

The Status of Public Relations in South Asian Region: The Importance of Public Relations Function in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the prestige and importance of public relations function in Pakistan by investigating reporting relationship of the public relations department to the highest management, “PR department contribution to strategic planning and decision-making”, “PR department contribution in research” and “organizational support to PR department/PR Department Prestige”. The results are based on email survey responses randomly collected from the highest ranked practitioners of 101 inhouse PR departments of public and private sector organizations adopting a stratified sampling technique. The results indicate that private sector organizations place more importance on public relations function in Pakistan as compared to public sector organizations. Public relations departments in private sector organizations in Pakistan are more involved in strategic planning and decision making significantly contribute in and benefit more from research-based activities and enjoy a better prestige in the eyes of their top management as compare to public relations departments in public sector organizations.

Key Words: **PR in Pakistan; PR and Strategic Planning, PR and Decision-Making**

Introduction

In Pakistan, the establishment and development of the public relations function in organizational setups is the need of the day to counter vibrant media clutter. The expanding mushroom growth of the media industry and cross media traditions are posing pressure of media scrutiny on organizations in Pakistan. The organizations are taking a one-eighty degree turn within their public relations apparatus and preferring contemporary methodologies of public relations practice to engage media. Thus, prestige, importance and priority patterns of public relations are shifting within public and private sector organizations in Pakistan (Mukhtar, M., 2018; Mukhtar, M., 2011; Cheema, 1996).

This study explores that how do different organizations working in public and private sectors give importance to public relations function. The concept of “importance of PR function” is conceived through the constructs of PR practitioner relationship with the senior management, PR department involvement in strategic planning and decision making, PR department contribution to research and the

overall prestige of the PR department i.e. organizational support to PR department (Grunig et al., 2002).

Public relations scholars argue that involvement of public relations in strategic planning and decision-making process plays an important role to securing the importance of PR function in organization and to ensuring the development of cordial relationships with their publics (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Grunig, 2013). The involvement of public relations function at strategic management level and its input in decision-making process ensures greater self-sufficiency to organizations to effectively engage within complex environments and thus also assures greater success in establishing and sustaining mutual relationships with the key publics (Edelman, 2011; Grunig et al., 2002; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Arthur W. Page Society, 2013).

While exploring the importance of PR function in Gabon, Oksiutycz and Enombo (2011) quantified that public relations departments in private sector companies were dealing with both centralized and decentralized management hierarchies while performing their professional obligations. The centralized management structure was not allowing the practitioners to become a part of their decision-making process. While the decentralized management structure was providing the practitioners with suitable space to interact within their top management while performing their professional duties. In comparison of both structures, most of private companies were benefiting from decentralized structure and top management instructions were being adapted as per local environmental and cultural provisions.

Yudarwati (2013) explored PR function in Indonesian mining sector and supported the postulates of the power control theory. Power control theory hypothesizes impact of dominant coalition on public relations practices in organizations. The perception of the top management about PR functions plays an important role in its success and the decisions of the top management to employ PR apparatus strategically or non-strategically also impact the performance of PR function (Grunig et al., 2006:45). Yudarwati (2013) conducted thirty-seven in-depth interviews taking thirty-four practitioners and three top managers and concluded that three major companies of mining sector were employing public relations non-strategically. PR departments of these mining companies were not responsible for corporate social responsibility, neither they were involved in top decision-making. Rather PR departments were working under the instructions of a more junior level of management. Public relations function was also not a part of integrated communication packages of these companies. These companies were also taking public relations decisions without employing strategic management element (Yudarwati, 2013).

Wilson, C. (2016) explored that dominant coalition evaluate the involvement of PR in decision making process by observing the knowledge and expertise of the PR department. Dominant coalition employs PR department in manager role if they feel that the potential of the department is compatible enough to involve in decision making process.

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Kanihan et al. (2013) survey results reinforced that there is a strong positive correlations between “the position of PR practitioners within top management (dominant coalition)” and “ the informal power individualities and abilities to perform public relations strategically and symmetrically. If the PR practitioner holds good prestige and power within top management, he can assert more informal power to perform his practices symmetrically and strategically. But if the PR practitioners holds weak or no prestige within top management, then he cannot assert any power to conduct PR activity on symmetrical and strategic scales.

Similarly, while registering the features of excellent communication departments, Vercic and Zerfass (2016) measured alliance with dominant coalition as one interpreter to assess the communication department excellence. PR departments with practitioners closely associated with the dominant coalition were performing more excellently as compare to PR department with practitioners bearing no formal or informal bond of collaboration with the top management.

Research Questions

RQ1: How much importance do public and private sector organizations place on the public relations function in Pakistan?

RQ2: How does importance of PR function differ in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan?

Methods

Survey method was adopted for this study. The sample consisted of 101 organizations taking fifty-one organizations from public sector and fifty organizations from private sector. The stratified sampling technique was used in this study. The organization of public sector strata were randomly chosen from federal and provincial ministries, government ministries, universities, autonomous bodies and corporations. The organizations of private sector strata were randomly chosen from non-government organizations, industry, private universities, telecom sector, hotels, banks and real estate sector. The survey was distributed online through Qualtrics. Survey consisted of fourteen close ended questions. These questions/item were computed using SPSS to make constructs including PR department reporting mechanism, involvement of PR department in strategic planning and decision making, contribution of PR department to research and PR department prestige and further, these constructs contributed to better answer that “How much importance do public and private sector organizations place on the public relations function in Pakistan? All the questions were replicated from previous studies. A categorical scale was used for one question to inquire about the relationship of the practitioner to senior management as the leader of public relations unit. The remaining thirteen questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale (Babbie, 1990: Balch, 2010).

Results and Analysis

Relationship with the senior management

Reporting mechanism between PR department and the top management is an important predictor to reflect the status of relationship that existed between PR practitioner and his dominant coalition members. A healthy relationship is ensured when a direct reporting mechanism existed between PR practitioners and the senior most manager. A direct reporting mechanism also ensures the capacity of the practitioner to work in a manager role also.

Three levels of reporting were used to measure the relationship with the senior management. These three levels included “reporting to the most senior manager (the top hierarchy)”, “reporting to a senior manager (middle level hierarchy)” and “reporting indirectly to the head of the organization through a junior level chain of management”.

Table 1. Descriptive Frequencies for Relationship with the Senior Management

Relationship Level	Frequency	Percent
To “the most senior manager/officer”.	69	68.3
To “a senior manager/officer who in turn reports to the most senior manager”.	31	30.7
“Indirect relationship status between PR department and top manager within which PR executive reports directly on some matters only but not all”	1	1.0
Total.	101	100.0

Table 1. interpreted the reporting mechanisms of the PR departments. Most of the practitioners heading PR departments (N=69, 68.3%) were reporting their official matters to the most senior level (Head of organization). Out of the total sample, a good number (N=31, 30.7%) of PR professional were involved in a two-step hierarchy mechanism of reporting i.e. they were sending their communication to “a senior manager/officer who in turn reports to the most senior manager”. The ratio of the practitioners (N=1, 1%) whom were following an indirect multi-step reporting mechanism was almost minimum. There was no evidence that any of the practitioner was involved in a more junior level of reporting.

Table 1.1. Descriptive Frequencies for Relationship with the Senior Management Comparing Public and Private Sectors

Organization Sector	Relationship Level	Frequency	Percent
Public Sector Organization	“To the most senior manager/officer”.	38	74.5
	“To a senior manager/officer who in turn reports to the most senior manager”.	12	23.5
	“Indirect relationship status between PR department and top manager within which PR executive reports directly on some matters only but not all”	1	2.0
	Total (N).	51	100.0
Private Sector	“To the most senior manager/officer”.	31	62.0

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Organization	“To a senior manager/officer who in turn reports to the most senior manager”.	19	38.0
Total (N).		50	100.0

Table 1.1. interprets a comparison of frequencies of reporting mechanism in public and private sectors PR departments in Pakistan. In public sector, most of (N=38, 74.5%) the practitioners heading PR departments were reporting their official matters to the most senior level (Head of organization). Out of fifty-one, a slight majority (N=12, 23.5%) PR professional were involved in a two-step hierarchy mechanism of reporting. And a minor number (N=1, 2%) of professionals were involved in indirect reporting relationship. None of the practitioners in public sector was involved in a more junior level of reporting.

Similarly, in private sector, most of (N=31, 62%) the practitioners heading PR departments were reporting their official matters to the most senior level (Head of organization). Out of fifty, a good number of (N=19, 38%) PR professional were involved in a two-step hierarchy mechanism of reporting. No professional was involved in indirect reporting relationship. None of the practitioners in private sector was involved in a more junior level of reporting.

Departmental involvement in strategic planning and decision making

The efficiency and clout of a PR professional increase to perform as a manager if the PR department is more involved in the decision-making and strategic planning processes. Five items were placed in the questionnaire to explore involvement of PR department in decision-making and strategic planning. These items included strategic planning, engagement in social issues, developmental initiatives, routine assignments and reactions to crisis.

Table 2. Involvement of the PR Department in Strategic Planning and Decision Making

	N	Mean	SD
Strategic Planning and Decision-Making Items. $\alpha=.755$	101	3.95	.66
“Strategic planning”.	101	3.53	1.07
“Response to major social issues”.	101	3.86	1.02
“Main projects related to expansion”.	101	4.02	.81

“Routine operations”.	101	4.14	.79
“Crisis communication planning and response”.	101	4.18	.93

The descriptive scores for involvement of the public relations department with various obligations concerned with to decision-making and strategic planning are interpreted in Table 2. The scores for the mean values of the three activities/actions out of five were above 4.00. While the scores for the mean values of two activities including “strategic planning” (M=3.53) and “response to major social issues” (M=3.86) were recorded above 3.5. PR departments were highly involved with “crisis communication planning and response” (M= 4.18) and were less involved with “strategic planning” (M=3.53).

Table 2.1. Descriptive Statics for Departmental Involvement in Strategic Planning and Decision Making (Public Sector Vs Private Sector)

Organization Sector		N	Mean	SD
Public Sector Organization	“Share of the PR department to Strategic Planning and Decision-making items”.	51	3.76	.69
	“Strategic planning”.	51	3.16	1.17
	“Response to major social issues”.	51	3.55	1.10
	“Main project related to expansion”.	51	3.98	.93
	“Routine operations”.	51	4.08	.77
	“Crisis communication planning and response”.	51	4.02	.95
Private Sector Organization	“Share of the PR department to strategic planning and decision-making items”.	50	4.14	.58
	“Strategic planning”.	50	3.92	.80
	“Response to major social issues”.	50	4.18	.83
	“Major initiatives (e.g. new developments, services, and programs)”.	50	4.06	.68
	“Routine operations”.	50	4.20	.81
	“Crisis communication planning and response”.	50	4.34	.89

A comparison of descriptive values for involvement of PR department in decision-making and strategic planning tasks in both sectors is construed in Table 2.1. In public sector, two items scored above 4.00 while three items scored above 3.00. The items that scored above 4.00 for the mean value were “routine operations” (M=4.08) and “crisis communication planning and response” (M=4.02). The items that scored above 3.00 for the mean value were “strategic planning” (M=3.16), “response to major social issues” (M=3.55) and “major initiatives” (M=3.98).The PR departments in public sector were highly involved with “routine operations item” (M=4.08) and less involved with “strategic planning item” (M=3.16).

In private sector four items scored above 4.00 for the mean values. These items included “response to major social issues” (M=4.18), “major initiatives” (M=4.06), “routine operations” (M=4.20) and “crisis communication planning and response” (M=4.34). The score of the one item (“strategic planning”, M=3.92) was almost near to 4.00. PR departments in private sector were highly involved with

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“crisis communication planning and response task” (M=4.34) and less involved with “strategic planning task” (M=3.92).

Departmental contribution to research

PR departments that are more involved in research-oriented tasks are more able to generate PR activity on professional scales and are obviously more proficient to employ symmetrical PR models to secure better success. Contribution of PR department in research-oriented tasks was quantified on five items.

Table 3. Descriptive Statics for Departmental Contribution to Research

Contribution to Research Items $\alpha=.889$	N	Mean	SD
	101	3.38	.94
“Carrying out day to day research activities”.	101	3.14	1.19
“Conducting specific research to answer specific questions”.	101	3.17	1.14
“Carrying out information gathering formally for consumption in decision making other than research”.	101	3.36	1.11
“Carrying out information in an informal way”.	101	3.60	1.08
“Making contact with opinion leaders outside the organization”.	101	3.61	1.15

Table 3. interprets the mean scores for contribution of PR departments in research related activities. Two items scored above a mean value of 3.00. These items included “conducting day to day research” (M=3.14) and “conducting specific research to answer specific questions” (M=3.17). three items scored above a mean value of 3.50. These items included “Carrying out information gathering formally for consumption in decision making other than research” (M=3.36), “carrying out information in an informal way” (M=3.60) and “contacting opinion leaders outside the organization” (M=3.61). PR departments in Pakistan were highly involved in “contacting opinion leaders outside the organization” (M=3.61) and less involved with “carrying out day to day research research activities” (M=3.14).

Table 3.1. Descriptive Statics for Departmental Contribution to Research (Public Vs Private)

Organization Sector	N	Mean	SD
	51	2.59	1.15
	51	2.86	1.33
Public Sector Organization	51	3.00	1.25
	51	3.24	1.23
	51	3.33	1.21
	50	3.70	.95
Private Sector Organization	50	3.48	.81
	50	3.72	.81

“Conducting informal information gathering	50	3.98	.74
Making contact with opinion leaders outside the organization”.	50	3.90	1.02

Table 3.1. reflects a comparison of mean values of items for contribution of the PR departments in research in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan. In public sector three items generated mean scores above 3.00. These items included “carrying out information gathering formally for consumption in decision making other than research” (M=3.00), “conducting informal information gathering” (M=3.24) and “making contact with opinion leaders outside the organization” (M=3.33). Two items scored above a mean value of 2.50. These items were “conducting routine research” (M=2.59) and “conducting specific research to answer specific questions” (M=2.86). Public sector PR departments were highly involved in “making contact with opinion leaders outside the organization” (M=3.33) and were less involved in “conducting routine research” (M=2.59).

In private sector, all five items scored above a mean value of 3.00. These mean values recorded against these items were “carrying out day to day research activities” (M=3.70), “conducting specific research to answer specific questions” (M=3.48), “Carrying out information gathering formally for consumption in decision making other than research” (M=3.72), “conducting informal information gathering” (m=3.98) and “making contact with opinion leaders outside the organization” (M=3.90). Private sector PR departments were highly involved in “conducting informal information gathering” (M=3.98) and were less involved in “conducting specific research to answer specific questions” (M=3.48).

Departmental prestige

Prestige of the PR department within organizational hierarchies plays an important role in smooth regulation, legislation and obviously recognition of the department related to its decisions in making PR policy and different response mechanisms. The functioning of a PR department will be smoother if it earns more prestige and vice versa. Prestige of PR department was measured on three items.

Table 4. Organizational Support to PR Function

Departmental Prestige Items	$\alpha = .840$	N	Mean	SD
		101	4.15	.90
“Our institution provides support necessary for departmental success”.		101	4.25	1.08
“To my mind, my department is one of the most valuable units in our organization”.		101	4.27	.96
“Senior Executives in my organization believe my department as one of the most valuable departments in our organization”.		101	3.92	1.07

Table 4. reflects mean values for prestige of PR department items. PR practitioners believe that my department is one of the most valuable units in our

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organization” (M=4.27). On the other hand, they are less confident to believe that “Senior Executives in my organization believe my department as one of the most valuable departments in our organization” (M=3.92).

Table 4.1. Organizational Support to PR Function (Public Vs Private)

Organization Sector		N	Mean	SD
Public Organization	“Our institution provides support necessary for departmental success”.	51	4.00	1.30
	“To my mind, my department is one of the most valuable units in our organization”.	51	4.12	1.05
	“Senior Executives in my organization believe my department as one of the most valuable departments in our organization”.	51	3.76	1.21
Private Organization	“Our institution provides support necessary for departmental success”.	50	4.50	.74
	“To my mind, my department is one of the most valuable units in our organization”.	50	4.42	.84
	“Senior Executives in my organization believe my department as one of the most valuable departments in our organization”.	50	4.08	.90

Table 4.1. interprets a comparison of descriptive values for support of the organization to PR function in public and private sector organizations. The public-sector practitioners were confident in believing that “To my mind, my department is one of the most valuable units in our organization” (M=4.12). Similarly, Private sector practitioners were confident in believing that “Our institution provides support necessary for departmental success” (M=4.50). But both public (M=3.76) and private (M=4.08) sectors practitioners were less confident in believing that “Senior Executives in my organization believe my department as one of the most valuable departments in our organization”.

Answers to research questions

RQ1: How much importance do public and private sector organizations place on the public relations function in Pakistan?

RQ2: How do importance of PR function differ in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan?

Prestige and value of PR function/activities as perceived by organizational top management in Pakistan was quantified using three constructs. These constructed were “PR department contribution to strategic planning and decision-making”, “PR department contribution in research” and “Organizational support to PR department/PR Department Prestige”.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Importance of Public Relations Function in Pakistan

Importance of PR Function Constructs	N	Mean	SD
“PR department contribution to strategic planning and decision-making”.	101	3.95	.66
“PR department contribution in research”.	101	3.38	.94
“Organizational Support to PR department/PR Department Prestige”.	101	4.15	.90

The descriptive vales for prestige and value (Importance) of PR function in organizations in Pakistan are interpreted in Table 5. The mean scores indicated that PR departments in Pakistan possessed a reasonable “Organizational support (M=4.15) but their involvement in research was comparatively less (M=3.38) as compare to other two constructs.

Table 5.1. Descriptive Statistics for Comparative Importance of PR Function in Public and Private Sectors in Pakistan

Organization Sector	N	Mean	SD
Public Sector “PR department contribution to strategic planning and decision-making”.	51	3.76	.69
Organization “PR department contribution to research”.	51	3.00	1.05
“Organizational Support to PR department”	51	3.96	1.02
Private Sector “PR department contribution to strategic planning and decision-making”	50	4.14	.58
Organization “PR department contribution to research”	50	3.76	.64
“Organizational Support to PR department”	50	4.33	.73

Comparative descriptive values for importance of PR function in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan are interpreted in Table 5.1. PR practitioners in both public(M=3.96) and private (M=4.33) sectors believed that they possessed a reasonable “organizational support to PR department”. But practitioners in both public (M=3.00) and private (M=3.76) sectors were not confident enough in “contribution of their departments to research”. PR practitioners in private sector were highly involved in “strategic planning and decision-making” (M=4.14) as compared to public sector practitioners less involvement (M=3.76).

Lastly, the independent sample t-tests were processed to test the significance of these mean differences for importance of PR function between public and private sectors in Pakistan.

Table 6. Independent Sample T-Test for PR Department Contribution to Strategic-planning/Decision Making and Organizational Sector (Public/Private)

	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Equal variances not assumed	101	-.38	.13	-3.029	96.646	.003

As per construed in Table 6., an independent sample T-test was processed to compare PR department contribution to strategic-planning and decision-making scores for public and private sector organizations. There were significant

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differences in scores for public-sector organizations (M=3.76, SD=.69) and private-sector organizations (M=4.14, SD=.58; $t(96.646) = -3.029$, $p = .003$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in mean scores (mean difference = -.38, 95% CI: -.63 to -.13) was very small ($\eta^2 = .01$). The higher mean score for private sector reflected that PR departments in private sector were more involved in strategic planning and decision as compare to PR departments in public sector.

Table 6.1. Independent Sample T-Test for PR Department Contribution to Research and Organizational Sector (Public/private)

Equal variances not assumed	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
	101	-.75	.17	-4.364	82.558	.000

As per construed in Table 6.1. , an independent sample T-test was processed to compare PR department contribution to research scores for public and private sector organizations. There were significant differences in scores for public-sector organizations (M=3.00, SD=1.05) and private-sector organizations (M=3.76, SD=.64; $t(82.558) = -4.364$, $p = .000$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in mean scores (mean difference = -.75, 95% CI: -1.09 to -.41) was very small ($\eta^2 = .01$). The higher mean score for private sector reflected that PR departments in private sector were contributing more in research as compared to PR departments in public sector.

Table 6.2. Independent Sample T-Test for PR Department Prestige and Organizational Sector (Public/Private)

Equal variances assumed	N	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
	101	-.37	.18	-2.104	99	.038

As per construed in Table 6.2., an independent sample T-test was processed to compare PR department prestige scores for public and private sector organizations. There were significant differences in scores for public-sector organizations (M= 3.96, SD= 1.02) and private-sector organizations (M= 4.33, SD = .73; $t(99) = -2.104$, $p = .038$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in mean scores (mean difference = -.37, 95% CI: -.72 to -.02) was very small ($\eta^2 = .01$). The higher mean score for private sector reflected that PR departments in private sector were supported by their employer more as compared to PR departments in public sector.

Conclusion

The prestige and value (Importance) of public relations functions is quantified by analyzing the reporting mechanism between PR departments and senior management, by exploring the contribution of the PR department in top decision making and strategic management tasks, by assessing the research infrastructure employed by PR departments and by observing support mechanism of the organization for PR departments in Pakistan.

Results specify that most of (68%) the PR professional heading PR departments possess a direct reporting mechanism to and from heads of the organizations. In comparison, public sector PR departments possess a better direct reporting mechanism as compared to private sector PR departments in Pakistan. Most of the public-sector PR professionals (74%) were reporting to their senior managers directly as compare to private sector PR professionals (62%). Holistically, PR function in Pakistan bears a reasonable reporting culture while officiating their professional duties. Thus, most of the PR departments were reporting at the most senior level or a senior level at least. This study found very rare examples of practitioners in both public and private sectors whom were involved in reporting at a very junior level of management.

Similarly, a good number of PR departments in Pakistan are found involved in organizational decision making and strategic planning tasks for their public relations programs. In comparison, private sector PR professional and obviously the departments are found significantly more involved in “strategic planning and decision making” tasks as compared to public sector departments/professional whom are slightly less involved. Many of the PR departments are also involved in planning and executing their programs based on research-oriented data. The contribution of PR departments in research activities is slightly more significant in private sector as compared to public sector.

Lastly, most of PR departments possess good professional reputation within their top management circles. Again, PR departments in private sector enjoy a more frequent prestige potential as compared to PR departments in public sector. It can be concluded that the overall prestige, value and importance of PR function in private-sector organizations in Pakistan is comparatively more established and recognized than in public-sector organizations.

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