **Study context**

Kenya is among the rapidly developing countries in Africa, with one of the most stable and by far the largest and most developed financial systems in the East African region (Beck et al., 2010), and continues to significantly improve, becoming the economic and technology hub for the continent. This stability has attracted multinational corporations that seek to expand their

businesses in the East African region with Kenya as an entry point (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012). Similarly, non-profit organizations have also widened their visibility in Kenya with international support to address a variety of health, social and economic issues facing the country. In this regard, Kiambi and Nadler (2012) have observed that Kenya has great potential for PR in African.

Very few empirical studies have, however, focused on PR in Kenya. A search from various indexed databases, including google scholar, yielded only three publications (Kiambi, 2014; Kiambi & Nadler, 2012; Mbeke, 2009). These publications provided a historical perspective of PR in the country, noting that the practice started in the 1940s during the colonial era when the British established a need to communicate with the local public. Although not a new phenomenon, the practice has neither been empirically studied from a professional nor public perspective, particularly to understand how it is perceived.

### **Public relations practice review**

Public relations practice is about relationship building between organizations and the public it serves, and is based on trust, credibility, and transparency (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). As PR practice continues to gain value in the global communities and its potential to drive a better society grows, ethical issues that shape the profession, specifically trust and transparency among practitioners, have been addressed. These are two elements which are central to the field (Christensen & Langer, 2009).

Studies have established trust as a key determinant in successful organization-public relationships (Ki & Hon, 2007; Yang et al., 2015). In colonial Kenya, for example, the British used PR intending to build a mutual understanding between the white settlers and the local people. During colonization, this collaboration was described as “the art of establishing and maintaining within a community the spirit of fellowship and cooperation based on mutual understanding and trust” (Chief Secretary, 1947). As Yang et al. (2015) argue that trust or distrust of a PR professional is an expectation of one’s credibility, entailing competence, integrity, and dependability, which is affected by one’s perceptions. Transparency, which refers to openness and information disclosure, is also likely to affect perceptions about PR professionals. Three important elements are associated with transparency: information that is truthful, substantial, and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective and balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that hold them accountable (Rawlings, 2008; Yang et al., 2015).

Ironically, PR practice has historically had a bad image even though it is in the business of image-making. This is not entirely surprising given that PR started as propaganda and adopted publicity techniques with scant regard to ethics. This has led practitioners to refer to themselves as public affairs, corporate communicators, and marketers to avoid the stigma of the term PR. To address this stigma, Bowen (2009) calls for PR practitioners and educators to demonstrate their worth and potential as valuable contributors to society.

### **Media perceptions of PR practice**

The media shape our ideas of reality. In fact, the cultivation theory posits that media reality may be more “real” than actual reality under some circumstances. Media and communication studies have historically demonstrated a direct one-to-one relationship between media and public perception. For instance, Jo (2003) notes that “ordinary people’s perception of PR is the product of socialization, education, and incidental learning from both mass communication and personal experience” (p. 406). Entertainment media, film, television, and fiction are ubiquitous and form

an important part of our collective knowledge.

In a 1999 study of film and fiction from 1930 to 1995, Miller identified eight archetypes that represent PR characters. These were ditzzy (shallow but lovable); obsequious (will go to any length to please the boss); cynical (sarcastic, angry, driven, unhappy); manipulative (wheeler-dealer without a conscience); money-minded (evaluating everything from a bottom-line perspective); isolated (a poor fit with others); accomplished (competent, able, respected); and unfulfilled (at odds with their jobs, gloomy outlook). PR functions were presented as “a somewhat mysterious occupation populated by unscrupulous practitioners with superiority complexes whose main goals appear to be getting their clients mentioned in the news media, duping the public and their clients, and gaining power” (Miller, 1999, p. 24).

Tsetsura et al. (2015) building on Miller’s work, carried out a study of films from 2000 to 2010. Their findings were a close match to Miller’s, demonstrating how stable these negative depictions have been over time; however, they found two additional categories (conflicted and idealistic). Conflicted describes those characters who felt their work was at odds with their desire to be good while idealistic people are those who pursued high ideals and did not compromise them in challenging situations (Tsetsura et al., 2015). On the other hand, Ames (2010) found improved images of PR practitioners in the movies she studied from 1996 to 2008. In her study, PR characters in the movies examined fitted five of Miller’s eight, but there was a decline in the number of stereotypes portrayed. Furthermore, she found that PR job functions were better articulated depicting PR as a complex, multi-faceted profession. While PR stereotypes are evolving, they remain mostly negative in popular media.

Turning to journalism, Jo (2003) observed that “antagonism and animosity toward PR have been embedded in the journalistic culture” (p. 399). Journalists and editors described PR as a distraction and obstructionist (Jo, 2003; Pincus et al., 1993). In New Zealand, Sterne (2010) found that the media primarily viewed PR practitioners in negative terms and that the PR media relationship was conflicted. The conflict emanated from the fact that the media definition of PR was limited to publicity. However, these negative attitudes may be diminished by the high level of neutral level responses to the questions (Pincus et al., 1993).

The portrayal of PR practice in news and social media has also not been overly positive. Kinsky and Callison (2009) studied the use of the term PR in network news (ABC, NBC, and CBS) and found that the PR industry was portrayed in a neutral manner. Nevertheless, a third of the stories were negative and about five percent positive in how they depicted the industry. A study of journalists on Twitter seems to reflect the same trend. Yoo and Samsup (2014) studied journalists’ Twitter posts that referenced PR. Their findings show that the references were mostly neutral except for persuasion and advocacy. Generally, journalistic perceptions of PR are negative and neutral at best despite the exponential growth of the industry.

Part of the confusion and misperception derives from the connection that PR shares with its cousin disciplines of advertising and marketing. As such, Bowen (2003, 2009) notes that, the ideological confusion among publicity, marketing, advertising, integrated marketing communication, and propaganda, has further degraded understanding of the function and purposes of PR. In a study that focused on the public perceptions of Korean marketing and PR professionals’ functions, as traditionally defined, Ha and Ferguson (2015) found that reputation management and media relations were critical elements of PR jobs; whereas promotion was at the center of the marketing profession.

## Perceptions of PR practice in academia

In academia, understanding and perceptions about PR practice have been unclear. In assessing students understanding of the difference between PR and marketing, Bowen (2009) noted, “some of the PR majors did not only confuse the field with marketing, but also seemed to lack any real knowledge of the business-oriented basis of PR, confusing it instead with image management or publicity” (p. 406). Bowen (2003) associated the lack of understanding with a failure of making those in other disciplines aware of what responsibilities and functions the discipline involves.

Contrary to the media portrayals, few studies have found positive perceptions about the practice. For example, in an experimental study that focused on public perceptions, Sallot (2002) found that the reputation of the public practice relations among the public was better than average. Similarly, in a telephone survey of public perceptions of PR practice, White and Park (2010) uncovered evidence that PR was not viewed negatively, deceptive or unimportant to society. Callison et al. (2014) also identified positive attributes that described practitioners (e.g., smartness and capability), although the ethical considerations remained strongly negative. This perception remains unfortunate since ethics is at the core of PR practice.

Researchers have attempted to understand why PR practitioners have had a negative reputation. While focusing on practitioners, Davidson and Rowe (2016) realized that their work was not well-understood by the public. As a matter of perpetuity, a history of scandals and unethical practices have tainted the profession and practitioners. Lack of transparency and insufficient regulation were cited as contributing factors as well as the failure of practitioners and their associations to effectively explain their functions to the public. Other factors include the failure of practitioners’ organizations to uphold professional standards among members. This has led to low credibility (Bowen, 2009; Callison, 2004) and promoted private interests over the public good. Although this is changing, the social role of the discipline has not been adequately emphasized (Simmons & Walsh, 2010). For example, Bell Pottinger, one of the leading British-based PR agencies with programs in South Africa, was expelled from the PR Commission Association (PRCA) for unethical practices (Sweney, 2017). Such action demonstrates the strategic functions of the practice that can be made more visible to enhance the credibility of the profession even as organizations strive to change media images.

Overall, PR practice is critical for the emerging economies that need to communicate and plan programs that impact the public. Although the generic principles of PR are widely applied, how the profession is practiced in each country differs based on a variety of factors that may include people’s perceptions of the profession and practitioners. Thus, focusing on Kenya, this study will examine those perceptions and will address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What factors influence how PR practice is perceived in the Kenyan context (either positively or negatively)?
- RQ2: What factors influence how PR professionals are perceived in Kenya?
- RQ3: Is social media usage associated with how PR practice and professionals are perceived in Kenya?

## Methods and measures

The study was an online survey conducted among the public in Kenya. It was created in Qualtrics, the online survey system, and an anonymous link was generated and distributed to participants. Participants were recruited from various public locations and through the street intercept method, which involved recruiting people on the street to participate in the study (Miller et al., 1997). The recruitment process involved approaching people who were “engaged in such activities as sitting,

walking, to and from work, running errands, performing job-related duties, preparing to use public transportation, visiting, participating in recreation, or just hanging out” (Miller et al., 1997, p. 655). Those recruited were screened for appropriateness prior to being requested to provide their email address for the online survey link. Criterion for inclusion included the ability of participants to read and speak English (Kenya’s official language), access to the internet (via a computer, phone, or mobile device), and be over 18 years. An email listing was created in the Qualtrics survey system for automatic survey distribution. This pre-recruiting enabled: a) pre-screening to ensure that only those eligible participated in the survey; b) allowed systematic survey distribution and sent reminders only to those who had not responded to the survey; and c) reduced the study timeframe, since respondents who had agreed to participate expected to receive the survey.

To meet the research ethics requirement, all participants were required to read and provide consent of the information included in the initial questions in Qualtrics. These included the purpose and timeframe for the study, the risks and benefits involved, voluntary request to participate and respond honestly to all questions, and contact details of participants. It is important to note that only those who provided consent by clicking “continue” in Qualtrics to indicate that they had read and understood the information could complete the survey. However, those who clicked “exit” were sent to the end of the survey page. A total of 784 people agreed to participate and out of which 390 responded after four reminders. After assessing this data to remove incomplete responses, approximately 355 were retained (a response rate of about 50%).

### *Measures*

Key study variables included perceptions of the role of PR (positive and negative); perceptions of the PR professionals (positive and negative); and trust, distrust, transparency of PR practitioners, and social media usage (See Table 2). Variables were measured with validated scales that were adopted from previous studies. The scales had Cronbach alphas of .70 and above, except for one with .60, which is generally considered moderate and acceptable (Taber, 2018). Trust, distrust and transparency had alphas of above .80, considered very good (Cortina, 1993). The positive role of PR was measured with seven items that focused on the positive contributions of PR in society (e.g., benefits society by providing information, moves an organization forward, supports the needs of the community, and improves relationships between organizations and the public). The items adopted from White and Park (2010) were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and had a reliable internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ).

Negative perceptions of the PR were measured with five items that captured the publicized negative perceptions of the profession, which to some extent is projected in the media (e.g., PR is only for damage control, an attempt to disguise something, all about publicity, and exaggerating and misleading information). The scale was also adopted from White and Park (2010) and has been validated in other studies that focus on PR perceptions. It was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and yielded an internal consistency of .61 (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .61$ ).

Perceptions of PR professionals were measured with eight items adapted from Callison et al. (2014) and categorized as positive or negative. The positive perceptions scale was measured with four items that portrayed professionals (e.g., outgoing, intelligent, informed, and friendly). The scale has a reliable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ). The negative perceptions scale was also measured with four items that portrayed PR professionals negatively (e.g., liars, biased, information manipulators, aggressive, and unintelligent). The negative perception scale also had a

reliable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ).

Distrust of PR professionals was measured with a 7-item scale that was adapted from Yang et al. (2015). The scale included statements such as: PR professionals not being respectful of laws, not caring about acting ethically, lying to increase profits and intentionally deceiving the public. These items were measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and had a relatively high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ).

Trust for PR professionals was also measured with a scale adapted from Yang et al. (2015). The scale had six items that described PR professionals as being positive about the direction in which the company or organization is leading, accomplishing what they say they will, treating their publics fairly, and are guided with sound principles. The items were measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and had a highly reliable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ).

Transparency among PR professionals was measured with a 10-item scale validated by Yang et al. (2015). The scale included items such as: PR professionals sharing information with the public, allowing the public to share their opinions, expecting transparency in sharing the organization's intent of communication, and that PR professionals are not deceptive in interpreting public's opinions and exemplify genuine commitment to communicating with the public. The scale had a high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ).

## Results

Respondents were composed of 53% males ( $n = 187$ ) and 47% females ( $n = 168$ ) with an age range of 18-64 (Mean = 30.18). Most participants (52%) worked full-time in paid positions, 16% worked part-time in paid employment, while 12% were self-employed and only 20% reported being unemployed (see Table 1). Regarding education, most of the participants had a Bachelor's degree (45%), whereas 32% had a Master's or other postgraduate level training. Only one respondent did not complete high school. As for social media, participants were evenly distributed between low and high usage. There was a high rate of WhatsApp usage, with 78% ( $n = 277$ ) of the participants reporting using it frequently. This was followed by YouTube (52%) and Facebook (42%). When categorized into high and low usage, based on the median (Med = 3.70) on a 5-point scale, 52% ( $n = 186$ ) were low social media users while 48% ( $n = 169$ ) were heavy users.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics**

	Category	N	%
<b>Age</b> Mean = 30.18, SD = 10.48 Range = 18–64yrs	18–27	181	51
	28–37	78	22
	38–47	46	13
	48 and above	50	14
<b>Gender</b>	Male	183	53
	Female	165	47
<b>Education level</b>	High school and lower	41	12
	Professional training/Diploma	38	11
	Bachelors	157	45
	Postgraduate	114	32

<b>Employment status</b>	Not Employed	67	20
	Part-time employment	53	16
	Full-time employment	163	49
	Self-employed	39	12
	Other employment	10	3
<b>Social media usage</b>	Low	186	52
	High	169	48
Mean = 3.66, SD = 1.06			
Median = 3.70	<b>Total</b>	<b>*355</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Some categories do not add up to 355 because of missing data or non-response

### *Descriptives*

All the key variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) except for social media usage, which was measured on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (very frequently). As shown in Table 2, participants had moderate negative perceptions about PR (Mean = 3.06, SD = .760). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Table 3) shows that negative perceptions varied by education level [ $F(7, 342) = 2.945, p < .05$ ] with significant differences between those with high school education and those at master's level. Age was also correlated significantly with negative perceptions of public relations profession ( $\beta = .094, t = 2.053, p < .05$ ) (Table 6). Other demographic factors, specifically gender, education level, and employment status were not significant in determining the negative perceptions of PR practice ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 2: Descriptives of key variables (items)**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Negative perceptions of PR role (5)	3.06	.760	.61
Positive perceptions of PR role (7)	3.84	.672	.77
Positive perceptions of PR professionals (4)	3.87	.675	.71
Negative perceptions of PR professionals (4)	2.59	.800	.72
Distrust of PR professionals (7)	2.57	.883	.90
Trust of PR professionals (6)	3.44	.730	.82
Transparency of PR professionals (10)	3.16	.780	.91
Social media usage (10)	3.66	1.07	.73

**Table 3: ANOVA of key variables based on education and employment**

	Education		Employment	
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Negative perceptions of PR role	2.945	<b>.005</b>	.181	.948
Positive perceptions of PR role	2.837	<b>.007</b>	1.151	.333
Negative perceptions of PR professionals	1.932	.064	1.489	.205
Positive perceptions of PR professionals	.906	.502	1.645	.163
Trust of PR professionals	.572	.779	1.369	.244
Distrust of PR professionals	.542	.802	.555	.695
Transparency of PR professionals	2.094	<b>.044</b>	2.838	<b>.024</b>
Social media usage	2.839	<b>.007</b>	.600	.663
DF (Between groups/Within groups)	7, 342		4, 323	



Positive perceptions about PR practice were rated moderately, but slightly higher than the negative perceptions (Mean = 3.84, SD = .672), suggesting participants agreed more with the statements that reflected positive perceptions. ANOVA results indicated that participants' perceptions varied by their education level [F (7, 342) = 2.837,  $p < .05$ ]. A simple linear regression shows a correlation between age and positive perceptions of PR practice ( $\beta = .165$ ,  $t = 3.072$ ,  $p < .05$ ), meaning that those who are older had more positive perception compared to the younger participants (Table 5).

Perceptions about PR professionals were categorized as both positive and negative. The positive perceptions were rated higher (Mean = 3.87, SD = .675) when compared to negative perceptions (Mean = 2.59, SD = .800). Notable, though, both these perceptions of PR professionals did not vary by one's education level or employment status. A t-test analysis indicated that gender had no influence on PR practitioners' positive or negative perceptions.

Distrust of PR professionals was rated much lower (Mean = 2.57, SD = .883) compared to trust (Mean = 3.44, SD = .730). Both trust and distrust did not vary significantly by an individual's employment status or education level. Age was not correlated with trust or distrust of PR professionals. Similarly, gender was also not a significant factor ( $p > .05$ ).

Transparency was moderately rated (Mean = 3.16, SD = .780) and varied by employment status [F (4, 323) = 2.838,  $p < .05$ ] with significant differences between those with part-time and full-time employment. Transparency also varied by the education level of participants [F (7, 342) = 2.094,  $p < .05$ ], but mostly between those with advanced degrees and those with no university training ( $p < .05$ ). No significant association was found between transparency perceptions and age, or any differences based on gender ( $p > .05$ ).

Social media usage was moderate (Mean=3.66, SD = 1.07) and varied by education [F (7, 342) = 2.839,  $p < .05$ ]. However, the more educated participants had less usage, but employment status was not a significant factor ( $p > .05$ ). Based on the median statistic, social media usage was categorized as low and high and calls for further analysis. In examining intervariable correlations (Table 4), results show positive correlations between negative perceptions of PR role and people's views of PR professionals ( $r = .454$ ). Similarly, positive perceptions of PR role were correlated with the trust ( $r = .473$ ) and the perceived transparency of PR professionals ( $r = .365$ ).

**Table 4: Inter-correlations of key test variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Negative perceptions of PR role	1	-.097	-.035	.454**	.352**	-.217**	-.244**	.052
2. Positive perceptions of PR role		1	.463**	-.253**	-.327**	.473**	.365**	.118*
3. Positive perceptions of PR professionals			1	-.190**	-.230**	.372**	.233**	.143**
4. Negative perceptions of PR professionals				1	.675**	-.437**	-.398**	.009
5. Distrust of PR professionals					1	-.494**	-.424**	-.010
6. Trust of PR professionals						1	.715**	.124*
7. Transparency of PR professionals							1	.044
8. Social media usage								1

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Results show a weak, but positive correlation between social media usage and positive perceptions of PR professionals ( $r = .143$ ) and their role ( $r = .118$ ).

### *Predictors for positive perceptions of PR practice*

In determining factors that influence how PR practice and its role in society was perceived in the Kenyan context (RQ1), a multiple linear regression was performed. Predictive factors included age, education level, positive and negative perceptions of PR professionals, trust and distrust of professionals, perceived transparency, and social media usage. These factors produced a significant model [ $F(8, 324) = 23.589, p < .01$ ] and explained about 37% of the model variance ( $R^2 = .368$ ). As shown in Table 5, significant factors included age, positive perceptions of PR professionals, and trust ( $p < .05$ ). The other factors (e.g., education, social media usage, etc.) were not significant contributors.

**Table 5: Predictors for perceptions of public relations practice**

	Positive perceptions			Negative perceptions		
	$\beta$	$t$	<i>Sig.</i>	$\beta$	$t$	<i>Sig.</i>
Age	.165	3.072	<b>.002</b>	.059	.998	.319
Education	.038	.730	.466	.091	1.582	.115
Positive perceptions of PR professionals	.334	6.985	<b>.000</b>	.062	1.182	.238
Negative perceptions of PR professionals	-.024	-.382	.703	.397	5.777	<b>.001</b>
The trust of PR professionals	.220	3.124	<b>.002</b>	.035	.461	.645
Distrust of PR professionals	-.070	-1.085	.279	.075	1.056	.292
Transparency of PR professionals	.099	1.498	.135	.075	-1.043	.298
Social media usage	.089	1.925	.055	.033	.645	.519
	F (8, 324) = 23.589, $p < .01$ $R^2 = .368$			F (8, 342) = 13.096, $p < .01$ $R^2 = .244$		

In examining the predictors for negative perceptions of PR practice and role, a multiple linear regression was also performed. A combination of factors including age, education, positive and negative perceptions of PR professionals, trust, distrust, transparency of professionals, and social media use all produced a significant model [ $F(8, 342) = 13.096, p < .01$ ] and explained about 24% of the model variance ( $R^2 = .244$ ) (Table 5). However, only the negative perceptions of PR professionals had a significant effect ( $\beta = .397, t = 5.777, p < .01$ ). All other factors did not individually have any significant effect on how the public perceived the role of the PR profession in Kenya ( $p > .05$ ).

### *Perceptions of PR professionals*

The second research question (RQ2) examined the factors that influenced how PR professionals are perceived in Kenya. Predictive factors for both negative and positive perceptions of PR professionals included age, education level, social media usage, negative and positive perceptions of PR practice, trust, distrust, and transparency of PR professionals. As shown in Table 6, the combined factors had a significant model [ $F(8, 324) = 14.139, p < .01$ ] and explained about 26% of the model variance ( $R^2 = .259$ ). The specific significant factors in the model were positive perceptions of PR role ( $\beta = .391, t = 6.976, p < .01$ ) as well as the trust of PR professionals ( $\beta =$

.173,  $t = 2.261$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Other factors did not individually have a significant effect ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 6: Predicting factors for the negative and positive perceptions of PR professionals**

Predicting factors	Positive perceptions			Negative perceptions		
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$ -value	$\beta$	$t$	$p$ -value
Age	-.047	-8.00	.424	.094	2.053	.041
Education	.005	.081	.935	-.044	-9.986	.325
Social media usage	.057	1.133	.258	.029	.748	.455
Negative perceptions of PR role	.051	.979	.328	.235	5.768	.000
Positive perceptions of PR role	.391	6.976	.000	-.026	-.587	.558
Distrust of PR professionals	-.074	-1.257	.210	.540	11.788	.000
The trust of PR professionals	.173	2.261	.024	-.068	-1.141	.255
Transparency of PR professionals	-.050	-.691	.490	-.068	-1.223	.222
	F (8, 324) = 14.139, $p = .000$ $R^2 = .259$			F (8, 324) = 49.706, $p = .000$ $R^2 = .551$		

In examining the negative perceptions of PR professionals, the same factors produced a significant model [F (8, 324) = 49.706,  $p < .01$ ] explaining about 55% of the model variance ( $R^2 = .551$ ). Distrust of PR professionals had the strongest effect ( $\beta = .540$ ,  $t = 11.788$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by negative perceptions of the role of PR ( $\beta = .235$ ,  $t = 5.768$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Among demographics, age was a significant contributor ( $p < .05$ ), but all other factors did not significantly contribute to the model.

In the third research question (RQ3), we examined if social media usage had any influence on how the public perceived the PR role and PR practitioners in Kenya. Social media usage, based on the median, was categorized into high usage (Med > 3.70) and low usage (Med < 3.70). Results from the independent samples (t-test) show that positive perceptions of PR professionals differed significantly based on their social media usage ( $t = -2.378$ ,  $df = 353$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Those with low media usage had more negative perceptions of the PR practice (Mean = 3.79, SD = .628) compared to the high social media users (Mean = 3.95, SD = .716) (Table 7). Social media usage did not play any role in participants' negative perceptions of PR practice or the negative perceptions people hold about PR professionals ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 7: Perceptions of practice based on social media usage**

Factors	Social media (SM) usage	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Neg perceptions PR role	Low SM usage	186	3.03	.779	-.660	353	.255
	High SM usage	169	3.083	.739			
Pos perceptions PR role	Low SM usage	186	3.762	.704	-2.268	353	.012
	High SM usage	169	3.923	.626			
Pos perceptions PR professionals	Low SM usage	186	3.785	.628	-2.378	353	.009
	High SM usage	169	3.954	.716			
Neg perceptions PR professionals	Low SM usage	186	2.604	.807	.346	353	.365
	High SM usage	169	3.178	.795			

## Discussion

This article sought to highlight the perceptions of PR practices and professionals among people in Kenya. As results have shown, people had moderately high positive perceptions of the PR practice and professionals compared to their negative perceptions. The negative perceptions of PR professionals were the lowest (Mean = 2.59), whereas the positive perceptions among professionals were rated most highly (Mean = 3.87). This means that Kenyans not only viewed the role of PR positively, but also their professional role in society. Although not much research has been conducted in Kenya or from other African countries for comparison, the findings of this study contradict some US-based studies on people's perceptions of PR (e.g., Callison et al., 2014; White & Park, 2010).

Concerning trust and distrust of PR professionals, results also showed moderately high trust in PR professionals (Mean = 3.44) compared to distrust (Mean = 2.57). This again indicated that Kenyans were confident on how PR professionals operate, and found them credible. As Yang et al. (2015) have pointed out, PR professionals' ability to minimize uncertainty, by providing information and to reduce vulnerability, contributed to relational trust or distrust. In this study, trust was measured by the PR professionals' ability to provide direction to their agencies, accomplish communication goals of their organizations, or treat the public fairly. Participants felt more confident in completing their tasks, therefore, this indicated that the PR professionals were competent and dependable in their roles. This finding again was consistent with previous studies (e.g., Callison et al., 2014), which suggested that PR professionals were viewed positively; however, some participants found their work dishonest, hence, untrustworthy. Additionally, participants rated the transparency of PR professionals moderately (Mean = 3.16), implying they were reliable in sharing information about the organization openly with the public and were not deceptive. Transparency is important in creating trust and agency-public relationships, which involves adequate disclosure and accountability about the organizations' activities (Rawlins, 2008).

In examining determinant factors of how PR practice were perceived in society, significant predictors included each participant's age, trust and positive perceptions of PR professionals. This meant older participants, with more positive perceptions and trust for professionals, were more likely to view PR practices positively. Similarly, in examining determinant factors of how PR professionals were perceived in society, only the positive perceptions of the PR practice and the trust for professionals had a significant effect. Demographic characteristics (e.g., age and education) and other factors used in this model (e.g., social media usage, negative and positive perceptions of PR practice, trust, distrust, and transparency of PR professionals) were not significant. However, previous studies have indicated that trust and transparency were crucial in how PR is perceived (Rawlins, 2008; Yang et al., 2015).

Results revealed a positive correlation between social media usage and the positive perceptions of the role of PR professionals. Social media also played a significant role in people's trust in PR professionals. As studies have shown, media plays a key role in how the public perceives PR practice. Those with low social media usage had less positive perceptions compared to those with higher usage. Most participants who used the internet as their main source of information were more likely learning about PR from online sources. These findings, to some degree, highlights the difference between this study and prior studies, which focused on the negative perceptions of PR practice and practitioners from television and film.

The study had several limitations that ought to be addressed. First, like other survey-based research, there is a likelihood of internal validity issues due to self-reporting. Second, the study only examined the association between variables and, therefore, cannot provide evidence of causal relationships. Third, the study did not examine participants' understanding of PR as a profession or their knowledge of the role and expectations of practitioners in the Kenyan context. The lack of a clear understanding of the profession could have influenced the results. Although PR has been in existence since the colonial period, it was not taught at the college level until the 1980s as part of journalism (Mbeke, 2009). It is currently taught in several public and private institutions at diploma and degree levels (e.g., University of Nairobi, Daystar University, Mt. Kenya University, Multimedia University, United States International University-Africa, and etc.), but within the wider context of journalism and mass communication. Fourth, the study is not based on a random sample and its representation of the target population cannot be determined. Finally, it had low variances, which may also imply internal validity issues; thus, it is not generalizable. Regardless of these limitations, the study provides some insights into how the population views PR practice in Kenya and the role of practitioners. It also validated the scales, paving way for their further use in the African context, which has not been previously done.

## **Conclusion**

Public relations practice, as a discipline, is not well studied in the African context and, therefore, limited research exists. However, it is important to understand this field from that context given the role of global communication and internationalization of businesses and non-profit organizations. Many studies have examined the application of the PR principles and the framework proposed in the excellence model in the 1990s. To understand the framework application and its success and barriers to excellence in PR, it is necessary to focus on how the public from various settings view the practice and practitioners. As the literature has shown, several studies have examined perceptions of PR from media perspective, particularly from a negative vantage point. This study relied on the public in determining key factors that influenced how participants perceived this PR field and its practitioners, especially in settings where media had limited influence. In addition to contributing to literature, where a glaring need exists, this study sought to validate some of the instruments on PR perceptions that have been used in other settings. Understanding the PR practice in Kenya requires a broader context, specifically the cultural, economic, political, and media contexts.

We recommend that various organizations (e.g., government, non-governmental, international corporations, and etc.) undertake further research on how PR is practiced to fully understand this field. To comprehend the genesis of both positive and negative PR perceptions in Kenya, assessing the actual knowledge of PR practice is essential. Although PR skills are taught at the university level, much of the practice may be performed by journalists who lack adequate training. Given the higher rate of cellphone usage, which has enabled internet access even at a community level, the PR professionals' utilization of social media in daily practice also requires further research.

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