

Factors Affecting Students' Decision to Study Public Relations at University: The Case of Al Ain University

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Abstract

Every year, thousands of high school graduates look forward to joining universities on different degree programs, and the selection of a suitable course is a major career step involving many different factors. To identify and examine the factors influencing the selection of a university program, this study employed purposive sampling to explore selection factors from the perspective of public relations students at Al Ain University in the UAE. The results show that the students found four categories of factor to be important: direct (such as family, work-authority, friends, and financial effects); personal (communication skills, the grade point average for year 12, cognitive desire and self-interest); university-related (university guide, reputation and instructor competencies); and, other related factors (positive media content, easiness of the subject, and future career prospects). The study was conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which obviously impacts the study's recommendations in terms of possible changes to the education process.

Keywords

Public relations degree, decision making, selection process, influential factors, COVID-19 education impact.

Introduction

Most students who complete secondary education may not have made a firm decision on which college or degree course they would like to attend for further study (Ramirez & Dizon, 2014). Therefore, selecting a university course as a career step is a critical stage in the secondary school student's life. Students do not choose their university courses for scientific or subjective reasons, and nor do they have pre-knowledge about the nature of these courses and whether they are easy or not (Al Ayed et al., 2012). Indeed, students may choose their programs for the wrong reasons. According to Zhang (2007), the attitude of the student in selecting a certain course is frequently based on the attraction and publicity of the course, but for others a selection results from parents' direction, or because their friends have joined a course. Thus, this study examines these internal and external factors. The authors believe that public relations is a suitable course for students who wish to express an interest and represent themselves clearly within the profession. The study probed the attitudes of the students in choosing public relations and their perceptions towards the course content and the pre-requisite skills needed. Ramirez and Dizon (2014) indicated that when most students finish secondary school they have made no solid decision on which study field or college to choose. Some undergraduates have indicated that they made the decision to study public relations without reference to any guidelines and were unfamiliar with the field (Gleeson, 2013). Others have indicated that their choice was based on personal interests, abilities, the influence of those around them, job prospects, and the ease of success on the course White & Park (2010). In the same vein, Brown et al. (2011) found that most public relations (PR) students were unfamiliar with PR as an academic subject and were misinformed about the profession. In this regard, universities might lend

assistance and empower students to choose their courses more consistently by exposing them to PR background and suitable courses. From this perspective, promoting awareness of an organization can facilitate a favorable reputation or good image (Kang & Yang, 2010). Alserhan and Rahrouh (2020) indicated that organizations cannot attract and retain a wide customer base without initiating better and effective communication strategies and activities. Indeed, the maturation of the field is encouraging, with the shift in focus

Literature Review

According to studies which have explored the factors influencing student choice of a PR degree, it is known that these factors vary between environments, but the most important tend to be interest in the subject, career advancement, and job opportunities (Malgwi, Howe & Burnaby, 2005). The study of Zhang (2007), which dealt with the reason for choosing university students the information systems major, showed that this specialization was added a few years ago to the interest and need of society. This research has employed the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to understand why university students choose the discipline of systems Information, the results of the study were: that one of the most important factors affecting the selection of specialization is the individual's real interests in the field of information systems, the existence of available jobs, the difficulty factor and ease of information systems curricula, the opinion of the family, professor's opinion of important factors for choosing the specialization of information systems also, females are not encouraged by society to enroll in information systems specialization. Bloom (2010) argues that, when PR is covered in the media, it is usually framed in a negative light and/or confused with advertising. It is therefore important that academic institutions promote and prepare adequate guidelines for

their educational programmes (Nadelson, 2013). According to Fullerton and McKinnon (2015), most students believe that their college degrees prepared them well for a career in PR but many were concerned about finding a job. However, Elarishi and Bajnaid (2019) argue that the PR curriculum needs updating and that PR should be recognized as a practical not theoretical subject; moreover, it should have its own union to provide more training programmes in an updated setting. Thus, Jami and McKinnon (2015) concluded that it is the responsibility of PR practitioners and educators to define industry values and strive to shape and redefine the image of PR.

Student Perceptions of PR

Student perceptions of PR have been widely examined elsewhere. Fullerton and McKinnon (2015) concluded that a large majority of students believed their degrees had prepared them well for a career in PR, but many were concerned about finding a job upon graduation. In research conducted on Australian students' perceptions of PR, Gleeson (2013) found that mass media influences this field, and indicated that students have mixed preconceptions related to stereotypes about mass media which contradicted trends about PR practice. Gower and Reber (2006) examined both junior and senior PR students enrolled at many US universities, and found that while students were satisfied with their skills in writing, social responsibility and other PR activities and responsibilities, they admitted to being less skilled in management and finance. In her study titled 'Factors associated with student choice in the university selection process', Beswick's principal finding was that parents, particularly mothers, are the most influential persons to affect the process (1989). The value of a university's reputation and the reputation of the programme, variety of courses offered, and proximity to home were also important factors in the study. In a more recent study, Ridzuan et al. (2018) stated that most of the participant students chose their PR course because of good industry prospects and the potential for a bright future, and were also factors which would encourage them to perform well in their education.

Problem Statement

PR as an academic field has become a great concern to academic staff, employers and graduates. This concern arises from issues related to the performance and efficiency of PR undergraduates and graduates in the workplace. (Ridzuan et al., 2018) and (Nadelson, 2013) have indicated that the educational institution plays an important role in exposing students to the background of their potential course in order that the student can make a wise choice, and indeed the authors believe that success in the PR profession depends on students making the right decision in this regard. Their decision may be influenced by internal and external factors, such as: choosing a course based on personal interest, previous academic performance, the reputation of the education institution, parents, friends, media, the industry of the field, the student's budget, job opportunities, university guidelines, and the easiness of the course itself.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions about student perceptions:

1. What factors affect PR students' decision to study this subject?
2. Does a PR degree offer graduates a suitable future career?
3. What type of work or work domains do PR students prefer to join after graduation?
4. Are PR students satisfied with their choice of subject?

The study highlights students' tendency to choose a PR course and their perceptions about its content. Ridzuan et al. (2018) stated that PR requires special research skills, management, persuasive communication, strategic planning, and writing. Recommendations based on the findings and data analysis will greatly help academic institutions improve and develop student decision making and also empower their academic performance.

Methodology

A cross-sectional design was employed, including a questionnaire on issues related to how students select PR as a subject. Only PR students in the Media and Communication College of Al Ain University were targeted. Data were collected between February and March, 2020 (at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic). Although the questionnaire was sent to all PR students in the college, forty-two of the two hundred and forty students responded, i.e. 17.5%.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data show that most of the sampled PR students were female (71.6%), 63.3% of the females being single compared to 83.3% of the males (Table 1). Clearly, this subject attracts females and singles most. By studying the relationship between gender and marital status, and using the Phi correlation coefficient, we find $r_{\phi}=0.195$, which implies a very weak relationship between gender and the marital status of the sample. A chi-square test produced a $df=1$, a significance level of 0.05, and a p-value of 0.2053, which also confirms that there is no significant relationship between the gender and marital status of the sampled students.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of PR students according to their gender and Marital Status

		Marital Status			
		Single	Married	Total	
Gender	Male	Observed	10	2	12
		% of row	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
		% of column	34.5%	15.4%	28.6%
		% of total	23.8%	4.8%	28.6%
	Female	Observed	19	11	30
		% of row	63.3%	36.7%	100.0%
		% of column	65.5%	84.6%	71.4%
		% of total	45.2%	26.2%	71.4%
	Total	Observed	29	13	42
		% of row	69.0%	31.0%	100.0%
		% of column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of total	69.0%	31.0%	100.0%

As shown in Figure 1, only 4.8% of the PR students were in their first year of study, 9.5% were in their second year, 42.9% were in their third year, 33.3% were in their fourth year, and a further 9.5% were in their fifth year or above. This indicates that the number of students joining the PR major is decreasing and it is expected that in two years' time most students will be graduating; at this point, the total number of students will drop dramatically if no course of action is taken to prevent this. Hence, the university must consider this and try to resolve why and how to attract students to PR programmes.

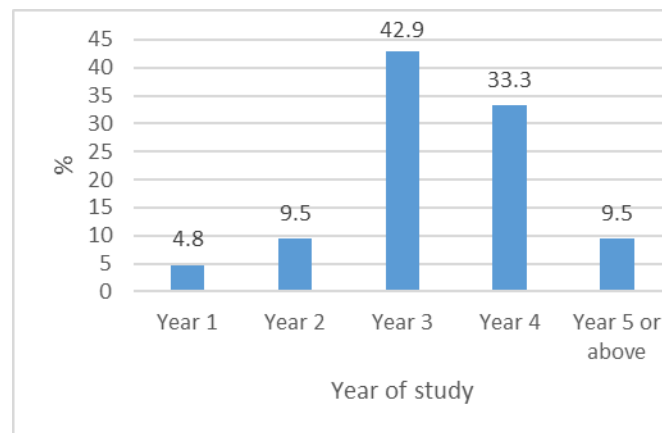


Figure 1. Distribution of Students according to Year of Study

As shown in Table 2, 88.1% of the sampled PR students are Emirati, and 11.9% were of other nationalities. The important issue here is that this PR programme mainly attracts Emirati students, and so Al Ain University should construct strategies and/or

activities to target a wider student community from different nationalities in order to increase the number of students in the field. This is especially important since the country, as everywhere, is facing an enormous challenge as teaching procedures react to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Table 2. Distribution of PR students according to Nationality

Nationality	frequency	percent
UAE	37	88.1
Non-UAE	5	11.9
	42	100.0

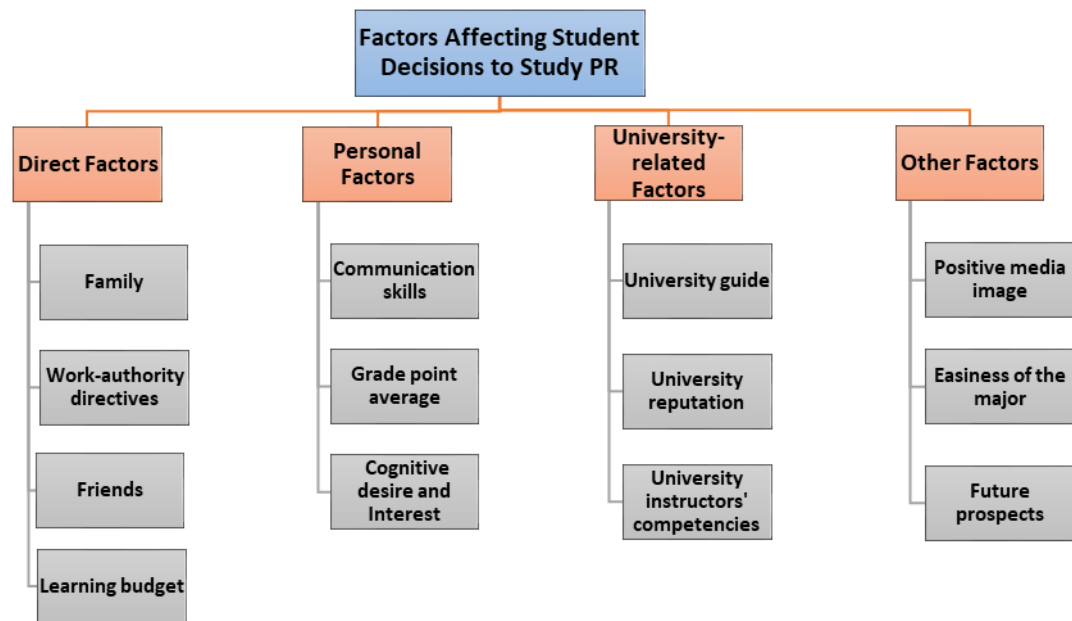
As shown in Table 3 below, 66.6% of the students had not planned to study PR prior to their graduation from secondary school, compared to 33.4% who had planned to do so.

Table 3. Students' Previous Plans to Study PR

	frequency	percent
Agree	14	33.4
Disagree	28	66.6
	42	100.0

Factors that Affect Student Decisions to Select PR

We studied various possible factors that might influence student decisions to choose PR as a course, from the perspective of the sampled students at Al Ain University. Figure 2 summarizes these factors.

Figure 2. Factors Influencing Student Selection of PR

Direct Factors

We investigated the effect of different factors such as families, work authorities, friends, and learning budget. Only 19% of the PR students were studying the subject at the request of their families (Figure 3), while 9.5% and 26.2% (a total of 35.7%) reported they strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that they were studying PR because of work authority directives (Figure 4). The influence of friends on

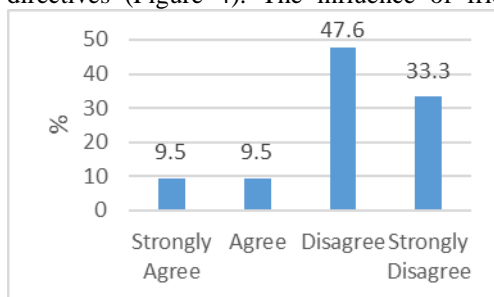


Figure 3. Students whose families influenced the selection of PR

choosing PR can be seen in Figure 5. We found that 21.4% strongly agreed and 35.7% agreed; that is, 57.1% of the sample said that their friends played a role in their choice of PR at Al Ain University. In contrast, 33.3% indicated that they disagreed and 9.5% strongly disagreed that their friends had influenced their study decision. Clearly, friends, or people in the surrounding environment, had a considerable influence on the sample. Regarding financial perspective, only 4.8% (n=2) of the students had decided to study PR because of their limited financial budget, whereas others' decisions had no relationship to their learning budget (Figure 6).

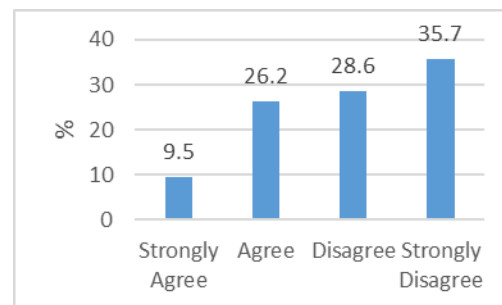


Figure 4. Students whose work authority directed them to study PR

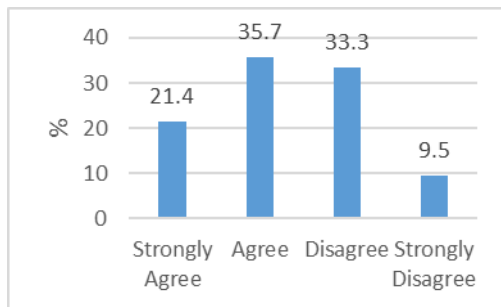


Figure 5. Students whose friends influenced the selection of PR

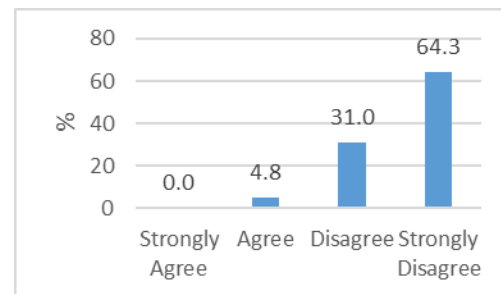


Figure 6. Students whose budget affected the selection of PR

Concerning personal factors, 47.6% of the sample said no formal body had guided or influenced them to choose PR (Figure 7), but other personal factors which might have affected the decision include the student's communication skills, their grade point average (GPR) from year 12, and their cognitive desire and interest in PR. 38.1% of the students strongly agreed and 50% agreed that they had chosen PR based on their personal communication abilities and skills, whereas 2.4% of the students disagreed and 9.5% strongly disagreed

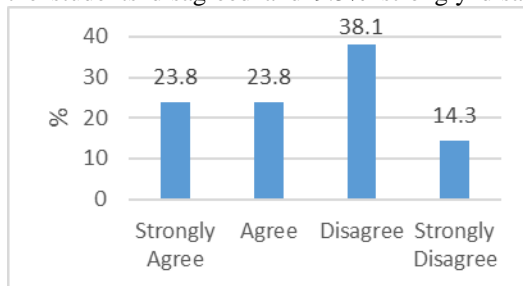


Figure 7. No formal body directed the selection of PR

that they had chosen the subject because of their communication skills (Figure 8). Only 14.3% of the students decided to study PR because their GPA at secondary level did not qualify them to study another major (Figure 9). For the factor of cognitive desire and interest, Figure 10 shows that 6.7% of the students strongly agreed and 26.2% agreed that they had chosen PR because of their cognitive desire and interest, whereas a total of 57.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed (19% and 38.1%, respectively).

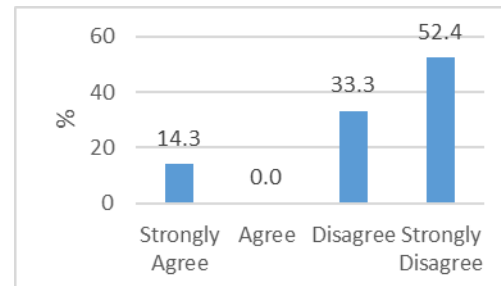


Figure 9. Students chose to study PR because their GPA did not qualify them to study another subject

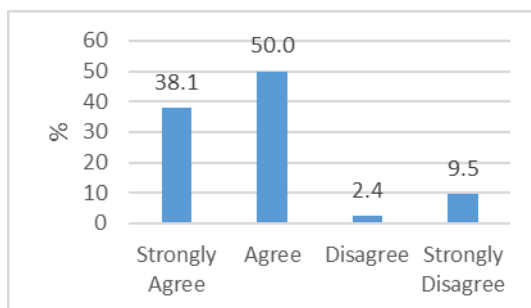


Figure 8. Students whose decision to study PR was linked to confidence in communication skills

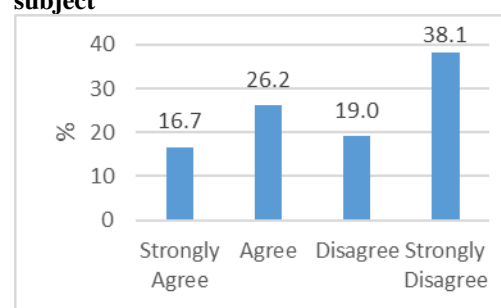


Figure 10 Students studying PR due to their cognitive desire and interest

Concerning university-related factors, we also considered the opinions of the PR students on the influence of Al Ain University's guide, website, and reputation on their decision to study their major.

From the students' point of view, as shown in Figure 11, 9.5% and 42.9% of students strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that Al Ain University guided them in their decision to study PR. In contrast, 21.4% and 26.2% disagreed and strongly disagreed,

respectively. Concerning the website, the promotion of PR courses on the university website seems to have had no impact on the choice of 78.6% of PR students to choose to study this major, but it did impact 16.7%, and strongly impacted 4.8% of the sample's decision to study it (Figure 12). On the other hand, only 14.3% and 19% of the sample strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that they had chosen PR because of Al Ain University's reputation for providing scientific, technical and logistical assistance with this specialization;

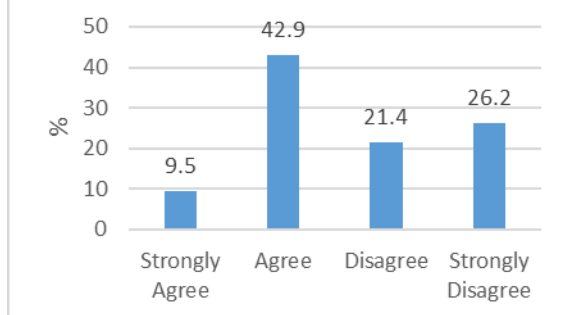


Figure 11. The Al Ain University guide to helped the students choose their degree

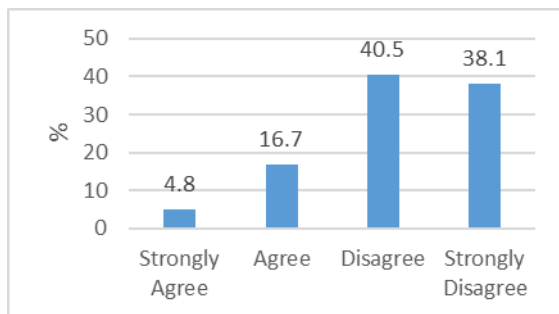


Figure 12. The Al Ain University website helped the students choose their degree

In the final category of other related factors, we investigated the effect of positive media content, and the easiness of PR as a degree course. Figure 15 below shows that 9.5% strongly agreed and 26% agreed (a total of 35.7%) that they had chosen to study PR due to the influence of positive media content, while 64.3% felt that they had not been so influenced. We were also interested to learn about

however, 42.9% and 23.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively (Figure 13).

We also found that from the students' perspective, 21.4% strongly agreed, 26.2% agreed, 23.8% disagreed, and 28.6% strongly disagreed that they chose PR because of their conviction of the competence and proficiency of the instructors of this specialization at Al Ain University (Figure 14). Clearly, the university needs to market its services and increase its reputation in its target recruitment regions.

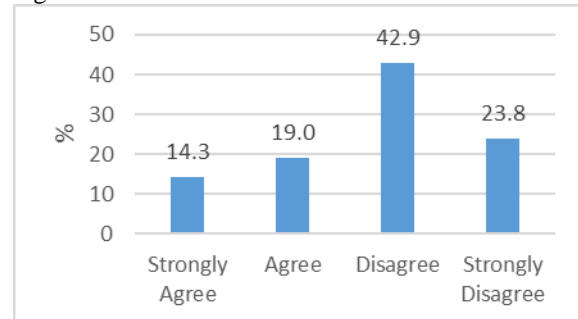


Figure 13. Al Ain University's reputation helped the students choose their degree

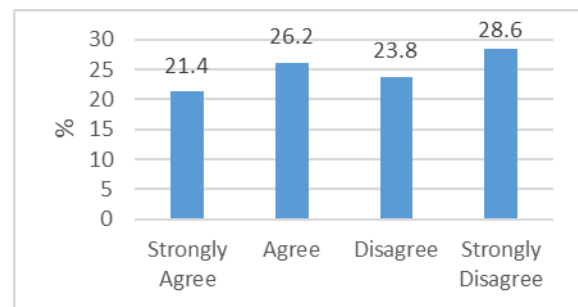


Figure 14. Al Ain University instructors' proficiency helped the students choose their degree

students' previous perceptions of the easiness of PR in connection to their decision to study it. Figure 16 shows that 61.9% of the PR students either strongly agreed or agreed (respectively, 23.8% and 38.1%) that they thought a PR degree would be easy to study, whereas 26.2% disagreed and 11.9% strongly disagreed (38.1% in total).

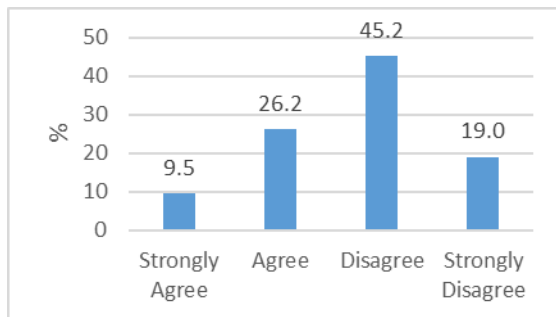


Figure 15. Choosing to study PR because of its positive media content

Students' Frame of Mind about their Future Careers

As shown in Figure 17, only 5% of these PR students disagreed that their major qualifies them for suitable jobs in the future, whereas the rest, i.e. 88.1% (26.2% strongly agreed and 61.9% agreed), felt that studying PR qualifies them well for the future. Half of the

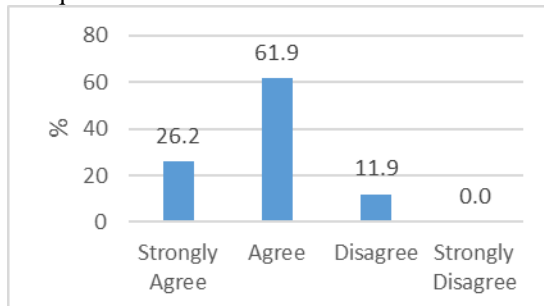


Figure 17. Students' perception of their PR qualification for finding a suitable job

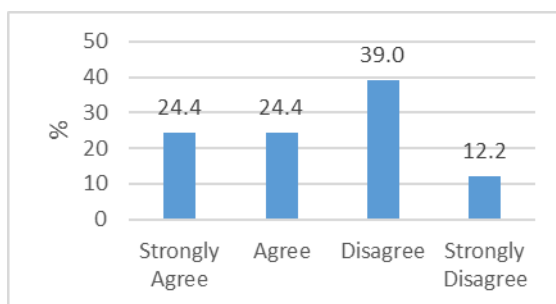


Figure 18. Distribution of PR students according to their desire to work for PR agencies

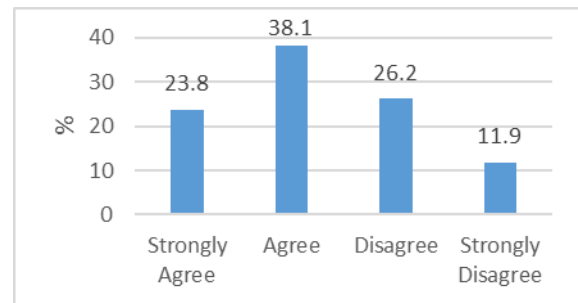


Figure 16. Students' previous perceptions of the easiness of PR degrees

study sample were not interested in working for PR agencies in the future (Figure 18). When asked about plans to work in the government sector, 83.4% planned to and no one was against it (Figure 19). Regarding working for administrative and consulting institutions, 80.9 % of the sample planned to but the rest did not (Figure 20).

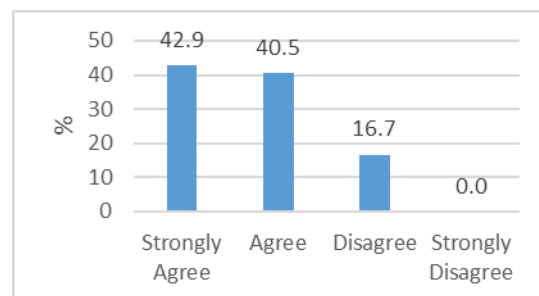


Figure 19. Distribution of PR students according to their desire to work in the government sector

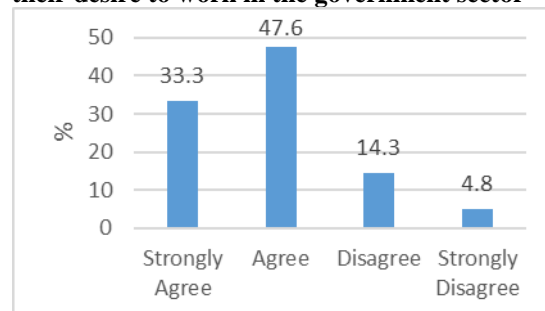


Figure 20. Distribution of PR students according to their desire to work in administrative and consulting institutions

Level of Satisfaction among the PR students

We were also interested to learn about how satisfied the PR students were with their choice of field in the College of Communication and Media at Al Ain University. We found that the majority (64.3%) were satisfied, 14.3% were not sure, and 21.4% were unsatisfied (Figure 21).

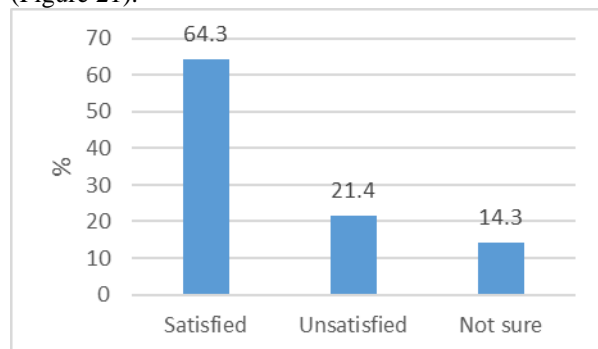


Figure 21. PR students' satisfaction with choosing PR at Al Ain University

Results

The influence of students' friends was the primary factor affecting this sample's choice to enrol in Al Ain University (AAU) on a PR degree, but the influence of their parents and work authorities also had a clear influence on their selection. Based on these findings, these PR students, who will soon be practitioners, should feel that they are completely satisfied with entering the workplace. Moreover, Al Ain University should consider this conclusion. Indeed, most of the PR students at Al Ain University did not choose the subject in order to find a suitable job opportunity after graduation due to the fact that they were currently employed in different sectors and departments. Most AAU PR students were also not concerned about finances because most received scholarships from their workplace.

On the other hand, the percentage of females enrolled in the PR course was high compared to males, which can be attributed to the fact that females in the UAE have strong, confident and successful personalities compared to males. Females seem to be more willing to work in PR because they tend to collaborate more, prefer working in teams, and are better social listeners than males, possibly due to the government's support for women's empowerment. The feminization of PR is also linked to the job market. Journalism is both poorly paid and a very unstable industry for males in the UAE, but PR is a growing market. In this regard, the university student advisory system must communicate effectively with students and their parents to ensure that they understand PR as a course and how to achieve in it. In general, universities can assist students and enable them to choose their courses consistently by giving them adequate knowledge of the background and courses appropriate to their subject.

According to the research sample, PR students at AAU are highly satisfied with their field, but the following five recommendations can be made:

1. As shown in Table 3, 66.6% of the students did not plan to study PR prior to leaving secondary school. In the dramatically changing field of education in the context of COVID-19, AAU must pay close attention to the importance of building targeted strategies to increase interest and attract the students to PR.
2. AAU should adopt new strategies and/or activities to target a wider student community of different nationalities and countries, especially if E-education remains dominant after the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to increase the number of students in the field of PR.
3. AAU should adopt advanced and sustainable campaigns to portray the university's position in general, and the College of Media and Communication in particular, using all appropriate media.
4. Media and communication colleges, in particular, should encourage and support their staff to be more active and effective on social media to generate greater digital student enrolment.
5. Since a strong academic reputation leads to more student enrolment in the college, we recommend that the faculties/colleges of media and communications encourage and support academic research.

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