

Public Relations in the Post-Truth Era: Evaluating the Field from the Perspective of Practitioners in Türkiye

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Abstract

This study examines public-relations practices in the post-truth era from the perspective of public-relations practitioners in Türkiye. To discover how they professionally experience and evaluate the post-truth era, this study employs a qualitative research methodology using in-depth interviews conducted with public-relations practitioners working in public-relations agencies. Through a thematic analysis of the data obtained from these interviews, the study concludes that public-relations practitioners in Türkiye have adapted to the requirements of the post-truth era and view their work within this framework. More specifically, the findings suggest that public-relations practitioners emphasize the importance of disseminating accurate information in an uncertain information environment. In this context, accuracy, transparency, and clarity arise as the three most important themes in the dynamics of public-relations practices in the post-truth era. These themes contribute to the understanding of how public-relations strategies are shaped amid the confusion of information and perception of the post-truth age. The study also sheds light on the role of public-relations practitioners in this process. In summary, the study seeks to clarify, from the perspective of public-relations practitioners, the changing situation of public-relations practices in the post-truth era, where cognitive biases, information overload, and disinformation interrupt the communication between organizations and their target audiences. It emphasizes the importance of awareness of the post-truth period for the field of public relations and draws attention to the need to disseminate this awareness. The findings obtained in this study contribute on both fronts, offering insights to professionals and researchers in the field.

Keywords: Post-truth age, public relations, new media, fake news, strategic communication management

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Hakikat-Sonrası Dönemde Halkla İlişkiler: Halkla İlişkiler Uygulayıcılarının Perspektifinden Uygulama Alanının Değerlendirilmesi

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Öz

Bu çalışma, hakikat-sonrası dönemdeki halkla ilişkiler uygulamalarını Türkiye'deki halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Böylece, onların bu dönemi mesleki olarak nasıl deneyimlediklerini ve değerlendirdiklerini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, nitel araştırma metodolojisi takip edilerek, halkla ilişkiler ajanslarında çalışan halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcıları ile derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmelerden elde edilen verilerin tematik analizi sonucunda, Türkiye'deki halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının hakikat-sonrası dönemin gerekliliklerine uyum sağladıkları ve çalışmalarını söz konusu çerçeveye dahil ettikleri sonucuna varılmıştır. Daha belirgin bir biçimde sonuca yaklaşmak gerekirse, bulgular, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının yoğun enformasyon ve bilişsel önyargılarla örülü hakikat-sonrası dönem atmosferinde doğru bilgi yaymanın önemini vurguladığını göstermektedir. Doğru bilgi yaymaya atfedilen bu önemle birlikte, hakikat-sonrası dönemde yürütülen halkla ilişkiler uygulamalarının dinamikleri için doğruluk, şeffaflık ve netlik üzerinde durulan üç ana tema olarak belirginleşmektedir. Araştırma sonucunda keşfedilen bu temalar, hakikat-sonrası çağın enformasyon ve algı karmaşasında halkla ilişkiler stratejilerinin nasıl şekillendiğinin anlaşılmasına katkı sunarken, ayrıca, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının bu dönemdeki rolünü de aydınlatmaktadır. Genel olarak değerlendirildiğinde, araştırma, halkla ilişkiler uygulama alanı için hakikat-sonrası dönemin farkındalığının önemini vurgulamakla birlikte, bu farkındalığın yaygınlaştırılması gereğine de dikkat çekmektedir. Hakikat-sonrası çağda bilişsel önyargılar ve dezenformasyon, kuruluşlar ile hedef kitleleri arasındaki iletişimi kesintiye uğratarak bu sürecin devamlılığını zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, hakikat-sonrası çağda halkla ilişkiler uygulamalarının değişen durumunu halkla ilişkiler uzmanlarının bakış açısıyla ele almıştır. Konu çerçevesindeki tartışmaların ve bu çalışmada elde edilen bulguların bir araya getirilmesiyle, incelenen sürecin kapsamlı bir bakış açısıyla anlamlandırılmasına katkı sağlanmıştır. Çalışma, halkla ilişkilerin meslek uzmanlarına ve halkla ilişkiler alanındaki araştırmacılara içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hakikat-sonrası dönem, halkla ilişkiler, yeni medya, sahte haber, stratejik iletişim yönetimi

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The post-truth era, which is characterized by prioritizing emotional objections over objective facts, has led to a shift in the way information is disseminated and perceived.¹ This shift has become evident during major events such as the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president, where misinformation and “alternative facts” have played a significant role in shaping public opinion (Fischer 2021). The prevalence of fake news in the political environment has been exacerbated by the proliferation of digital technologies and the multiplicity of communication channels available in the post-truth era. In the post-truth era, traditional notions of truth and objectivity have been challenged, with beliefs and opinions often replacing verifiable facts (Keyes 2021; McIntyre 2019; Thompson 2020; Alpay 2021). The existence of this phenomenon has led to the emergence of an important field of study in the field of public relations to explore the dynamics that play a role in contemporary communication environments within the framework of postmodernism and post-truth.

In this context, researchers have explored the intersection points of postmodern culture and public relations, emphasizing the importance of understanding campaigns and communication strategies in a postmodernist framework (Artan-Özoran 2021). This approach emphasizes the need to adapt public relations practices to the complexities of a postmodern world, where narratives and perceptions have a significant impact.

The evolution of public relations in the post-truth era has raised concerns

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about fact-checking and the dissemination of accurate information, especially in an environment where subjective beliefs and emotions often overshadow objective data (Wang 2022). Drawing on postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Eco, scholars have conceptualized public relations as a narrative that shapes perceptions and relationships with various peoples (Radford 2012). In addition, the concept of “pseudo-events” in postmodern public relations has been explored, emphasizing the construction of events and narratives to engage audiences in a postmodern world characterized by fluidity and uncertainty (Artan-Özoran 2018). The role of postmodern public relations practitioners as organizational activists has been emphasized, demonstrating the dismantling of traditional power structures and resistance from the margins in communication practices (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002).

The intertwining of post-truth and public relations has been a topic of academic research that has often grappled with issues of credibility and propaganda, focusing on how public relations shapes public perceptions and accepted truths (Ihlen et al. 2019). Scholars have called for multi-level reforms in public communication practices to address the effects of the post-truth phenomenon on various industries such as advertising, marketing, public relations, and journalism (Macnamara 2021). Verbeek examines how public relations strategies led to the creation of a post-truth political situation during the Trump administration (2017). Moreover, Thompson has explored the role, routine, and repercussions of public relations in the age of populism, post-truth, and fake news (2020). The aim of her research is to explore whether and how public relations processes create post-truth social conditions and how public relations practice participates in this. As such, he has used many case studies and interviews with public relations professionals from many countries to trace how they deal with their key communicative mediation role in the contemporary field of digital disinformation.

In the context of communication, the concept of post-truth has been examined, and the use of language and discourse characterized by post-truth mechanisms and their effects on public communication have been emphasized (Gobber 2019). Trust in the media and journalistic credibility have come under scrutiny in a sea of misinformation, highlighting the need to measure credibility in the post-truth era and address challenges related to trust in the media (Christofoletti 2024). As a result, the combination of postmodernism and post-truth has significantly affected the field of public relations, challenging traditional communication practices. Current research

has highlighted the need to adapt to changing narratives and perceptions and to engage critically.

Based on this context, the role of public relations professionals becomes especially important in this situation as they operate in the field of managing perceptions, reputations, and crises surrounded by the massive impact of social media, traditional media, advertisements, political propaganda, and other factors. Indeed, public relations practitioners might play an unprecedented role in shaping the public messages and influence, mainly because the area in which their messages are placed is oversaturated by emotions and personal beliefs. This is why the present paper aims to investigate how public relations professionals are evaluated and what their experiences are within this framework.

Therefore, the paper will apply a qualitative research to explore the insights that can be obtained from public relations practitioners about their professional activity in the post-truth era. The proposed study is designed to offer a unique perspective on the professional issues that practitioners need to deal with in their jobs on a daily basis. The research will enable an understanding of the challenges that professionals face and the opportunities they have in the era of post-truth in the context of Türkiye. The data will help to assess the future perspectives of public relations in light of the current trends. Whilst some studies that discuss the issues related to the current era of post-truth, the majority of studies do not focus on the public relations practitioners; however, none of the works have ventured into the experiences of Turkish public relations sectors. Hence, the present study could contribute significantly to public relations.

Understanding Postmodern Human: Journey Between Truth, Reality and Manipulation

While reality is based on the objective existence of things that do not depend on humans' beliefs or perceptions, truth refers to a distinctive idea that arises from the human mind and relies on individual consciousness (Alpay 2021, 27-28). Thus, reality in this context is the phenomenon of the material continuum existing independently of human will and opinion and having an objective and factual basis. In contrast, truth is based on a person's subjective opinion and experience, which inevitably changes its meaning (James 1922). Therefore, truth can vary from person to person and mean different things to each individual.

For many centuries, the concept of truth has undergone drastic changes, especially during the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period. In medieval societies the definition of truth was defined by religious leaders or religious beliefs, which united society. Then in the modern period, the scientific method and factual analysis became the basis of truth (Kuhn 2017; Paine 2013; Weber 1947).

As a result, those who disagreed with the objective reality of modernism began to move away from the extensive perception of reality, to move away from the truth. For this reason, some characterize modernity as a transition from a magical world to a disenchanted world (Ritzer 2010).

Modernism, with its emphasis on rationality and rejection of mystical elements, aimed to establish a rational connection between humanity and the divine. This approach has its origins in Max Weber's concept of "disenchantment". According to Weber, modernity is a process in which the world loses its magic and everything is dealt with rational and scientific explanations (Jenkins 2000). However, as Weber noted, this approach left many feeling devoid of life's enchantment, leading to a sense of emptiness among the masses. Consequently, those who disagreed with modernism's objective reality began to retreat from perceiving reality extensively, drifting away from truth. For this reason, some characterize modernity as a transition from a magical world to a disenchanted one (Ritzer 2010). Meanwhile, attempts have started to be made by those who wielded the power of economic and political power to subvert reality to strengthen their claim to sovereignty.

At this point, postmodernism comes into play. Postmodernism opposes modernism's emphasis on rationality and objectivity, arguing that reality and knowledge are relative. Postmodernist thought emphasizes the right of individuals to create their own realities and the validity of each individual's experience (Jameson 1991; Nehamas 2000; Cevizci 2005). This played an important role in the emergence of the post-truth era. Post-truth describes a period in which facts are replaced by emotions and personal beliefs (McIntyre 2019). In this context, the postmodern human is one who establishes his own reality and truths, rejecting authoritative and objective concepts of reality.

In this situation, the media has the ability to sway public opinion and create a reality that benefits the interests of those in power (McIntyre 2019). By manipulating reality in this way, those in power maintain their control over the narrative, expand their sphere of sovereignty and produce consent in the

public in line with their interests (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Consequently, the portions of reality that contradict the gains are shown in the dark and on the other hand, persons who experience reality have started to filter it through the filter of their personal feelings, beliefs, and convictions (McIntyre 2019).

To deepen the discussion in this context, Baudrillard highlights the emergence of a new concept in the context of reality: the simulacrum known as “the fake of the fake” distinct from the traditional dichotomy between the original and the counterfeit (2011, 14-15). In this scenario, the reference point for falsehood is no longer the authentic, but a fabricated deception, making it increasingly challenging to discern the source of truth. In addition to Baudrillard’s view, Alpay underlines that in today’s society, where the pursuit of pleasure takes precedence over the pursuit of reality, the possibility of reaching the truth is diminishing (2021, 38). The masses, driven by the pursuit of pleasure, prefer the easily accessible “simulacra of reality” provided by the mass media and move further away from the search for truth.

Furthermore, in the discourse of postmodernism, perspectives vary and everything is subject to change depending on the viewpoint of the observer. This postmodernist perspective suggests that truth is relative, and absolute certainty is unattainable (Jameson 1991). On a broader level, the relativistic perspective denies the existence of objective truth and certainty. This implies that respect for expertise and established knowledge has drastically diminished whereas the uncertainty from doubtful resources has skyrocketed. The structure of expertise, which is a critical tenet, has also crumbled, leaving room for anyone who articulates populist language to rise and position themselves favorably on the social ladder (Nichols 2017). Consequently, the possibility of permeating space for people to agree on the truth has become significantly difficult. In summary, the interaction between modernism, postmodernism, and power’s manipulation of reality has led us to question the traditional notions of objective reality and certainty. This situation has created a social environment that makes it difficult to understand the truth.

Post-truth: Is It Just an Attempt to Reinvent the Existing?

Post-truth, a concept first introduced by Steve Tesich (1992) and further popularized by his criticism of the era of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, can be defined as truth ceasing to hold any relevance in the conversation and discourse. Tesich associates this with the notion of cultural and societal manipulation, where leaders of the people unabashedly lied and

misrepresented the facts. In the face of these lies presented by the leaders, the people prefer the lies that paint a better picture of their country to the facts that make their country look weak.

Since then, the term has surged in popularity, particularly during key events like the American Presidential Elections and the UK's European Union Referendum, which took place in 2016. Oxford Languages even deemed it the word of the year in 2016 (Oxford Languages 2016). Today, discussions surrounding post-truth permeate various domains, from politics to public relations and media, sparking intense debate and reflection on the nature of truth and its role in shaping society.

Debates surrounding the concept of post-truth often revolve around whether it represents a mere rebranding of existing ideas or signifies a genuinely novel phenomenon. Post-truth as a concept has sparked debate about its novelty. In this respect, Fuller argues that post-truth is not a new phenomenon, arguing that the disconnect between external reality and reality narratives that claim epistemic authority has always existed (2018). This perspective implies that the essence of post-truth has historical roots and is not a new development.

In contrast, McIntyre contends that while truth has encountered numerous challenges throughout history, what distinguishes the post-truth era is its deliberate relegation of reality to a subordinate position in the political arena (2019, 22). Here, the noteworthy aspect is not merely the challenge to truth itself, but rather the questioning of truth as a "mechanism of political domination".

Illustrative examples from recent political discourse bring to light the effort to operationalization of post-truth as a means to gain political advantage. During the 2016 US Presidential Election, Newt Gingrich remarked to CNN's Alisyn Camerota that what people "feel" about crime rates, regardless of FBI statistics indicating a decline, holds greater significance (CNN 2016). This statement exemplifies the prioritization of emotions over factual data to make sense of the "post-truth as a means of gaining a political advantage". Another telling instance occurred on January 22, 2017, when White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer inaccurately reported attendance numbers at Donald Trump's inauguration. Kellyanne Conway, a senior advisor to President Trump, defended Spicer's false statement by invoking the concept of "alternative facts" (Blake, 2017). These examples highlight a concerted

effort to elevate emotions over empirical evidence in order to advance political agendas and expand the influence of the post-truth mechanism among those in power.

In order to understand the originality of the post-truth concept, it is also important to understand how reality is perceived in the context of the new media order. Traditional editorial roles, once paramount in ensuring the integrity of news production, have been supplanted by algorithms tailored to the economic dynamics of social media in the new media environment. Consequently, the decline of traditional media's influence has diminished the role of editors as gatekeepers, weakening the expert control and hierarchy-based media structures that once upheld fact-based news production (Thompson 2020, 98-154).

The internet, which offers a combination of both accurate information and misleading content, has created an atmosphere of uncertainty for truth-seeking efforts. In a similar context, Edelman's Trust Barometer survey reported that media were perceived as untrustworthy in most of the participating countries, as well as a decline in global trust in media (Edelman 2017). Moreover, social media platforms tend to promote echo chambers (Sunstein 2007) by bringing users together with other like-minded users, thereby further polarizing their viewpoints and consequently contributing to the rise of the post-truth era.

This polarization may contribute to the greater penetration of post-truth into society, as the post-truth age is not an age in which knowledge is evaluated in terms of truth and falsity (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). In this era, people are more likely to rely on information that supports their views while rejecting information that differs from what they believe.

Moreover, the dynamics of the new media structures the action among media platforms and users complicate the process of finding the truth. The attention economy promotes the idea of an abundance of information but a scarcity of attention, creating the mechanics within which sensational and controversial stories receive more attention (Simon 1971). Such attention dynamics create an ideal environment for false narratives and clickbait headlines, which promote the spread of fake news and misconceptions, the hallmarks of post-truth (McIntyre 2019, 102). Therefore, rather than being the cause of the post-truth era, new media can be seen as exacerbating its emergence. In this context, new media functions as a tool that shapes social perceptions and affects the dynamics of truth-seeking efforts.

The dynamics of new media structures complicate the process of finding truth between media platforms and their users. The attention economy, which emphasizes the abundance of information but the scarcity of attention, creates an environment in which sensational and controversial stories are more focused (Simon 1971). This dynamic encourages the spread of false narratives and clickbait headlines that are the hallmark of the post-truth era (McIntyre 2019, 102). As a result, while new media is not the root cause of the post-truth era, it exacerbates its emergence. In this context, new media functions as a tool that shapes social perceptions and influences the dynamics of truth-seeking efforts.

Public Relations Practices in the Post-Truth Era

In contemporary society, communication tasks for various organizations have expanded to encompass a wide array of roles, including advising managers, executing communication programs, and crafting content and publications (Grunig 2005, 11). Public relations, occupying a pivotal position in these conditions, finds itself amidst contentious debates concerning truth and reality.

Divergent perspectives exist regarding the purpose of public relations. While some perceive it as a manipulative instrument, others contend that its role is to disseminate information, facilitate conflict resolution, and foster mutual understanding. It is worth mentioning that Habermas (2003) fiercely criticize public relations as dangerous for the public sphere: biased discourses that was shaped by public relations that serve narrow interests always express corporate selfish motives and it harms the public good. On the other hand, Grunig (et. al. 2005) acknowledge public relations' manipulative nature, although they claim for idealistic, critical, and symmetrical, values-driven use of the approach, grounded on the principles of transparency and mutual profit.

The development of technology, the emergence of social media, and quick digitalization have brought public relations into a new era. This transformation is further accentuated by the changes in social perceptions of truth and reality, which are especially evident in the post-truth period. For example, in 2016, Apple was presented with an enormous tax bill payment by the European Union Commission after the Commission concluded that Apple had obtained unfair tax advantages from Ireland. The Commission found that Ireland allowed Apple to pay significantly less tax than other businesses

for many years, which constituted illegal state aid under EU rules. In such a circumstance, Apple switched conventional public relations response by publicly opposing the appeal instead of negotiating it or honestly agreeing with the commission and promising to pay the bill. The decision was called “political nonsense” by the brand (Reuters 2016). This example demonstrates how public relations practice depends on post-truth.

When searching public relations in the post-truth era, it is crucial to address the dual nature of its role. Professionals in communication fields such as advertising, marketing, public relations, government, and journalism play an important role in shaping public discourse and perception; these professionals can either perpetuate post-truth narratives or work against them through ethical concerns and a commitment to truth (Macnamara 2021). According to Thompson, the preference of public relations in the post-truth era has been to adapt to and maintain post-truth by combining traditional implementation approaches with an advanced digital marketing toolkit (2020, 129-130). The result of such a blend is the alignment between traditional message crafting, targeting, and distribution and digital marketing strategies, data analytics, and SEO. Moreover, to succeed in such an environment, public relations professionals master all existing approaches by utilizing the possibilities of traditional media and the enormous scope of online resources. The public relations practices of the post-truth era have become especially visible in the wake of the revelations surrounding Cambridge Analytica’s effective engagement strategies in 2018. This included the production of deceptive political content, the orchestration of trap schemes based on false allegations of corruption, and the meticulous curation of audience profiles based on nuanced societal concerns on social media platforms, especially Facebook.

On the other hand, according to Macnamara (2021), public relations also has the potential to serve as a defense against post-truth tendencies. In this context, public relations professionals can play an important role in maintaining truth and transparency. Efforts to combat post-truth practices in public relations encompass a multi-pronged strategy. One of these strategies includes advocating for reforms at various levels, such as top-down initiatives such as updated regulations and legislation, bottom-up strategies such as increasing media literacy, and a focus on ethics and standards within the profession. By addressing these issues, public relations can actively strive to counter the spread of misinformation and promote a more accurate narrative.

Public relations practitioners must work in an environment where truth is subjective and public debates are mostly about alternative facts. The profession also plays the role of taking advantage of post-truth situations and maintaining them (Ihlen et al. 2019, 1). The new shift in public relations forces public relations specialists to explore and sometimes exploit intricacies of the most challenging contemporary societal issues. However, this raises concerns about ethics and social responsibility. One of the most striking examples is the Bell Pottinger scandal. The misleading public relations campaign was based on SEO efforts, Wikipedia editing, creating fake social media accounts. Public relations tools were used to highlight claims that white monopoly capital controlled South Africa. The main effort here was to spread the narrative that the Gupta family was the target of such discrediting because of its Indian origin. Bell Pottinger attempted to surreptitiously disseminate negative public relations content directed at the opposition, including racist articles, cartoons, blogs and Twitter posts. The strategy fuelled racism and discrimination in South Africa, leading to public outrage (Caesar 2018). However, according to one opinion, the post-truth environment poses significant ethical and practical challenges for public relations. The profession must critically engage with these issues, promote rational and evidence-based public debate, and advance professionalism through rigorous standards of evaluation (Ihlen et al. 2019, 2).

In summary, the evolution of public relations in the post-truth era emphasizes the integration of traditional methods with digital innovation. However, a resolute commitment to ethical principles and social responsibility emerges as an important element to protect against this transformation, the spread of disinformation and the exacerbation of social divisions.

Research

The Purpose and Importance of the Research

The research investigates how public relations practitioners operating in Türkiye cope with and perceive the changes in their professional fields in the post-truth era. This study can be defined as an attempt to gain a comprehensive perspective on public relations in the case of Türkiye in a situation where factual information is scarce and a common truth is uncertain.

As stated in the introduction section of the study, previous studies in the context of post-truth, postmodernism and public relations emphasize the

need for public relations to adapt and take a critical approach to changing narratives and perceptions.

Based on this context, this research was designed by focusing on public relations practitioners in Türkiye. While attempting to ascertain the attitudes and practices of real-life professionals operating in a distinct cultural and political environment, the study ultimately provides perspective on public relations practices and adaptations during the post-truth era. Consequently, this focus contributes to a brighter perception of public relations as a field associated within specific cultures and the political conditions.

The study's original contributions lie in its direct engagement with Turkish practitioners, offering first-hand accounts of their strategies and experiences. Moreover, it examines the methods employed in Turkish public relations against the backdrop of the post-truth era, thereby informing discussions on the future trajectory of the field both domestically and internationally.

Methodology of the Research

Interviews, being a frequent practice in qualitative projects, were the research method used to collect information from the participants, who were public relations experts.

The strength of this type of methodology lies in its ability to open participants' insights for discussion, as well as the opportunity to explore uncertainty. It also provides the opportunity to observe the participant's gestures and facial expressions. Thus, live reactions and body language data can also be obtained, complementing the participants' verbal responses (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). In this way, researchers can have a multifaceted perspective on the issue at hand. This approach seems appropriate for investigating issues related to the Turkish public relations sector, especially in the context of the post-truth world.

In this direction, a common qualitative data collection technique that offers an advantage with its flexibility was preferred in the research methodology (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). Subsequently, the interview method was deepened to investigate the issue by gathering detailed insights from public relations practitioners.

In this context, an in-depth interviewing does not only create a means to recognize how participants reconstruct reality. It additionally gives them

the possibility to articulate their views on everything (Punch 2005, 166). Therefore, it provides the researcher with a way to obtain meaningful and in-depth data and to fully grasp certain social actions or relations (Kümbetoğlu 2008, 72). Consequently, it is believed that such a method was appropriate for untangling the challenges of public relations in Türkiye, taking into account the specificities of the post-truth period.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for both depth and flexibility in gathering information during the research process. Ethics committee approval was obtained for this research, confidentiality assurance was given to the participants before starting the interviews, and an informed consent form was read. Participants were assured of confidentiality. Face-to-face and online interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. Later, the audio recordings of the meeting were transcribed.

The main research question, accompanied by sub-questions, guided the interview process:

Main Question
What characteristics define public relations practices in Türkiye during the post-truth era, and what insights do practitioners offer regarding this phenomenon?
Sub-Questions
1. What underlies public relations practices in the post-truth era, and what challenges and opportunities does this present for practitioners?
2. What strategies do public relations practitioners employ to ensure effectiveness in the post-truth era?
3. How do different media tools, including social media, influence public relations practices in the post-truth era?
4. When designing a campaign in the post-truth era, what factors do public relations practitioners take into account?

Table 1: Research Questions

The data collection involved face-to-face and online interviews conducted with public relations professionals. The researchers of the study assumed the role of interviewer and the data were collected by the researcher personally. These interviews were guided by the semi-structured interview form (Appendix-1), ensuring consistency while allowing for spontaneous insights.

Subsequently, the collected data were analyzed with the thematic analysis technique within the context of relevant theories and perspectives, aiming to illuminate the intricacies of public relations practices in Türkiye amid the challenges of the post-truth era.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that involves organizing and analyzing data around specific themes or patterns. Thematic analysis can be expressed as a type of pattern recognition method in which emerging themes serve as categories for analysis. Thus, it is tried to understand how and why these themes emerged, under what conditions they were seen, and what kind of consequences they had (Bowen 2009). With these advantages, thematic analysis is especially useful for interviewing, focus group discussions, and finding repetitive patterns of meaning when working with other text-based data sources (Braun and Clarke 2006). In this context, thematic analysis was preferred because it was considered to be an ideal approach for the systematic study of large data obtained from in-depth interviews. This method is thought to be useful for understanding and explaining the complex and multidimensional experiences of public relations professionals in the post-truth era.

This analysis also utilizes the theoretical approaches presented in McIntyre's (2019) "Post-Truth" and Thompson's (2020) "Post-Truth Public Relations". McIntyre's work helps us understand the ways in which reality is perceived and presented in the post-truth era, while Thompson's work allows us to examine how public relations practices have evolved and adapted in this new era. These theoretical frameworks have helped us to examine the dynamics of the post-truth era and their reflections on public relations practices in Türkiye in more depth.

Sample of the Research

Given the focus on Türkiye, the research sample is comprised solely of practitioners employed in public relations agencies within the country. This choice can be expressed as the limitation of the research. Agency employees face a variety of post-truth challenges by working with different clients and industries. Accordingly, they develop strategies to address these challenges. This diversity will allow to observe a wider range of the effects of the post-truth period in this study. However, in future research, the research can be taken one step further with a study to be carried out with a sample group including in-house public relations experts.

Employing a snowball sampling approach, seven participants were selected for interviews, representing a diverse range of educational backgrounds and professional experiences.

Participant	Education Level	Interview Date
1	Master's Degree	07.12.2022
2	Associate's Degree	12.12.2022
3	Bachelor's Degree	15.12.2022
4	Bachelor's Degree	01.02.2023
5	Bachelor's Degree	24.02.2023
6	Bachelor's Degree	10.03.2023
7	Master's degree	24.03.2023

Table 2: Participants' Education Level and Date of the Interview

Participants' educational qualifications varied, with degrees ranging from Associate's to Master's level. Additionally, their professional backgrounds encompassed diverse roles both within and outside the field of public relations. Meanwhile, the participants' occupational profiles also added value to the sample as they were a combination of individuals from various industries and roles inside public relations agencies.

Participant	Outside Experience	Public Relations Experience	Agency Structure
1	Press Consultant (10 years)	Media Director (5 years)	Foreign-based Public Relations Company (Türkiye Office)
2	Corporate Communications Staff (6 months)	Brand Manager and Media Director (14 years)	Public Relations Agency with Global and Local Partners
3	Magazine and Newspaper Editor, Communications Consultant, Corporate Communications Manager (14 years)	Media Director (5 years)	Foreign-based Public Relations Company (Türkiye Office)

Participant	Outside Experience	Public Relations Experience	Agency Structure
4	Magazine and Newspaper Editor, Media Representative, Editor-in-Chief (14 years)	Director of Customer Relations (2 years)	Local Public Relations Agency
5	-	Media Representative and Media Director (23 years)	Local Public Relations Agency
6	-	Brand Director (6 years)	Public Relations Agency with Global and Local Partners
7	Business Manager in Food and Beverage Industry (10 years)	Group Brand Director (8 years)	Local Public Relations Agency

Table 3: Occupational Information of the Participants

Limitations, Validity and Reliability of the Research

This study explores the field of public relations practice in İstanbul, focusing on communication management professionals servicing different brands. While operating within one city and one segment of public relations industry limits suggestiveness to other contexts. In relation to this, this study acknowledges inherent limitations. First, participants' experience, expertise, and views are subjective, whereas this study aims to be clear and objective. Second, four months, during which interviews were carried out, may be insufficient to reflect the changing trends, strategies, and tactics of the complex and fast-evolving field as public relations.

A conscious effort has been made to mitigate the impact of these limitations on research and to increase the validity and reliability of this study. In this context, validity refers to the procedures used to ensure that the findings are indeed correct and true while reliability involves the clarity and completeness of the recording and reporting process to enable other researchers to verify the methods (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013, 255-274). As a result, the above criteria are critical aspects of any qualitative research.

With that in mind, internal validity was improved by consistent questioning, recording responses carefully, and maintaining various

perspectives and an objective view. At the same time, external validity was optimized by carrying out interviews with attachment to relevant experience in the sector and recording data in meticulous detail to promote reproducibility and application in various contexts.

In terms of internal reliability, establishing a trusting rapport with participants and encouraging sincerity, coupled with structured questioning, has promoted data consistency, verified through thorough re-evaluation. External reliability has been bolstered by diversifying participant demographics and extensive documentation of data collection methods.

In addition, thematic analysis technique was used in the analysis process of the collected data. Nowell (et al. 2017) propose a 6-step path to ensure reliability at every stage of thematic analysis. This path includes steps such as (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing reports with exemplary citations. This path was followed in the analysis process of the study.

These measures collectively enhance the credibility and utility of the research findings, paving the way for broader application and interpretation within the field of public relations practice.

Findings

The current study investigates public relations practices in Türkiye using a post-truth approach. A thematic analysis was performed on the interview data, following the steps suggested by Nowell and an extensive data set was obtained (et al. 2017). Later, the results were summarized and categorized into 12 groups, each revealing participants' behavior, attitude, or opinion to identify recurring trends. This technique will facilitate the emphasis on the main sections, providing the audience with an in-depth explanation and interpretation of the results, and therefore this chosen technique is considered to be compatible with the purpose of the article. In this way, a framework will be created to deliver a wide range of quality content.

Increase in the Spread of Fake News in the Media

In the field of public relations, the increase in the spread of fake news is a major issue that directly affects public relations professionals. Deliberately fake news creates difficulty by blurring the lines between truth and falsehood

(Shu et al. 2017). The intertwining of fake news with social media highlights the importance of understanding how public relations strategies are affected by these dynamics. According to one view, fake news is used as a tool in public relations practices. Thus, disinformation plays a role in shaping public relations narratives (Edwards 2020). Furthermore, fake news has a psychological effect known as the “fake news effect”. This effect causes individuals to reject information that does not align with their ideology (van der Linden, Panagopoulos and Roozenbeek 2020). Such biases, brought about by the spread of fake news in contemporary media, can significantly affect public perceptions and attitudes. Thus, it can affect the effectiveness of public relations campaigns that rely on the dissemination of accurate and reliable information.

P4 sheds light on the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon, highlighting the plight of journalists in Türkiye who, faced with inadequate support or external pressures, transition to online platforms to sustain their livelihoods. Therefore, journalists may spread false or distorted content to attract a larger audience and generate more money. According to the participant’s view, economic reasons are directly connected with the promotion of lies in digital media.

If you’re an editor or a reporter in a newspaper, you don’t care if a lot of people read your story. You do it, you deliver it, and you’re done with that news. The topic is closed. But that’s not the case in the new media environment right now. Journalists who cannot find a job open a website or operate on their own social media accounts. Here, too, he publishes false news to reach the reader. There is an urge to follow the result and make people like it. In order to make money, people can be misled in the news by presenting things that do not exist as news (P4).

P6 raises a critical issue concerning the accelerating spread of fake news and highlights that social media serves as an uncontrolled source for newspapers that begin echoing information from these platforms merely to attract the audience. Thus, the possibility that newspapers will start replicating information obtained from social media sources continues growing, and the line between proper journalism and superficial, attention-grabbing stories continues to disintegrate.

Moreover, all public relations participants highlight the idea that social media has a growing influence on the spreading of fake news and facilitating audience access to such content.

The Duality of Communication Management in the Post-Truth Era

Crisis management is a critical problem for public relations specialists, intending to maintain the good reputation of the institution. In the current public relations environment, the emergence of the post-truth era has led to a shift in crisis communication, especially with the widespread influence of social media platforms. Social media has dramatically changed the dynamics of crisis communication by offering a real-time, interactive, and decentralized channel for the dissemination of information during crises. These platforms allow organizations to ensure quick responses and dissemination of important information. However, the unfiltered nature of social media can complicate crisis management efforts by amplifying misinformation and rumors (Lin et al. 2016). Social media platforms have become essential tools for public relations professionals to share information, shape perceptions, and interact with stakeholders during crises. Two-way communication allows organizations to address concerns and gather feedback. Thus, it increases transparency and accountability in crisis communication. Furthermore, social media platforms serve as valuable channels for monitoring and analyzing public sentiment (Chotia, Pillay and Madzimore 2022).

The post-truth era brings new complexities to crisis communication practices. Emotions and personal beliefs take precedence over factual evidence, which leads to the spread of misinformation (McIntyre 2019). The rapid spread of misinformation can affect crisis management efforts, undermining organizational credibility and increasing public confusion (Veil, Buehner and Palenchar 2011). In conclusion, the dual nature of communication management in the post-truth era highlights the transformative impact of social media on crisis communication practices. Public relations professionals must manage communication in an environment where social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for engagement while also presenting significant challenges in managing misinformation and maintaining credibility. Research must illuminate how public relations professionals deal with these challenges.

Participants generally concur that social media can both catalyze crisis formation and expedite its dissemination. The prevailing belief among public relations practitioners, as evidenced by the data, is that amidst the tumult of a crisis, its peak intensity typically spans around three days. P6 further contributes to this discourse by alluding to a common adage in the communication sector, suggesting that silence during the initial stages of a crisis is often regarded as an effective approach: "In crisis communication,

there is birth pain in the first 24 hours, birth occurs at the 48th hour, and the child is already out of the hospital at the 72nd hour” (P6).

P4 extends this perspective, asserting that even within the current media environment, three days constitute a prolonged period, emphasizing the waning allure of a news story after merely twelve hours.

Collectively, these insights highlight the paradoxical nature of the media-driven agenda, wherein the heightened pace of information dissemination can engender desensitization among audiences. Consequently, remaining silent during a crisis may lead to its eventual obscurity. Conversely, the efficacy of messages crafted by public relations professionals on behalf of brands can be compromised due to audience insensitivity.

Ethics of Public Relations Practice in Post-Truth Era

When examining public relations in the context of the post-truth era, the concern of concealing and distorting facts raises ethical questions about the behavior of public relations practitioners. In an age where truth has become subjective, public relations practitioners face the ethical challenge of balancing the duty to protect the truth with the interests of their clients. Market-driven public relations can sometimes prioritize organizational interests over truth and authenticity (Tong and Chan 2020). This leads to concerns about the integrity of public relations practices and ethical considerations. Viewing public relations as a strategic tool emphasizes the need to critically evaluate practitioners’ roles in disseminating information and influencing public opinion (Kriyantono and Anggraini 2020). This highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by public relations practitioners in the post-truth era in reconciling organizational interests with truth and transparency. However, interviews have demonstrated a varying set of reactions to the intentions to distort the truth to serve the organization among Turkish public relations professionals.

In terms of expressing his commitment to personal values, P1 expressed his readiness to refuse cooperation with clients who carry the goal that is contrary to his values. Similarly, P3 has a clear stance on integrity and stated that he would not write a statement that did not transparently reflect the intentions of the organization.

Some people in the public relations industry sometimes have to write things they don’t believe in. I understand those friends, but I don’t agree with them. It’s about personal values (P1).

Before preparing a newsletter for the media, we ask our customers “What happened?”, “How did it happen?”, “When did it happen?”, “Why did it happen?”. Afterwards, we ask the question, “Do you sincerely answer these questions, is this the truth?” If there is the slightest doubt, then we make it clear that we cannot write this statement (P3).

At the same time, although it was observed that the approaches of P5 and P6 had a critical dimension, it was also observed that they did not have clear behaviors like P1 and P3.

No agency wants to miss out on client opportunities but, if the client’s image is really irreparably bad, we don’t take their consultation. If you ask, what do we do in that situation? An attitude such as “We don’t want to meet with you” is not nice, it is not a very polite attitude. We’re seeing each other. We give them a budget that is too high for them to accept. That’s our tactic in a situation like this (P5).

In general, there is also a prevalence of criticism and resistance in the field of public relations, when it comes to the context of manipulating facts to create a close alignment with the interests of the organization. P1 and P3 are examples of those who have expressed their resistance to this practice, and the emergence of more ethical concerns asserts the existence of this tendency in the field of local public relations.

The Key to Public Relations Practice: Transparency, Accuracy, and Clarity

Given the arrival of the post-truth era and the significant sociological changes that it entailed, a new perspective on communication strategies with the general populace is needed. The participants were asked to determine how exactly the public relations practices should be described in this particular era. According to the responses, one can conclude that it is more reasonable to focus on solid social responsibility activities that are transparent, accurate, and clear than the activities that use pathos and other emotional elements. In addition, based on the testimony of the participants, improving the environment, solving sustainability problems, and promoting education should be prioritized.

Additionally, due to the shortages of truth in the post-truth scenario, a critical quality for a public relation professional to possess is the ability to stimulate communications among individuals and keep personal thoughts detached from one’s professional duties simultaneously. Apart from that, it is interestingly quite ironic that participants (P6, P7) seem to think that

echo chambers in a post-truth world have the potential to help with public relations practices. These participants contend that crises often unfold within these confined spaces, presenting more manageable challenges compared to crises disseminated across a multitude of divergent groups.

Of course, this (echo chambers) is actually a great situation in terms of public relations and perception management because you can easily manage perception there. On the other hand, it is also problematic in terms of accessing accurate and real information. The answers to the questions “How aware are people of this?”, “Who is aware of how these algorithms work?” are unknown (P7).

Role of Fact-Checking Platforms in PR

Under the influence of the conditions of the post-truth era, the principles of honesty and integrity have ascended as paramount values, particularly in the space of online discourse. Fact-checking platforms have emerged as instrumental tools in evaluating the accuracy and veracity of information circulating on the internet. Apart from their tangible contributions to curbing the proliferation of misleading news and misinformation, especially during crises, these platforms hold potential as bastions of civil political institutions capable of withstanding pressures in polarized information ecosystems like that of Türkiye (Ünver 2020, 35).

Despite their significance, participants unanimously asserted that fact-checking platforms do not feature prominently in public relations activities. Factors such as low engagement rates, perceived impartiality issues, and politicization were cited as reasons for this detachment. P4 suggested that while press releases could be submitted to fact-checking platforms to counter misinformation, these platforms are not deemed essential communication tools. P7 expressed doubts regarding the integrity of these platforms, suggesting that they might be manipulated for perception management purposes.

I have heard that these platforms are being used as a perception management tool. There are allegations that I have heard that a question there is deliberately asked, deliberately confirmed, deliberately approved or disapproved and deliberately maligned. I would also like to point out that I see the use of verification platforms as a perception management tool as a very logical communication strategy. I would do it too (P7).

Consequently, it becomes clear that fact-checking platforms act as an auxiliary factor in public relations mechanisms. Participants consider

traditional and digital media platforms to be more suitable for disseminating accurate information due to wider reach and higher effectiveness. In addition, they stated that they prefer to get the right information directly from brands, not from verification platforms. In addition, compared to media platforms, according to participants, the perceived inadequacy of visitor numbers and influence levels on fact-checking platforms further reduces their importance in the eyes of public relations practitioners.

Social Media as a Practitioner's Source of Information

When developing a public relations strategy, practitioners traditionally rely on data provided by brands as their primary source of information and use them in campaign design. However, the evolving demands of the post-truth era have prompted practitioners to expand their repertoire of information and seek insights from various online platforms beyond traditional sources. Insights from participants show that practitioners are now incorporating not only data from their direct customers but also content collected from social media platforms into their strategic framework as a source of information.

Although Ekşi Sözlük is a very biased, non-objective field that actually creates very unfair evaluations for some, for example, if a brand is going to work with a celebrity, it naturally scans all sources. What they say about this person looks. Unfortunately, we are also looking at Ekşi Sözlük to see if it has the potential to be a crisis issue (P1).

If we are working on an individual basis, I look at platforms such as Ekşi Sözlük and KızlarSoruyor, but if we are going to communicate about an institution, I look at Şikayetvar (P6).

In this context, platforms such as Ekşi Sözlük² and complaint sites such as Şikayetvar³ have emerged as important sources of information for practitioners seeking extensive insight. Additionally, as P2 and P6 noted, sites such as KızlarSoruyor⁴ are also well-known for their benefits for public relations practitioners in this regard.

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- 2 Ekşi Sözlük is a collaborative hypertext dictionary in Turkish, built on the concept of user-contributed content. The website address is: <https://eksisozluk.com>
- 3 It is a platform that facilitates the resolution of complaints. Users can freely submit complaints about online services and products to institutions and brands through the site. The website address is: <https://www.sikayetvar.com>
- 4 KızlarSoruyor (En. GirlsAsk) is a social networking platform based on a question-and-answer format, where a digital community engages in interactions. The website address is: <https://www.kizlarsoruyor.com>

Keeping Reality Under Control on Social Media

Rise of manipulative communication practices by firms like Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica exposed the manipulative side of some public relations work (Thompson 2020). Notably, interviews within the scope of the study revealed a remarkable practice among public relations professionals: the use of anonymous accounts on social media platforms to disseminate positive content on behalf of clients. With this application, public relations aims to make a positive contribution to the reputation of institutions.

P5's remarks deepened this context. Acknowledging the existence of such practices, P5 referred to the organizations that carry out these activities as "under-the-counter agencies".

They really don't have names, they don't have anything. These are like the "troll army" of our industry. There are brands that work with them. Their job is to write positive content about the relevant brand on Ekşi Sözlük and similar sites. For example, there are a number of forums that are followed by technology lovers. They go in there and constantly write positive things in the name of the brand there. That's their only job (P5).

Conversely, some participants (P1, P2, P3, and P4) expressed a preference for direct message transmission rather than message transmission through anonymous accounts in public relations. Along these lines, they have taken a stance against the use of anonymous profiles to promote brands. However, deepened interviews revealed that there is a potential trend among these individuals to engage in such practices if privacy conditions are met. For example, P1 stated that they see this activity as a form of brand advocacy, similar to a journalist correcting a wrong.

In general, I would say that brands don't go here to produce content, but if they know people and they can trust that their anonymity will remain confidential, I think there is a possibility that they might. They might show a tendency in this direction. Just as a journalist friend supports you to correct a mistake about you, I think it is similar at some point for a brand to submit content anonymously to Ekşi Sözlük on issues related to itself (P1).

P5 indicated that he/she may be willing to use these methods if necessary, while P6 stated that such practices are currently proceeding with third-party partnerships. However, he/she emphasized that in the future, he could integrate more closely into public relations campaigns through in-house recruitment. P7 stated that he/she did not find these practices unethical within the framework of public relations.

These various perspectives provide in-depth insights into how public relations practices have benefited from social media in the post-truth era. However, these insights lead to critical reflection on the limits of ethical public relations practices.

The Role of Unifying Discourse in Post-Truth Public Relations Practice

In addition to the departure from reality, the post-truth era has witnessed a concerning rise in the use of vulgar and aggressive language in some public relations strategies, particularly evident in attempts to boost social media engagement. In the negotiations, this issue was tried to be deepened.

In this context, P2 emphasized that vulgar and offensive discourse is common in politics. He warned against its adoption in brand communication. Emphasizing the detrimental impact of discriminatory language on brand reputation, he argued that even though social media crises have faded, discriminatory rhetoric has left a lasting stain: “Discriminatory rhetoric has no place in brand communication. The crises of brands may be forgotten, but these discriminatory rhetorics are not forgotten” (P2).

Most participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, and P7) who echoed the statements of P2 stated that they preferred to use non-aggressive and polite language in their public relations practices. They emphasized the importance of producing content that is both memorable and sincere, emphasizing unity over divisiveness.

Taken together, these insights highlight a shared responsibility for civil language among public relations professionals, who understand the linguistic responsibility that extends beyond the here and now due to its implications for brand standing and the social order.

Public Relations in the Era of Algorithmic Influence

The manipulative public relations tactics unearthed by Cambridge Analytica’s involvement in the Brexit process highlight the pervasive influence of algorithms in shaping communication strategies in the post-truth era. Leveraging the analysis of large user data, these strategies aim to disseminate messages of dubious authenticity to fuel emotional responses among various target groups.

Cambridge Analytica’s attempt to unethically fill communicative gaps has led to the reinforcement of closed-mindedness among individuals. This

trapped them in echo chambers that confirmed their existing beliefs. This phenomenon contradicts the principles of the public sphere, which advocate the fair expression of different opinions. In this context, it was tried to reach subtle insights with the interviews conducted.

According to participants, the segmentation of target audiences and the dissemination of personalized message content are at the core of public relations. However, research findings suggest that public relations practices in Türkiye do not use persuasion-oriented strategies akin to those employed by Cambridge Analytica. Participants indicate a hesitance towards utilizing technological approaches involving algorithmic analysis and anxiety mapping of the masses, opting for a more cautious approach in their communication strategies.

Intersection of Science, Capitalism and Public Relations

Literature on public relations practices in the post-truth era sheds light on the efforts of tobacco and fossil fuel industries to sway public opinion through biased scientific studies (McIntyre 2019; Thompson 2020). Participants' insights on the existence of similar practices in Türkiye were examined.

Within public relations practices, there is a notable emphasis on valuing the reliability, precision, and authority of scientific findings. This emphasis has spurred collaborations between public relations and academic spheres. However, participants noted instances where collaborations prioritized brand interests over scientific integrity, raising concerns about ethical standards: "Unfortunately, I can't trust something that a doctor comes out and says "this is good" because I know the background of this job professionally. This creates a lack of belief" (P5). In this context, some participants (P2, P4, P5, P6) provided first-hand examples, while Participant 3 corroborated these observations based on industry hearsay. P5 also highlighted the normalization of biased collaborations, highlighting the prevalence of such practices.

This is happening so many times that if you ask me to give an example now, I can't pull one example out of that crowd, there are so many examples. Let me tell you, this situation has become so normalized that it doesn't even seem strange to us to talk about money in such collaborations (P5).

Additionally, P4 and P6 noted encounters with biased scientific statements, particularly in dermatology and aesthetics-related issues. Conversely, P7 stated that it was avoided from such practices in the food and

beverage industry. These insights illuminate the complex dynamics at play in public relations, underscoring the need for ethical considerations amid the intersection of science, capitalism, and communication.

Fake News Production

Critical literature on public relations contends that certain practices prioritize corporate interests over the public good, often resorting to deceptive tactics that manipulate objective data, thus contributing to the production of fake news (Thompson 2020). The relevant context was tried to be deepened by asking the participants about the effect of public relations practices on the spread of fake news.

Some participants (P1, P3, and P4) strongly rejected the allegation that public relations was involved in the production of fake news, emphasizing their commitment to ethical communication practices. P3, in particular, stated that public relations agencies can facilitate the dissemination of information to the media, but the ultimate responsibility lies with the clients who provide the information.

If the company that is your customer has given you the wrong details, then the public relations company will have produced fake and false news. That's why, the intention of the company is important. Otherwise, public relations companies will never knowingly produce fake news (P3).

On the other hand, some participants (P2 and P5) pointed out that there is a high probability that such activities will take place in the public relations sector, even if they do not have personal participation.

There must absolutely exist public relations teams that, instead of working to improve their own brand's reputation, work to spread falsehoods that will bring down the competitor's brand (P2).

Is there anyone who produces false news to gain some gains, who is so underhanded, to put it mildly? There are. For sure there are (P5).

P7 pointed out that traditional media enabled one-sided communication tactics, but the emergence of social media changed the dynamic. The participant suggested that the interactive nature of social platforms makes it increasingly difficult for fake news to spread because users can easily check and debunk false information. Therefore, in the participant's opinion, the importance that social media attaches to user engagement acts as a deterrent against the production of fake news.

These (fake news spread) used to exist because things were so comfortable. If I tell a lie, where will the person whose perception I want to shape search and find the truth of what I say? Now, the truth is pouring out with documents under our posts “one by one”. Therefore, such a thing is not possible now. Naturally, social media ended the whole thing here. So, we can’t lie (P7).

Such insights emphasize the complex dynamic of public relations and fake news production highlighting the ethical considerations and evolving media environment shaping contemporary communication practices.

Conclusion and Discussion

Within the framework of the post-truth conditions, where emotions and personal beliefs often dominate facts as public drivers (Keyes 2021; McIntyre 2019; Fischer 2021), public relations faces not only increasing demands but also stronger criticism (Thompson 2020). Designed within the framework of this context, the research aimed to examine the experiences and perceptions of public relations professionals in Türkiye regarding this evolving field. Thus, it is planned to provide extensive information about practitioners’ feedback on new communication trends.

In this respect, in a similar context to Thompson’s (2020) views, it can be stated that public relations practitioners in Türkiye skillfully manage the communicative difficulties posed by the post-truth era by adopting approaches that are compatible with changing social dynamics. Thereby, the flexibility of professionals to align their strategies with the needs of the current era can be underlined. Within the framework of the research, manipulative practices were observed, which included the spread of controlled narratives on social media through anonymous accounts and the presentation of content as organic content in a purchased media space.

Moreover, in the post-truth era, where public relations is undergoing a transformation, while the emphasis on concerns about fact-checking and the dissemination of accurate information is increasing (Wang 2022), it is seen that there is no such concern on the public relations practices’ side in Türkiye. In this regard, the relationship between fact-checking platforms and public relations practitioners is limited.

Public relations is often seen as serving corporate goals, leading to conflicts between corporate goals and stakeholder demands. Practitioners are often challenged to find solutions that prioritize corporate interests

(Adi and Stoeckle 2023). This presents ethical dilemmas for public relations practitioners. In this context, in line with Holtzhausen and Voto's (2002) claim that public relations practitioners have the role of postmodern activists, some participants stated that they adopt a critical and resistant attitude when it comes to obscuring reality in order to create harmony with the interests of the organization. In a similar vein, these findings are in line with the study of Adi and Stoeckle (2023), which indicates that there is a strong desire for public relations to be recognized for its transparency, sustainability, responsibility, ethics, and positive social impact that promotes development. Moreover, it coincides with Macnamara's work, which states that public relations has the potential to serve as a defense against post-truth tendencies, and that practitioners can play an important role in maintaining truth and transparency.

However, more research needs to be done to provide a more in-depth understanding of how public relations practitioners in Türkiye deal with these challenges. The findings of this research are important for understanding how public relations professionals make strategic decisions in the changing post-truth communication environment and the ethical and practical implications of these decisions. In conclusion, public relations practices in the post-truth era face significant ethical and strategic challenges. The responses of public relations professionals in Türkiye to these challenges and the strategies they have developed provide valuable insights into the future role and function of public relations in both local and global contexts. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of ethical and practical issues in the field of public relations and to the development of practices in this field. Future studies may suggest ways to deepen these findings and increase the societal impact of public relations practices.

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Appendix-1: Questions in the Interview Form

1. First, would you like to introduce yourself?
 - 1.1 Would you like to briefly talk about your industry experience?
 - 1.2 What is your day like as a public relations practitioner? Can you tell us about your daily workflow routine?
2. Have you been involved in a public relations campaign during the traditional mass media era, when social media had not yet become widespread?
3. How do you think the increase in social media usage rates has created a change in the field of public relations practice?
 - 3.1 Do you think there is a link between the increase in the use of social media and the faster spread of fake news? Are there any examples of this that you have experienced?
4. What challenges does public relations, one of whose main purposes is to create public opinion, face in the post-truth era, when objective facts based on fact and evidence are not as effective in shaping public opinion as appealing to emotions and personal beliefs?
 - 4.1 While the audience's demand for fake news is increasing, what actions do you take regarding the fake news that is spreading about your organization (or customer)? How are the truths about the institution spread?
 - 4.1.1 Are there collaborations with fact-checking platforms?
5. Do you think that public relations practitioners should act as content producers on behalf of organizations (or clients) today?
 - 5.1 So, do public relations practitioners produce content anonymously through various tools today? What do you think about this?
6. In the face of the decrease in audience attention to the media due to the increasing per capita media consumption, what do public relations practitioners consider to design a campaign?
 - 6.1 In this context, is vulgar and aggressive rhetoric used from time to time in order to make the content of the message more remarkable?
7. What is the benefit of the detailed target audience segmentation offered by Google and Facebook in advertising services in terms of public relations practices?
 - 7.1 Does public relations reach detailed target audience segmentation through other tools?
8. Are there any studies that you carry out on behalf of your institution (or client) in the context of public relations with academia and think tanks? If so, what are these studies?
9. What role do you think public relations plays in the production of fake news? As an insider in the field, can you make a critical assessment?

We have come to the end of our meeting. Thank you very much for your time and the information you have shared. Is there anything you would also like to add?