Exploring Employees' Perception Towards The Public Relation Practitioners Practice: Jimma Zonal Government Offices In Focus

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to describe employees' perception towards PR practitioners' practice. Factors affecting the practice were also assessed. The data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire involving five items a Likert scale, in-depth interview and document analysis. The study found out that PRs practice was perceived poorly in the eyes of employees in the study area. The practitioners are not professionally responsible and they are politically affiliated. It was recommended that PR practitioners should be professionally and structurally organized, and should be involved in strategic planning, decision making and implementation of organizational planning to make PRs activities effective.

Keywords: Public relations; roles; models; factors; perception; employees; PR practice

Introduction: The practice of PRs can be described as an information management between an organization or individual and its publics. According to Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, (2002) it can also be described as a management of communication between an organization and its publics. There is also a view that PRs is a communication process that maintains mutual benefit for both an organization and the public.

PRs is expected to serve the public interest, develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, contribute to informed debate about issues in society, and facilitate dialogue between organizations and their publics (Newsom and Carrel 2001, p.102-103). In essence, practitioners in the developing nations are "less inclined to seek information from their publics because they do not intend to shape organizational activities to the needs of

their environment" (Sriramesh, 1992, p.204). In developing nations, PRs employees work largely as receptionists and/or communication agents (Culbertson and Chen 1996, p.249).

Lauzen and Dozier (1992, p.207) further highlight this fact by indicating that not only must practitioners be surveyed, the dominant coalition (or a member of the dominant coalition, decision makers and the managers) must also be surveyed. The employees' perception has to be studied. Accordingly, different studies revealed that, non-professionals' perception is also not correct and it has to be addressed in this particular study. Scholars in Nigeria have labored to debunk what they commonly call popular misconceptions of PRs-associating PRs with untruthfulness, lying, window dressing, propaganda, publicity, press agentry, sales promotion and gift-giving (Ajala, 2005;

Asemah, 2011; Daramola, 2003; Nkwocha, 2005; Nwosu, 1997). It is for this reason that this study investigated employees' perceptions of their organization's practitioners' practice in the study area. This is the main reason that the current study explored employees' perception towards the practice of PRs in Jimma zonal sector offices.

Although the name PRs is expanding and growing rapidly in various organizations in Ethiopia, the profession is still suffering from problems emanating from misuse by government organizations, misunderstanding of the clear roles of PRs, the problem of differentiating between PRs as a management tool or communication process in an organization (Geremewu, 2017, Bereket, 2015, Ermiyas, 2009, Rahel, 2009). It is often wrongly associated with propaganda, publicity, and manipulation (Rosenberg, 2013).

At the same time, some managers and employees do not understand well what public relations encompasses, what goal it seeks to achieve and how it works. Henslowe (1999), supports the above idea that the public relations discipline is often either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted so that it is used in a pejorative way, associating it with propaganda, or evasion. Most organizations disregard public relations as an integral part of the organization.

The problem that this study addresses can therefore be the existing lack of knowledge and understanding of the practice of PR, and poor perception of the practice in Ethiopia in general and Jimma zonal sector offices specifically. This prohibits the country from participating in continental and global discussions on the fundamentals of PRs. Our country must assist in creating a global understanding of the current practice of PRs in our study set up.

Although there are some local (Demelash and Hamza, 2020, Geremewu, 2017, Bereket, 2015, Ermiyas 2009, Rahel, 2009), and foreign studies (Mohamed, 2004, Michael, 2017, Derina 2005,) that have been documented for the study of pr practitioners'' practice and that have been documented there are no, to the researchers' knowledge, study addressing the perception towards the PT practioners practice and it seems scanty in the current study setup. The factors affecting the PR practice is not also studied in the area. Therefore, the current study aims to fill the gap through exploring the perception in Jimma zonal sector offices (South West Ethiopia). Moreover, the factors affecting PRs practices were assessed.

Defining Public Relations: According to the researchers' review, there are so many attempts to sort out to define PR as new field of study since 1970s in different parts of the world. However, senior practitioners such as Edward L. Bernays and John W. Hill had by then published books in which they offered their own meaning. By the early 1970s, the term had been defined by the PRSA. Several authors had also tried to put their hands and made endless efforts at defining what public relation is. These definitions then have occurred in journal articles and critical comments by journalists (Robert L., 2005). However, in 1976, Rex Harlow (1988, p.9) scoured through 472 definitions of PR and came up with the following paragraph:

> PRs is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the

responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. (Harlow, quoted in Wilcox et al. 2003, p.7) cited in Alison (2004)

Therefore, a freer society becomes, the more regulated it becomes and the more citizens are expected to act responsibly. Therefore, PRs should listen to society and focus on how the reputation of the organization can be managed effectively (Opukah, 2003:8-9). Ogbuagu (2003:9) defines PR in terms of listening to the public and acting accordingly:

> "The management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes programmes of action to earn public understanding and acceptance, including a policy of enlightened self-interest by which process a business or organization continually tries to win the good will and understanding of its customers, employees and the public at large".

There are many other definitions that have gained recognition over the years. As a result, according to Wilcox, et. al. (2001, p.3) one of the early definitions that gained wide acceptance was formulated by the newsletter PRs News.

The twenty-first-century government administrator needs new tools to address the changing context of government communication. First, civic life in modern times is now much more dominated by the news media and by related public communications technologies. Second, public administration itself is increasingly an act of communication. Government PRs is a vital tool that can help all public sector agencies implement their missions and increase accountability. For example, PRs can be used to educate, the citizenry, inform the public of new programs and services they may be eligible for; and persuade the public to serve as the eyes and ears of the agency. Third, the public context of public administration is what differentiates it from business administration (and nonprofit management) (Mordecai L. et al, 2012).

The definition by Cutlip, et. al. (in Wilcox et. al., 2001, p.3) states that PRs is the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. Hunt and Grunig (1984, p.5) explain that most definitions of PRs contain two elements: communication and management. Thus, there are so many scholars who defined PRs as the management of communication between an organization and its publics.

As a result, based on the above argument PRs must be a two-way activity: listening to what the public thinks, as well as projecting the organization's messages based on the public's thinking. It follows that PRs activities can only be effective and influential where the aims of the organization are compatible with the aims of the public (Haywood 2002, p.15-16).

Perceptions towards Public Relations Practice

Public relations and the creation of a positive image are subsequent and longstanding efforts of many public and nongovernmental institutions. Because of its nature and content,

PRs have been identified as bodies in defense of the institution they represent and are often perceived as structures that do not follow the publics' interest. The conceptual image about the functioning of public relations has been also depicted as the result of perceptions of society and media workers.

As it is the case throughout the history of PRs evolution, the introduction of the profession was a result of number internal and external factors, which depend on a number of variables, on the other hand, the introduction of any new external profession or idea, faces several challenges. Through this research, the researchers intend to explore public relations, from the perception and factors affecting its practice perspective.

Considering the perception of PRs in Ethiopia it is the outcomes of inefficient PRs activities and functions that could influence the practice to be perceived by the public including the employees as a negative or bad profession which is serving only government when the nature of the profession is not. Ethiopia is a place where the public, academic community, media, cadres of the ruling party, civil servants and most importantly the young generation have not been made adequately aware of the country's major social, political and economic policies. Therefore, it is fair to argue that PRs institutions and the media somewhat failed to accomplish their missions in relation to PR. As a result, we are observing uncertainty in the minds of many Ethiopians on the current and future status of the country since PR has been used as a propaganda tool reporting only the developments aspect of the country (Ethiopian Herald, 2016).

Accordingly, the negative perception of PRs in Nigeria was also reported that there the PR tool of propaganda by corrupt politicians during the First Democratic Republic (1960–1966); and

as a psychological weapon by both the Biafra Secessionist Army and the Nigerian Army during the nation's civil war (1967–1970) (Otunbanjo n.d.). The public communications of each of the parties were one-sided, and propagandist in nature.

Other studies on perception of PRs as include Bowen (2009), Buhagiar (2006), Callison (2004), Kaur & Shaari (2006), Priest (2004), Sterne (2011) and Valentini (2009). Valentini (2009) analyzed the level of credibility and professionalism of PRs in Italy, noting that PRs was initially considered as an indirect form of publicity. He added that, the national scandal that enmeshed the Italian society in 1992 involved many PR practitioners; this had "a strong impact on the reputation of public relations as a profession" (p. 654). Valentini (2009, p. 656) avers: "Italy is paradoxically in a position where some best practices and excellences in PR co-live with arcane PR activities focusing on press-agentry/publicity concepts".

Aronoff shows that, attitudes of journalists about PRs differed substantially and negatively from the attitudes held by PRs professionals towards themselves. Shaw and White (2004) investigated the perception of PRs and journalism educators' towards media relations. The study found out that journalism educators believed that PRs professionals are not credible enough and tend to manipulate their publics.

Again, Callison (2004) investigated the perceptions of PRP by households in the United States, using a telephone survey of 593 subjects and found that sources directly affiliated with an organisation, were more negatively perceived than independent sources. Based on this, he concludes: "Ethically and practically, a company's spokesperson cannot disavow any connection to the company represented; it seems that any attempt to communicate on an

organization's behalf from the organization's own pulpit is doomed". Buhagiar (2006, p. 10) focused on the perceptions of PRs professionals among broadcast and print journalists in the State of Michigan using the interview technique and reported that "an opinion that seems to be very popular is that the field of public relations is always perceived more negatively than the field of journalism".

Scholars in Ethiopia have labored to debunk what they commonly call popular misconceptions of PRs-associating PRs with untruthfulness, lying, window dressing, propaganda, publicity, press agentry, sales promotion, and gift-giving (Geremewu, 2017, Bereket, 2015, Ermiyas 2009, Rahel, 2009) and in some African countries (Ajala, 2005; Asemah, 2011; Daramola, 2003; Nkwocha, 2005; Nwosu, 1997). Ajala (2005, pp. 11–12) argues that "people who are less well-informed about the practice of public relations (that) are more likely to be disillusioned" about it. Asemah (2011, p. 13) concludes: "the general public does not have clear understanding of the practice and value of public relations". Although Sterne (2011, p. 26) similarly shows that in New Zealand, practitioners claim that the public erroneously believe PRs is about spin, lying and deceiving, he concludes that, asking practitioners their views about the image of PRs suffers "from the same limitation as asking rabbits what they think of their lettuce patch".

It is for this reason that this study investigates differing perceptions of employees (other than PRs practitioners) towards PRs practice in the study setup. Based on the problems stated and the literature reviewed above, this particular study answered the following questions. (1) How do employees perceive the practice of PRs in Jimma Zonal Offices? (2) What are the factors which hinder PRs practitioners from effectively practicing public relations?

2. Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology that was employed, the population and participants of the study, the sampling techniques and procedures, sample size, and data collection instruments. The last point in this chapter is methods of data analysis that was used to organize and describe the generated data.

1.1.   Study Design and Methods

The study was a cross-sectional exploratory study that used a descriptive research design to investigate the research problems. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to address the study objectives so that triangulation of the findings is possible. This approach involved the generation of data in quantitative form which can be subjected to quantitative analysis. The qualitative technique has seen growing popularity in PRs. Qualitative methods are becoming more common in PRs research (Wimmer and Dominick 2003, p. 405-408). Qualitative research methods are particularly important if one intends to study people, groups, organization and societies (Van Aken, Berends & Bij 2007, p. 129). 3.3.

1.2.   Study Area and Period

The study was conducted in Jimma town zonal sector offices from 01 January-15 June, 2018. The proposed research was investigated in Jimma zonal sector offices because the setup was close to our workplace and the resources are limited. According to Oromia yearly book (2008) these sector offices are divided into four groups of clusters namely Agricultural and Government Developmental organizations cluster, Civil Services clusters, Administrational and Security clusters and Industrial and City Development Cluster. These clusters have their own bunch of sector

offices which was made clear in the coming topics.

1.3. Study Population and Sampling Techniques

1.3.1. Study Population

The source population was all staff members (539) in the zonal office of Jimma town. The study population encompasses all the staff members including manager and their deputy, PRs personnel, team leaders and the team members excluding contract based employees and other supportive staff (office boys/girls, guards, drivers). These are excluded because of their weak relationship with the issue. For the purpose addressing factors related issues, the participants were PR practitioners and deputies and/or managers of Jimma zonal sector offices; because these individuals in one way or another are responsible to coordinate all the PRs activities in the sector offices. On the other hand, for the purpose of addressing the employees' perception towards PRs practice, the participants were those employees other than those involved in PRs activity in the respective offices.

1.3.2. Sampling Techniques and Procedure

1.3.2.1. Sample Size

In this study there are two ways that the researchers have determined the sample size. To study factors affecting PRs practice, the sample participants are those PR practitioners either managers or deputies of each zonal offices. There are (thirty three) 33 sector offices extracted from four clusters in Jimma zone and an independent one named Jimma zone government communication affairs office. These sectors are the classification from (four) 4 major clusters according to the current zonal structure in Oromia (Oromia year book,

2008).In this case, where there is a deputy in each of these sectors he/she was PR personnel and also there is an office were both managers and deputies are working together. On the other hand, where there is no deputy, the managers were serving as PR practitioners in their respective offices. Accordingly, five (5) sector offices have only managers while Twenty seven (27) sector offices have the deputy working as a PR practitioner in the office. Adding to that, in JZGCAO and JZAO there are seven (7) and five (5) PRP respectively totaling forty five (45) participants. Thus, the researchers enrolled all the practitioners without sampling since they are small in number. To study employees' perception, the sample size required for the study was estimated by confidence interval approach, using the single population proportion formula employing OpenEpi software version 3.03 (Dean AG, et al, 2016) as indicated below:

Sample size $n = [Np (1-p)] / [(d2/Z21-\alpha/2*(N-1) + p*(1-p)]$
Where, n is the estimated sample size:
Np is the Population size (for finite population correction factor or fpc) (N) = 539
p is the hypothesized % frequency of outcome in the population, usually 0.5
(Z1-α/2 = the 100(1−α/2) the percentile of the normal (or Gaussian) distribution. For the commonly used two-sided 97% confidence interval, Z1−α/2 = 1.96
d = the margin of confidence interval = 0.10

Accordingly, considering population size of 539, frequency of outcome in the population (proportion of participants having good perception towards practice of PRs practitioners to be 50%, with 97% confidence level and 10% margin of error, the sample size required for the study will be 97.

1.3.2.2. Sampling Procedures

For quantitative approach the respondents were selected using census sampling for all the practitioners and they are enrolled to address factors related issues. To select respondents to address the perception of employees towards PR practice in their respective office, all Jimma zonal sector offices staff load was collected and proportionally allocated to select representative sample from each organization as demonstrated in figure blow. Accordingly, those selected office managers were included directly, because all the activities of the office are coordinated and managed by him/her. Again a lottery method was used to select other participants who are already allocated proportionally.

Accordingly, to make the sampling technique simple and clear there has to be a clear and simple classification of those offices into inclusive classification. Consequently, these classifications have been clearly stated in Oromia yearly book (2008) as clusters. For this study context, the researchers named them in figure blow as Cluster A; stands for Agricultural and Government developmental organizations cluster. It includes nine (9) sector offices working on related tasks to agriculture and development. Cluster B; stands for Civil Service clusters. This one has around seven (7) sectorial offices. Cluster C; this is and Administrational and Security cluster comprising a total of seven (8) sector offices. The last classification Cluster D; it was named as Industrial and City Development Cluster. It includes nine (9) sector offices.

To study factors qualitatively, the PR practitioners were selected purposely especially those who are involved were considered as key informants. Those informants are namely deputies, managers and team leaders who were purposively selected. As a result, the practitioners in JZGCAO, JZGCAO and JZPC were the one who are

selected for interview. As a result, seven (7) informants: three (3) from JZGCAO, three (3) JZAO and one (1) from JZPC were selected from the offices accordingly. JZGCAO was chosen because it is the zonal government's spokesperson and the organization which is responsible to coordinate all the PRs activities in the area. The other sectors are for their human resources and a well-equipped, organized and an independent PRs team in their office.

To study employees' perception through quantitative approach, an open ended questionnaire was used and was taken as appropriate tool to collect data. Each employee who participated has a chance to reflect his/her own perception towards the practice of PRs in the study setup.

1.4. Data collection Instruments

1.4.1. Questionnaire

The main goal of the questionnaire was to determine factors affecting the PRs practice and to examine employees' perceptions towards the practice of PRs in the study area. Two types of questionnaire were prepared and distributed for the respondents. The first respondents were the PRP in the study area to address factors affecting it and the second groups of respondents were the employees to study perception.

The practitioners' questionnaire consisted of four (4) parts. Part I was dedicated to the personal information of the respondents, such as sex, work experience, position and academic qualifications and the purpose was to give vivid picture to the readers about who the respondents of this study were. The second part was designed to investigate factors affecting the practice of PRs. The employees' questionnaire was also prepared involving two parts in which the first was the same as

practitioners' and the second part is the items related to employees' perception that was administered to selected employees. The rationale to adopt a three point Likert scale was to generate more comprehensive responses from the subjects providing them with an opportunity to indicate a range of options.

1.4.2.   In-depth Interview

Since the target of this study is to explore factors affecting the practice and employees' perception so interviewing the PRP in the respective sectorial offices is one way to achieve the desired objective. They are interviewed to get their practices, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, experiences and identify factors/trends by asking a follow up questions independently. The researchers chose the JZGCAO because it is the zonal government's spokesperson and the organization which is responsible to coordinate all the PRs activities in the area. The office produces its own magazines, newspapers, writes press releases, conducts meetings with people and has its own social media presence to accomplish its organizational objectives and goals. Although the office has its organizational structure in the Woreda and kebele levels, and the other interviewees were selected from JZAO and JZPC due to their human resources and owing an independent and a well-equipped PRs office in the study area. This is mainly due to time and financial constraints and most importantly due to the idea that these are the offices practicing PRs mostly and thinking that it will never create much influence on the collected data in the study setup.

1.4.3.   Document Analysis (Review)

The aim of this document analysis is to understand what is written in the editorial policy, guidelines/manuals, ethical standards, strategic and yearly plans, performance reports,

growth and transformation plan II (GTP II) document. This helps the researchers to compare and analyze the issue from different perspectives to get the full picture of the issue under investigation. Any document material that adds value in answering the research questions was assessed and analyzed. There was a prepared checklist that contains pertinent issues in which the researchers base to analyze the documents that has been shelved in respective offices.

2.   **Result**

Under this section the data was presented and subsequent analysis was be made. A mixed research approach was used to gather data from 140 respondents of semi structured questionnaire of both practitioners and employees (63.6% male and 36.4% female). Adding to that qualitatively the researchers conducted an in-depth interview with seven (7) key informants and documents were also reviewed by systematically analyzing the information gathered from various data sources, the researchers have drawn possible substantial account of the issue being studied and major findings were presented.

According to the data obtained from the quantitative, socio-demographically, most respondents were males. In most government offices, the number of males was larger than the female and so are the practitioners in the study setup. As far as age is concerned, majority of the practitioner respondents (76.2%) were with age group of 31-50,and the larger proportion of employee respondents were (66.7%) with age group of 21-40,and most of the PR personnel (98%) were holding either diploma or degree. Similarly, majority of non-PR employee respondents (90.4%) were holding diploma or degree. Regarding the position of practitioner respondents most of them (71.4%) are deputy and PR personnel.

The demographic result shows that there are younger age respondents from both group of individuals participating in this study. Similarly, most of this practitioners and employees are holding either degree or diploma and this shows that, the study participants are educated and younger.

Under this section employees' perception towards PRs and the practice was described. The result was presented by classifying items into different parts like the general perception, perceptions related to social responsibility issues of the practitioners and employees' perception related to practitioners' political affiliation issues.

2.1. Employees' Perception towards Public Relations practice

Table 1: Employees' perception towards PRs practice at JZSO March, 2018.

General Perception (about profession, practitioners and practice)	Scale			Mean Score
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
PRs practice in our office is merely a publicity activity.	53.8%	20.4%	25.8%	2.27
PRs produce and deliver information to the media.	64.5%	22.6%	12.9%	2.51
In our office PRs is viewed as pejorative profession.	24.7%	21.5%	53.8%	1.70
There is no value placed by decision makers on the PRs.	36.6%	22.6%	40.9%	1.96
PRP are just an information provider for journalists among their stakeholders.	52.7%	18.3%	29%	2.23
PRP provide information for all stakeholders.	46.2%	30.1%	23.7%	2.22
The practitioners are clueless about what PRs entails.	28%	30.1%	41.9%	1.86
PRs department is the division that wastes money.	22.6%	22.6%	54.8%	1.68
PRP are viewed as event organizer, arranging the meetings and forwarding mics.	52.7%	21.5%	25.8%	2.27
PRP play an important role in decision making in this office.	57%	23.7%	19.4%	2.38
PRs practice has no value in our office.	18.3%	14%	67.7%	1.50
PRs were viewed as a tool for whitewashing reputations.	50.5%	20.4%	29%	2.21
The PRP disseminate accurate information but they do not volunteer unfavorable information.	48.4%	25.8%	25.8%	2.22
PRs practice follows an open and two-way communication system	31.2%	4.3%	64.5%	1.67
PRs follows a one-way communication system.	59.1%	6.5%	34.4%	2.24
Here PRs is seen as an ethical and legitimate profession.	50.5%	22.6%	26.9%	2.23
PRs is not deceptive or manipulative by nature.	67.7%	12.9%	19.4%	2.48
Perceptions related to social responsibility	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Mean**
Here the purpose of PRs is to develop mutual understanding between management and public.	41.9%	8.6%	49.5%	1.92
The Practitioners are addressing/entertaining the community issues and problems.	40.9%	4.3%	54.8%	1.86

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
The practitioners are working in a socially responsible manner.	33.3%	6.5%	60.2%	1.73
PRs practice is public centered practice.	36.6%	3.2%	60.2%	1.76
Perceptions related to Practitioners political affiliation	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Mean**
PRs practice encompasses a manipulative role.	39.8%	22.6%	37.6%	2.02
PRs works to disseminate government information only.	37.6%	15.1%	47.3%	1.9
PRP are political gate keepers and/or mouthpieces of the government.	55.9%	18.3%	25.8%	2.3
PRs embraces propagandistic activity in our office.	49.5%	20.4%	30.1%	2.19
PRP are viewed with suspicion by the employees.	47.3%	15.1%	37.6%	2.09
The broad goal of practitioners is to persuade publics to behave as our office wants them to behave.	48.4%	20.4%	31.2%	2.17
In our office, PR is more of a neutral disseminator of information than an advocate for the organization.	31.2%	10.8%	58.1%	1.73

Regarding the employees' perception towards the PRs practice in the study area, majority of the respondents agreed that PRs profession is not deceptive or manipulative by nature (67.6%, mean score 2.48), PRs practice in our office is merely a publicity activity (53.8%, mean score 2.27), PRs practice follows a one-way (from government to public only) communication system (59.1%, mean score 2.24) and PRP are viewed as event organizer, arranging the meetings and forwarding mics(53.7%, mean score 2.27). The overall employees' perception towards PRs practice, profession and practitioners was described by the composite score. The mean composite score of perception towards PRs practice was 18.3. It was also found that 48.4% of the respondent had a mean composite score of less than 18.3.

The data from an open ended questionnaire shows that, the employees are aware of "PRs as a profession; it is a very good concept but we are not using it yet in our work place." Regarding the practice the respondents explained their idea that, "PRs have to base itself on reporting tangible information and real info has to be disseminated for the public. PRs have to be practiced by a government for the purpose of general public." The other respondent stated that, "If PRs is practiced based on the written plans and programs it would be helpful, but now it is valueless to me that PRs is not effectively practiced."

The other respondent addressed that, "If the PRs is practiced in an independent way owing its own structure and office it would be better." The other respondent also writes that:

> "If it is not practiced as an additional task, meaning that the deputy in any office has his/her own responsibility and to them PRs is an additional job so this has to be changed".

With regard to the employees' perceptions towards the practitioners social responsibility, it was found out that, a larger proportion of respondents disagreed that, PRs practice is public centered practice (60.2%, mean score 1.76), the practitioners are working in a socially responsible manner (60.2, mean score1.73), the purpose of PRs is to develop mutual understanding between our management and the public (49.5%, mean score 1.92) and the practitioners are entertaining the community issues and problems (54.8%, mean score 1.86). The overall perception of the employees towards social responsibility of practitioners was described by the composite score. As the data of composite score of the respondents were normally distributed, the mean composite score

was taken and found to be 3.29. Using this value as a cut of point, it was observed that 51.6% of the respondent had a mean composite score of less than 3.29.

From an open-ended questionnaire data, it is stated by many respondents that, "Our PRs personnel are not working in socially responsible manner since they are favoring the government they work for". Another respondent also stressed that, "PRs is a very valuable practice that could work as bridge between the public and the government but, ours is not for the purpose of creating mutual understanding between the government and public. However, it is for protecting the interest of government on the public and following their daily activities". The other respondent also explained that, "PRP are favoring their relatives in order to promote him as he/she is working in effective way. This means that the manger and deputy were relatives in some offices they work in cooperation to favor one another in order to be promoted based on fake reports that has been sent to the higher officials. They do not care about the public which they are affecting based on their fake report".

Another respondent explained that:

"PRP are not professionals so, they do not know how to be socially responsible. They are favoring their relatives in order to promote him as he/she is working in effective way and/or favoring the government by hiding truth from the public."

Perceptions related to political party affiliation of the practitioners result shows that a larger proportion of the respondents agreed that PRP are political gate keepers and/or mouth pieces of the government (55.9%, mean score 2.3), PRs embraces propagandistic activity in their office (49.5%, mean score 2.19), the broad goal of practitioners is to persuade publics to behave

as our office wants them to behave (48.4%, mean score 2.17), and PRP are viewed with suspicion by the employees (47.3%, mean score 2.09). The overall mean composite score for employees' perception towards practitioners' political party affiliation (partisanship) was found to be 6.04. As a result, the researcher revealed that 53.8% of the respondent had composite scoreless than mean score of 6.04.

From an open-ended questionnaire data it is stated by many respondents that:

"PRs practitioners are mouthpiece of the existing government. Publics' idea is swallowed. The practitioners are political gate keepers and they are not working with the community; they are government agents in our office."

There is a respondent stating that:

"PRs is a very valuable practice in general but ours is not for the purpose of creating mutual understanding between the government and public. However, it is for protecting the interest of government on the public and following their daily activities''.

In general, this study revealed that a larger number of employees poorly perceived the PRs profession, practitioners and the practice. The other point is that the practitioners are not practicing PRs in socially responsible manner and they are also mostly perceived as politically affiliated practitioners like being government mouth pieces and the like. In the next part of the study we are going to discuss these issues in detail with reasons. To sum up, all perception items into a single result the overall composite score of employees' perceptions towards the practice of PR, considering mean composite score 27.63, the study found that nearly 50% (49.5%) of the respondents scored less than the mean composite score 27.63. This indicates

that PRs is perceived badly according to nearly half the employees in the study set up.

2.2. Factors affecting Public Relations practice

The following section describes the findings of factors influencing the practice of PRs in the study setup. Several potential factors have been identified as rated by the respondents and presented below in table.

Table 2: The rate of factors affecting PRs overall practice at JZSO, March, 2018.

Factors Items	Scale			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
Lack of Professionalism and training.	85.7%	9.5%	4.8%	2.8
Lack of Leadership commitment and support.	88.1%	9.5%	2.4%	2.85
~~Unlimited???~~Fear of the practitioners.	69.1%	23.8%	7.1%	2.61
An influence by unwritten laws limiting roles.	69%	14.3%	16.7%	2.52
Self-Censorship.	76.2%	21.4%	2.4%	2.73
Lack of professionals' involvement in decision making.	90.5%	7.1%	2.4%	2.88
Closed organizational culture and environment.	71.4%	21.4%	7.1%	2.64
Partisanship (political party affiliation).	78.6%	14.3%	7.1%	2.71
Lack of organized feedback system.	81%	14.3%	4.8%	2.76
Lack of focus on serving the public.	76.2%	19%	4.8%	2.71
Extreme media and public scrutiny	66.7%	23.8%	9.5%	2.57
Lack of coordination with strategic publics	85.7%	14.3%	-----	2.85
Lack of professional associations and code of conducts	78.6%	14.3%	7.1%	2.71
Friends and Relatives Interest not to practice PRs in a correct manner	31%	23.8%	45.2%	1.85
Low level of economic development	45.2%	11.9%	42.9%	2.02

Accordingly, as agreed by most of the respondents, PRs practice in the study setup was mainly affected by lack of experts or professionals involvement in strategic decision making (90.5%, mean score 2.88), lack of leadership commitment and support (88.1%, mean score 2.85), lack of coordination with strategic publics (85.7%, mean score 2.85) and lack of Professionalism and training (85.7%, mean score 2.85). Other issues including partisanship (political party affiliation) of the practitioners, lack of professional associations, societies & code of conducts governing the profession, closed organizational culture, fear of the practitioners and an influence by unwritten laws limiting their roles, were also

important factors rated by the respondents (table).

Furthermore, all key informants have also explained some factors hindering the practice of PRs in their offices. One of the key-informants explained it as follows:

"There are these challenges like lack of coordination with the PRs personnel in each sector offices."

Similarly, other factors were also affecting in our study area that, one of the respondents explained the challenges that:

"The practitioners are not considered as having value in some sector offices and they are not giving priority for PRs. At organizational level there is managers' misunderstanding of the purpose of PR and at individual-levels like lacking professional training."

The other informant addressed that:

"Practitioners themselves are affecting the practice because they don't have good perception of the purpose of PRs what it does and what it entails and they don't get overall purpose of PRs since they are not professionals."

Another respondent also noted that:

"Among the challenges, the practitioners' position is always changing from time to time just after they got trained. These practitioners are not manager of the staff; they are deputies, and they are not receiving trainings and PRs is considered as secondary roles (additional obligation)." According to another key-informant from JZAO explained that,

"Practitioners and the office managers frequently disagree on the functions and objectives of PRs. The, management did not inform us on important matters or consult us in policy-making plans and significant PRs aspects". Another informant added that:

"What I see as a highly inhibiting factor not to be effective in our zone is that there are no professionals working in our offices; as a PR practitioners even they are not given due attention from the higher officials. In addition to that those non professionals are also not trained and they are not effective in what they are doing."

The other issue addressed by one of the key-informants is stressed that:

"Lack of budget allocation for the practice of PR in the office is also an important factor challenging the practitioners not to do it effectively. Since each task they are doing needs a budget and without it there will be no task for the practitioners".

There are also some factors found in documents that the practitioners have mentioned while collecting information for SWOT analysis from internal and external publics. Internally PRs loses consideration and value from the senior executives and they are not allowed to play a managerial role; they also believed that either they give information or not it does not change anything at all. External publics told them that they are just an agent of the government collecting data for their own benefit and data collected from the public without bringing any change.

3. Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand employees' perception towards the practice in Jimma Zone sector offices. The factors affecting PRs practice in the study setup and their implications were the other purpose of this study.

Accordingly, the study result shows that the practice in the study setup is highly affected by different factors. In our study, it was found that lack of experts' involvement in strategic decision making, leadership commitment and support, and lack of training and professionalism were factors that are highly rated by the respondents. This means that they are highly affecting the practice in the area. This shows that they are also very important items to influence PRs practice in the study setup.

The same inhibiting factors are also reported in the study conducted by Achison (1999) in Nigeria. Accordingly, inadequate number of

qualified or competent PR practitioners also tends to militate against the effective practice of PRs. Another is education and training of practitioners in Nigeria for instance, the Nigeria Institute of PRs (NIPR) determines the nature and scope of knowledge required to practice the profession. Additionally, the rapid growth of PRs has also attracted many inexperienced, unethical practitioners who tend to create false image of the activity. Similarly the study also demonstrated that, in Nigeria and other developing countries where PRs management is relatively young, PRs programmes are under-funded, thus, this inadequate funding has grossly affected the effective practice of the profession Achison (1999).

The same challenges are also reported from the local study done by Geremewu (2017) in Dire Dawa and Harar and Ermiyas (2009) in Amhara region bureau of information found out that, the functions of PRs at the strategic planning level rarely exist due to lack of qualified public relations personnel reasons. They also added that this was resulted because of another factor which is the confusion of recognizing PRs as communication expert or as management body. In some offices it has lost recognition as well in the region. Another study by Ermias (2009) reveals that there are the same factors affecting the social responsibility role of PR practitioners in Amhara region bureau of information.

Similarly, the study conducted in Kenya Luvonga (2008) also reveals the challenge in this industry that PR practitioners are not allowed to play a major role in organizational strategic planning, inadequate budgetary allocation for the PRs department owed to the fact that top management undermine potential and importance of the department in comparison to others. Encroachment is another challenge inhibiting growth of this industry. This is ideally putting none PRs professionals in top management positions in PRs

department. This usually affects the performance of the junior employees most of whom now end up becoming PRs technicians.

These study shows that the same issues are overall challenging the practice similarly in different parts of the country and the continent not to become effective in playing their roles. Osho (2001), observed that unskilled practitioners abound in the practice of PRs in Nigeria that their nefarious, illegal and unethical activities are militating against the development of the profession. The study concludes in a way that these people, despite giving the profession a bad image, also constitute setback in the drive to achieve professional excellence.

The same reasons are also explained in these studies like the practitioners lack of independence and just execute what they get from top management. The profession still lacks professional bodies and associations, thus codes of ethics which harms very badly the integrity, engagement and independence of the practitioners (Mohammed, 2005). The reasons mentioned above are also addressed by one key-informant that:

"We are here to implement what is sent from the higher officials without asking and modifying the document and they also get the document from their top management".

Several factors could affect the role of PRP in an organization. A study by Dozier et al., (1995:7) examined the variables that are affecting the contribution of PRs personnel into shared expectations between management and the practitioner, the sufficient knowledge base of the communication department, and a corporate communication conducive organizational culture.

In addition, the same study conducted by Mohammed (2005), revealed that PRs in the

Arab World is still distanced from top management and relegated to secondary roles instead of advising and contributing in the decision-making. The status of PRs in society is correlated with the degree of freedom, democracy and the place public opinion occupies and the role it plays in society. If organizations and institutions do not care about the concerns, problems and where about of their public, then the whole concept of PRs is distorted and displaced. What is affecting this role according to one of the respondents is that:

"PR needs an atmosphere of freedom and democracy, a milieu where individuals are respected, freedom of expression is guaranteed and differences are respected. PRs is built upon the individual and it's the most important reason for someone to exist lies in the respect of the individual and the respect of his opinion and point of view."

With regards to the employees' perception the result was collected from three viewpoints. The first was general perception items including 17 (seventeen) items and second perceptions related to the practitioners' social responsibility issues with 4 (four) items and third was the practitioners' political affiliation with 7 (seven) items.

The result of employees' general perception was described by the composite score. Accordingly, it was found that 48.4% of the respondents had a mean composite score of less than 18.3. This shows that there is something missing in the practice of PRs in the study setup. This number is high and it means that PRs is badly perceived for about nearly half of the employees in the study setup.

However, the employees have a good perception on the true nature of the profession. A larger proportion of respondents disagreed that PRs has no value in their office and PRs profession is not deceptive or manipulative by nature. However, there basic problem is PRs is not being practiced in correct way.

The above point is also supported by the study recorded by Ikechukwu Nwosu (1996). He identified the following misconceptions about PRs practice in developing countries: PRs is not window dressing or presenting a wishy-washy product/ service/ Organization/Personality in a way it/ he does not deserve. PRs is based on high performance, equality and credibility in terms of products, service, policies and practices. PRs is based on two- way communication which leads to mutual understanding, respect, goodwill and acceptance. PRs is not propaganda, advertising or publicity. Sometimes, however, PRs uses the tools to achieve its objective.

The respondents also admitted that PRs is supposed to follow a truth and clear two-way communication (between government and the public). However, clearly it is not in the real practice. The reason for this was also stated by the respondents that, they are afraid of the government to disseminate accurate and true information, rather they disseminate what is told by higher officials.

The next point will be the employees' perceptions towards the practitioners being socially responsible or not. The result reveals that, a larger number of employee respondents disagreed that, the practitioners are working in a socially responsible manner, PRs practice is public centered practice. These two items scored high and they are important items. Consequently, nearly half of the respondents disagreed the purpose of PRs is to develop mutual understanding between our management and the public's and the practitioners are addressing/entertaining the community issues and problems.

The overall result found that 51.6% of the respondents had a mean composite score of less than 3.29. This shows that the practitioners are not practicing PRs in a socially responsible manner according to more than half of the respondents. This number is high and there has to be measure taken by the practitioners in the study area.

This shows that the issue of being socially responsible is very important to influence PRs practice. The study conducted by Abdul Rashid and Ibrahim (2002) on the attitudes of Malaysian managers and executives towards social responsibility of practitioners revealed that, 65% of the study respondents agreed that, socially responsible activities provide a favorable public image. Unfortunately, this issue was missing in our finding. On the other hand, Rosenberg (2013) argued that many people wrongly assume that PRs is preoccupied with image-making in the sense of creating a false front or cover-up. This may fit our PRs in the way it is perceived by the employees in the study setup.

The last point was practitioners' political party affiliation in the practice of PRs. The result reveals that, larger proportion of the employee respondents agreed that, PRs practitioners are political gate keepers and/or mouth pieces of the government, it embraces propagandistic activity in our office, practitioners are viewed with suspicion by the employees, and the broad goal of practitioners is to persuade publics to behave as our office wants them to behave. Consequently, it is revealed that 53.8% of the employee respondents had less than mean score of 6.04. This shows that, most of the practitioners are politically affiliated and they are mouth pieces of government in the study area. They are not practicing PRs free from political influence. This number is high and it also means that PR is politically affected according to than half of the employees in the

study setup. They believe that, the practitioners are affected by being partisanship.

Accordingly, similar study conducted by Ermiyas (2009), found that, being a member of a political party affect the practitioners` social responsibility role in that they become biased and self-serving to what they support. This affects the practitioners' sensitivity and responsiveness to the interests and concerns of the publics`. This was similar to the current study in that the practitioners simply become the agent of propagating their own party`s programs and dominant line of group think. The practitioners express their view. So that it would be better for the practitioners to be free from being a member of a political party to truly serve both publics and government's interests. Finally, it is found that nearly half (49.5%) of respondents poorly perceived PRs in the JZSO.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. **Conclusions:** This study found that PRP are contributing more in doing technical tasks including taking photos, writing speeches, and producing and disseminating information. Especially when we look into items that showed they are contributing most, it is technical activities like taking photos, writing speeches, and producing and disseminating information. While those items scored least are those which can be seen as managerial roles like contributing in developing strategic planning in their office, managing crisis and scanning and monitoring relevant environmental developments or issues. This finding has been substantiated qualitatively. The contributions of PR practitioners' tasks rarely exist at the managerial level due to lack of professionals and commitment of managers. This resulted in the confusion of recognizing public relations as communication expert, as management body in those offices.

It was also found that practice was under some hindrances that has been affecting the actual exercise in the study setup. Among the very major factor, lack of experts' involvement in discussion making, lack of professionals and commitment of both practitioners and the managers. In order to be effective PRs importance has to be recognized to the government. Qualitatively some factors were addressed such as, lack of coordination, PRs being considered as additional job, lack of budget allocation, changing PR practitioner from office to office and the practitioners were not managers of the staff.

The study has also tried to examine the employees' perception in Jimma zonal sector offices. The finding revealed that, in a general sense the practice, profession and the practitioners is perceived negatively according to 48.4% of the respondents and the practitioners are not socially responsible to 51.6% of the respondents and finally the practitioners were politically affiliated to 53.8% of the respondents. These percents of respondents were scored less than composite mean score. According to Ermiyas (2009), being a member of a political party affect the practitioners` social responsibility role in that they become biased and self-serving to what they support. This affects the practitioners' sensitivity and responsiveness to the interests and concerns of the publics`.

In conclusion, it is not perceived as a good profession by the employees and the practitioners were not socially responsible. It would seem that the responsibility thus lies on the little practitioners existing in the study area to manage the variables influencing them in order to maximize their contribution to organizational performance and to become effective in overall PRs practice. In essence the solution to this problem can be found in the following quote:

We don't have to travel to other disciplines to find our diamonds. PRs is an important discipline if you're good at it. So, get to be good at it. (Grunig, 2006b:7)

5.2. Recommendations: Based on the findings of this study, the following measures are hereby recommended for improved practice of public relations in Jimma zonal sector offices. To ensure effective PRs practice in the study area the researchers made the following recommendations. This study recommends for the dominant coalitions that they have to give PRs profession a recognition and consider them as a management function in their organization.

From the finding the researchers observed that, there are some factors hampering the effective practice of PRs in Jimma zonal sector offices. Among them the major one was lack of professional players in the field. It is therefore recommended that PRs formal education and training should be arranged by zonal administration offices.

The final recommendation goes to the practitioners that, they had to work hard, to mobilize and create awareness for the managers and the employees about the purpose of PRs and its value for the organizational success. Consequently, creating awareness helps to enhance the practice through minimizing challenges and it could also help improve or change the poor perception the practice of PRs had in the study setup. PRs need an atmosphere of freedom and democracy, an environment where individuals are respected, freedom of expression is guaranteed and differences are respected. PRs is built upon the individual and it's the most important reason for someone to exist lies in the respect of the individual and the respect of his opinion and point of view.

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