

Problems and Prospects on the Evolution of Advertising and Public Relations Industries in Oman

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Abstract: In this article, the researchers foregrounded media convergence that transformed old established media, PR (Public Relations), and advertising industries into new forms. Though the Omani government is encouraged to facilitate the PR and advertising industry by giving several licenses, universities offer PR and advertising courses to fulfil the national job requirement. However, this enthusiasm is not appearing in the Omani PR and advertising industry as the PR field practices need to be more organized, which shows an identity issue in public relations. This research paper argues how these issues are connected with company management's attitude towards PR functioning and why the Omani advertising industry is limited to a particular advertising area. Qualitative and quantitative methods are applied. Three sets of questionnaires have been devised in Arabic and English languages to facilitate a better understanding of different terminologies. Through the purposive sampling technique, 150 respondents were surveyed and interviewed. SPSS software has been used to analyze the data. The remainder provides insightful findings that indicate a substantial gap between the fundamental concept of PR and the practical approaches of private and public companies. It also explains the reasons for the uneven development of advertising industries in Oman. This pilot study will help as a reference document in Policymaking for the growth of PR and advertising industries in Oman and the Omanization process.

Keywords: Public Relations and Advertising; Industries; Media; Communication; Technology; Omani Government; Arabic and English Languages; Business Scenarios, Communication Process.

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1. Introduction

Globally changed business scenarios and media convergence have transformed traditional customer approaches. The advent of the smartphone and the easy accessibility of the internet has augmented the communication process to a different level. Social media has provided a secure platform to communicate one to one or one to the group by texting, audio, or video messages simultaneously. Before any purchase, new consumers want to explore all sorts of information available in the market under different budget ranges. This urges different modes of communication for both parties (company and buyers). That is why advertising is not considered sufficient, as it facilitates one-way communication. Companies use a media mix with PR practices to deal with new customers. They wanted to bridge the gap between the company and its public by winning their trust. It requires continuous efforts to establish mutual relations between companies and their public. Companies have understood the value and requirements of PR practices and advertising. That is why they are not providing only communication, but facilitating better care after the sale, listening to grievances to solve customers' issues and inquiries and working hard to satisfy all types of needs.

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1.1. Problem Statement

Oman's economy is growing very fast. Therefore, the Sultanate is also pushing the practices and idea of PR and advertising to promote industrial growth:

- Colleges and universities are offering PR and advertising courses to meet the requirement of the national job market. However, it has been observed that PR faces an identity crisis as most private and public companies' practices are dissimilar and unidentified, which limits and creates confusion for PR job seekers.
- Similarly, the advertising industry appears one-sided as it focuses more on print advertising. Job opportunities for Omani Youth can be found in these two industries abundantly as it has an emerging market, but what are the reasons which stop it from growing?

1.2. The Rationale of the Study

The Ministry of Information is giving many licenses to PR and Ad agencies. Even then, what are the reasons that these agencies are practising only specific tasks? The advertising industry has yet to flourish fully, which limits job opportunities for newcomers. Due to few job opportunities, students stopped opting for advertising majors, and it became a reason to fridge this significant specialization at Nizwa College of Applied Sciences. This gives us a reason to pursue this study. PR in companies also has the same condition. Instead of the management function, crisis management, and planning communication strategies, the PR role is limited to managing tours and travel, hospitality, reception of guests and contacting media houses. They coordinate with different government departments and arrange visas for employees.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

- To understand the issues that limit the practices of the ad and PR industry in the Sultanate
- To gauge the gap between the fundamental concept and practical approaches of PR for pedagogical reference to review the course content of Public Relations and Advertising.
- To explore the further scope of the ad and PR industry for job seekers and implement the Omanization process.

1.4. Significance of the Study

- This research brings the attention of Omani ad and PR industry professionals to issues mentioned earlier to encourage the proper practices in Oman so that these two industries can grow full-fledged and generate substantial job opportunities for the upcoming Omani graduates.
- It has pedagogical significance too. Students will also be more enthusiastic about choosing advertising, PR majors, and research work to meet the market requirements.

2. Literature Review

Much of the research is not done in the realm of advertising and Public Relations status in Oman. However, some available books provide a solid background to our research and connect it to a big canvas. According to these studies, some Asian countries like Japan and India have a weak concept of PR, while advertising is a prominent marketing tool. For example, in January 2010, a case of crisis was reported in the USA for a Japanese car manufacturing Company, Toyota. The company was criticized for not telling consumers about the trouble of gas pedals stuck on Toyota vehicles. During a poll, YouGov Brand Index found that it affects Toyota's car rating 28 to plummet to minus 17.1, even lower than Hummer's rating. This created a massive clamour in media, blogosphere and politics. USA Today/all UP Poll found that 55% of Americans thought Toyota had failed to respond quickly to potential safety defects. Most crisis communication experts agreed that Toyota was slow to respond to the situation due to the weak approach of PR. Japanese country culture is different from the US [7]. Jesse Toprak, an analyst for TrueCar.com, told PRWeek (A leading source of news for the PR industry), "If this was a domestic American company like Ford, within an hour, we could expect the CEO to have stated apology. That is not how business works in Japan [7]."

There is another confusion about the PR profession as its practices often get mixed with the marketing department. In developing countries such as India, it has been noticed that marketing specialist is performing PR work as it is not considered a separate department. Sometimes, they are considered telephone solicitors or door-to-door sales representatives. Some PR practitioners' business cards describe that they do marketing communication. Some organizations have marketing PR in their job titles and on their letterheads. This statement got approved as one former principal of such firms wrote a book describing "Marketing Public Relations" as programs that encourage the purchase and consumer satisfaction through credible communication of information and impression [2]. This book describes how PR practitioners apply their knowledge and skills

to support marketing. "Some Marketing authors add to this confusion by suggesting PR as a tactic used in marketing. PR strategists today find an idea that generates publicity to build a brand [4].

This confusion intensified when Paul Holmes, the president of the Holmes Group, described one incident. He wrote, "Someone once told me he is changing his firm name from XYZ PR to XYZ Marketing Communications because "we have broadened our portfolio of services. However, marketing is a much narrow discipline than PR. We manage relations between the company and its clients. While in PR, we establish and maintain relations between the company and its stakeholders [3]. This statement shows that the public relations identity crisis more or less is found in other Arab and Asian countries too. Though marketing and PR are separate managements with slight differences, overlapping and complementary goals, it mistakenly concludes with no difference. Not only marketing but sometimes PR practices are getting mixed with publicity too. Publicity is a tool to influence audience opinion to achieve short-term goals through print and electronic mediums. At the same time, PR is considered the company's participation in community issues to make them feel special. Along with this, sponsorship management, media tracking, special publication, organizing events and campaigns and getting credit for its works in favour of the Company are PR- related work. It is a managerial action that aims to gather public opinion and analyze them for making a company action plan. It influences public opinion positively through responsive behaviour [5].

PR is rated as the most rapidly growing best jobs list by Fortune, US News and World Report magazines, like accounting, law, business and medical professions. However, PR does not require prescribed educational preparation, government-sanctioned qualifying exams, or peer review to ensure competent and ethical practice. In addition, they do not practice clearly defined roles recognized as essential for the common good. The US labour department reported that 129,000 were employed in PR during 2000. This number increased by 210,000 and projected an 18% growth to 286,000 by 2016. China also indicated a rapid development of PR practices in three decades. Chinese expert Ming Anxiang estimated it more than 100,000 practitioners and 10,000 PR firms are working professionals throughout the rest of Asia, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand [1]. In the Sultanate of Oman, PR and advertising are still developing. The following table 1 shows the advertising agency's license, which was given by the Ministry of Information, Oman [6].

Table 1: Advertising agencies license, issued by Ministry of Information, Oman

S. No.	Number of Agencies	Year of issuing the license
1	64 Advertising Agencies	2010-2011
2	19 Advertising Agencies	2013
3	16 Advertising Agencies and publishing agencies	2014
4	19 Advertising Agencies	2015

This table 1 shows the emerging trend of the Omani market and the Oman government's commitment to promoting PR and advertising in the country. Muscat, the capital city of Oman, is developing as a hub for such agencies. OmanAd and Asha Advertising and marketing agency, Euro RSCG Muscat, are some of the leading agencies in Oman with its growing portfolio of global, regional and local brands (fig.1).

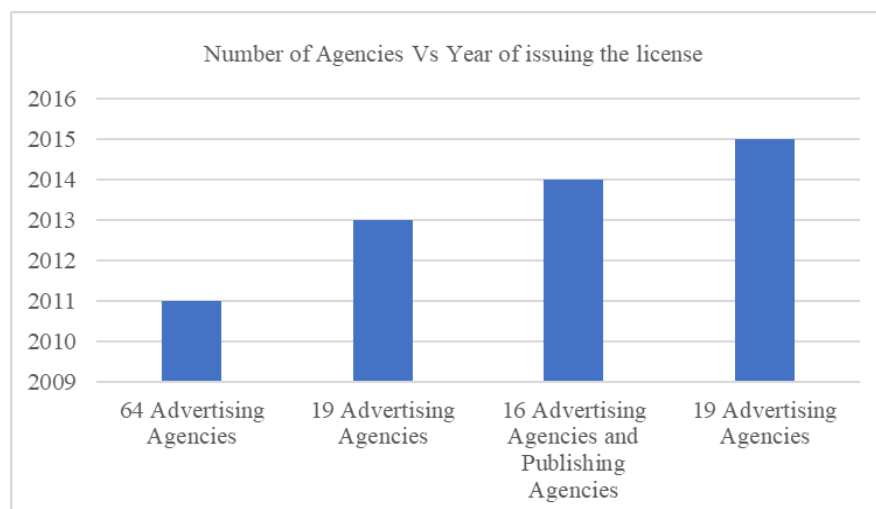


Figure 1: Number of Agencies Vs Year of Issuing the License

OmanAd, the oldest ad agency, had established in 1975, created an enviable track record and fulfilled the requirement of more than 150 prestigious corporate and government entities in the Sultanate. Asha Advertising and Marketing, Havas Worldwide Muscat, was established in 1982. Now, two divisions of Ajit Khimji's advertising Companies, Havas and Paradigm Advertising, are merging into a single entity. This merger combines the distinct strengths of both agencies to meet the client's requirements and satisfaction.

In Muscat, different ad agencies are not only providing brand and promoting services, but they also give solutions in the field of web advertising and graphic designing. They are also responsible for various promotions, publicity, and marketing. They provide 100% solutions related to marketing. Advertising Agency Ad-Craft, Advertising Ad-Craft SHIHAB LLC, Advertising and Internet Sol in Oman SHIHAB in Oman, Al Naboogh Trading, Oman System (Research The World), SABCO ART LLC, SILVER FALCON Enterprises, Sunrise International LLC, WOWOMEN, OHI Advertising, Omaneya Advertising and Public Relations SAO, National Publishing and Advertising LLC, Oman Graphic EST, Action Film Production CO LLC, Halley's Studios, RIAM SIGNS and Advertising Industry are some agencies which are facilitating advertising in Oman. Like the north city of Muscat, Dhofar, the southern region of Oman is not having many PR and advertising agencies. Zoom Advertising, 180 Degrees Advertising, Eye Max LLC, Muscat Media, Fun Star Signs, Graphic Arena, Trateeb Ad, Anwar Ad, Graphic Point, and Al-Bayadi Ad are some prominent ad agencies in Salalah. Dhofar has enough potential to grow; its main reason is its distance from the capital city. To fulfil the regional demand of local companies like Dhofar Cattle Feed, Dhofar Power, Dhofar Tourism, Dhofar Poultry Company, Dhofar Insurance, Salalah Methanol Company, Salalah Sanitary, Port of Salalah, Omantel, Nawras, Bank Muscat, Bank Nizwa, Bank Sohar, OTE, Oman Arab Bank, Land Mark group, Salalah Garden Mall, Raysut cement and McDonald, Eye Max advertising company is working hard since 2008.

As a prominent ad company, it offers customized advertising solutions for all business segments in the Sultanate. They also provide outdoor advertising services like- mega com, mupis (Roadside advertising), unipolar or hill advertising, rooftop advertising, signage, billboards, airport displays, mall display, taxi advertising, mass transit displays, and trans-ad to their clients. Eye Max is the first advertising company which has introduced mupis in Salalah and improve the visibility of the product through mega-coms [6]. In terms of PR agencies, there are minimal numbers, such as Adnic PR, Al Omaneya Advertising and Public Relations, Buzzword/Action, Media and Communication Group, Momentum PR, Reach- A Division of united media services, SABCO Art LLC and TRACCS Oman are working to meet with the demand of the corporate market [6]. These agencies are Muscat based. In Salalah, the PR concept is limited to the public sector industry.

3. Methodology

The present study is explanatory research. It describes the issues related to the identity of PR practices in Oman and the growth of advertising agencies with those facts which create hindrances to its development as cause-and-effect relations. Qualitative and quantitative methods are applied in data collection. Qualitative data consists of open-ended questions which have been gathered through interviews. The interviews were conducted in advertising agencies' offices and the job fair in Salalah Hall, College of Applied Sciences. Quantitative data includes close-ended questions. The questionnaires have been devised in English and Arabic and distributed to private and public companies, ad agencies, public relations and advertising students through an online link.

3.1. Area of Sample Selection and Sample Size

The area of sample selection is Salalah, Oman. A purposive sampling technique is applied as a limited number of companies and ad agencies are available in Salalah. We have targeted 150 respondents from public and private companies using PR practices directly or indirectly. A total of 18 public and private companies and 11 advertising agencies have participated in our study. Their names are Raysut Cement, Ministry of Education, Dhofar Cattle Feed, Salalah Mills, Dhofar Power, Salalah Methanol, Oman Air, Public Authority of Manpower Regist, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Health, Salalah Port, Crown Plaza, Dhofar University, Dhofar Municipality, Salalah Drainage Company, Royal Diwan, Salalah Wali office and College of Applied Sciences, Salalah for PR data. At the same time, Zoom Advertising, 180 Degrees Advertising, Max, Muscat Media, Fun Star Signs, Graphic Arena, Trateeb Ad, Anwar Ad, Graphic Point, Al-Bayadi Ad, and Middle East Press Advertising have provided data related to the Salalah advertising field. Seventy PR and advertising majors graduate from the College of Applied Sciences, Salalah (COHORTS 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014) have also participated in this research.

3.2. Variables of the Study

Independent and dependent variables are devised to understand cause and effect on the growth of PR and advertising. For example, nationality and gender can be considered as independent variables. At the same time, the company's mindset and

approach towards public relations practices, clients' demands for advertising services, and actual availability of professional training and skilled workforce can be counted as dependent variables.

3.3. Research Questions

- What is the actual status of PR and advertising in Oman?
- Why do agencies and companies practice PR under different names?
- What are the challenges of PR and advertising practices in Oman?
- What are the limitations of the Oman ad industry that hinder its development?
- What is the future scope of ad and PR practices in Oman?

4. Discussion

The present discussion is based on responses from the survey and interviews. The data is analyzed with the percentage of frequency. The graphs and tables are used to describe 150 responses. During our study, we noticed a fast growth of advertising in one direction while PR is facing immeasurable identity issues in Oman, as it has a mean of 2.65 with a standard deviation of .976. Only 15.7 % of responses show they practice PR with its original name. However, the Omanization level in advertising is shallow as it has a mean of 1.70 with a standard deviation of .047 (with only 30.4% responses). At the same time, the public relations field is doing fantastic, as it has a mean of 1.02 and a standard deviation of .140 (with 98% responses). We found two reasons behind the low rate of Omanization in the ad sector. Firstly, the Omani advertising sector is recently developed, as 65.2 % of respondents said they have been in this job for less than ten years. It is limited to some specific kinds of print advertising. Secondly, due to the lack of skills and experience, this sector is more dependent on experts' talents. During our research, we found that male employees dominate both industries (table 2).

Table 2: Ratio of Male and Female Employees in the PR and Ad Industry

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male in PR	38	74.5	74.5	74.5
	Female in PR	13	25.5	25.5	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male in ad	18	78.3	78.3	78.3
	Female in ad	5	21.7	21.7	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	

Mostly, advertising agencies are owned by the private sector, while we can see a difference in public relations divided between the government and private sectors with 51% and 47% (fig.2).

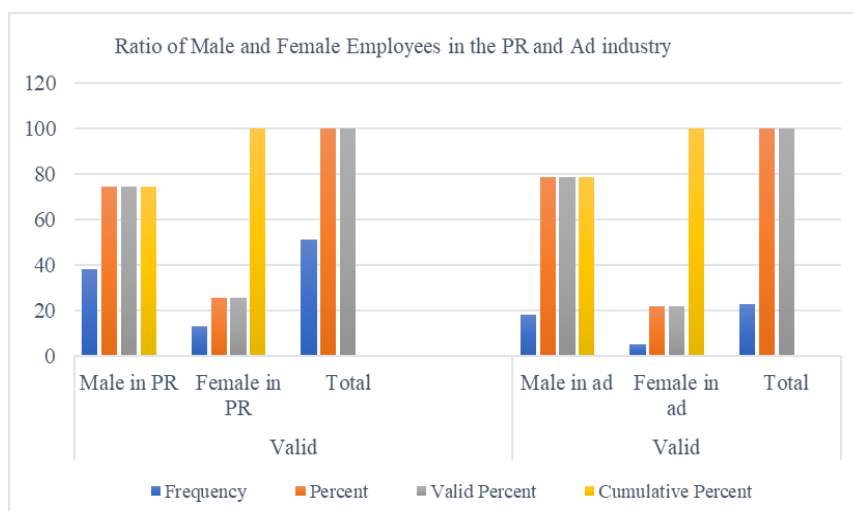


Figure 2: Ratio of Male and Female Employees in the PR and Ad Industry

Table 3 displays an identity issue in public relations.

Table 3: Different Job Titles Performing PR Practices

Valid	Public Relation	Frequency 8	Percent 15.7	Valid Percent 15.7	Cumulative Percent 15.7
	Media and Communication Specialists	10	19.6	19.6	35.3
	Administrative job	27	52.9	52.9	88.2
	Customer Dealing	4	7.8	7.8	96.1
	Ad and Branding Job	2	3.9	3.9	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	

In both sectors, we found that young people aged 30 years to 40 years from the highest percentage; 64% for PR and 52.2% for advertising. In the advertising sector, 39.1% of youth aged 25 to 30 joined, while in PR, only 17.6 % of people have joined. Young people are joining fewer PR jobs, showing a lack of opportunities or an issue regarding PR positions (fig.3).

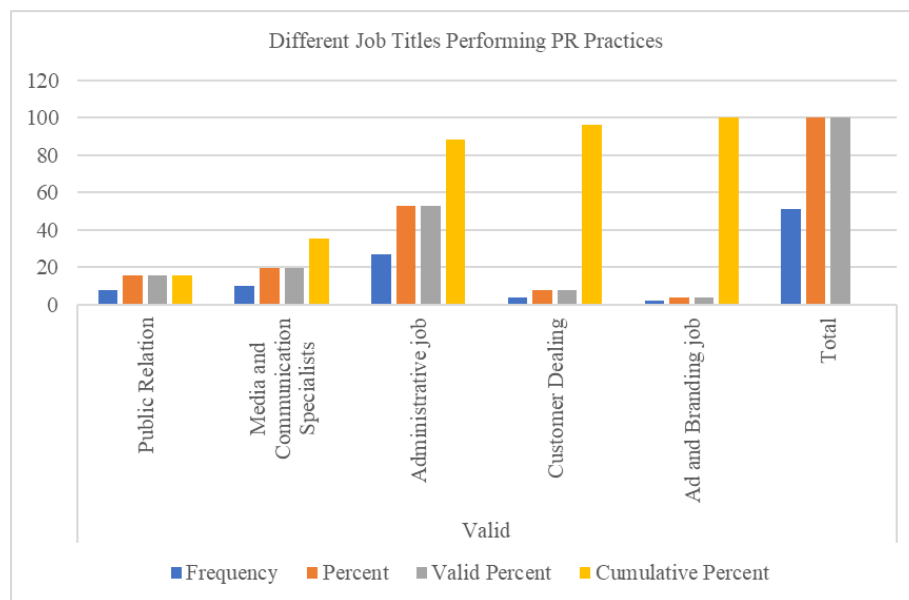


Figure 3: Different Job Titles Performing PR Practices

During the interview, we found that jobs with PR names are available. This is a reason which prevents PR graduates from joining PR specialization. Through Pearson correlation, it can be easily seen in table 4.

Table 4: Correlations between joining age and available opportunities for PR

Correlations			
Occupation		Occupation	Age Group
Occupation	Pearson Correlation	1	-.033
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.817
	The sum of Squares and Cross-products	52.353	-1.176
	Covariance	1.047	-.024
	N	51	51
Age Group	Pearson Correlation	-.033	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.817	
	The sum of Squares and Cross-products	-1.176	23.922
	Covariance	-.024	.478
	N	51	51

In the PR sector, 64.7 % of respondents said they are involved in communication strategy and branding the institution's image. However, 35.3% of respondents have mixed PR and media or communication department job profiles. Identity issues in PR raise some serious concerns regarding the role and practices of PR. That is why we found a different ratio percentage in their work profile. 66.7% of respondents said they are involved in management functions, while 33.3% said they have nothing to do with them. These two percentages prove our problem statement (fig.4).

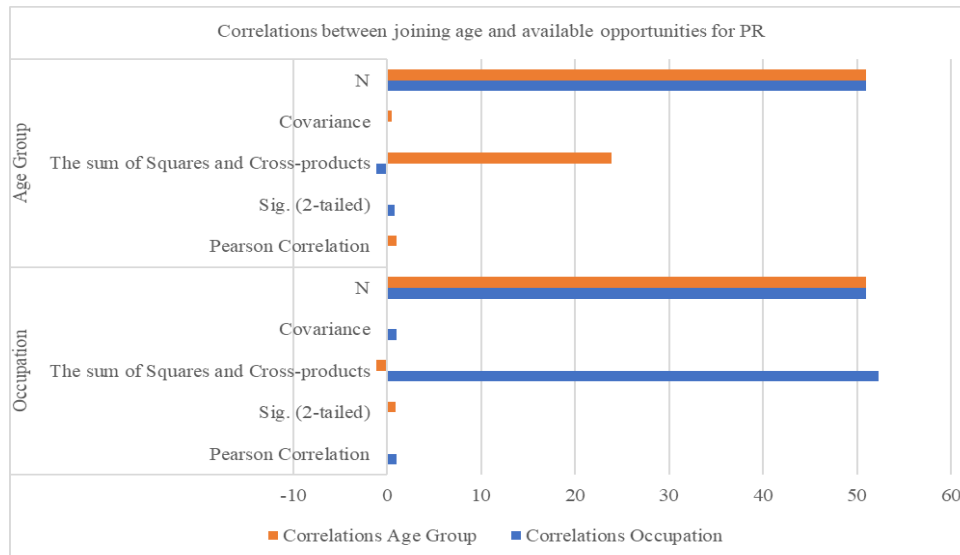


Figure 4: Correlations between joining age and available opportunities for PR

The above same percentage we received as an answer to the question: "Are you limited to visa, accommodation, and travel arrangements?" The question arises: How can they be limited to the abovementioned services if they are involved in management functions? What is the definition of their management functions? It confuses.

Though the respondents work for different departments, 62.7% said they have public relations practices training to manage crises occasionally, while 37.3% denied such training.

54.9% of respondents said they were trying to bridge the gap between the public and the company, while 45.1% said they had never tried this. Again, we found confusion as 45.1% said they are not involved in bridging the gap, but for an answer to involve in community service, 74.5% agreed that they are working for community service. 66.7% of respondents said they are using PR tools, but in answer to designing communication strategies to attract customers, only 60.8% agreed. Research is essential to public relations practices for discovering marketing issues, creating communication strategies and tactics and making company policies.

However, only 47.1% of respondents said they are involved in marketing research, while 52.9% said they have nothing to do with it. This attitude limits the development of PR agencies. This is also proved by the following Fig. 5.

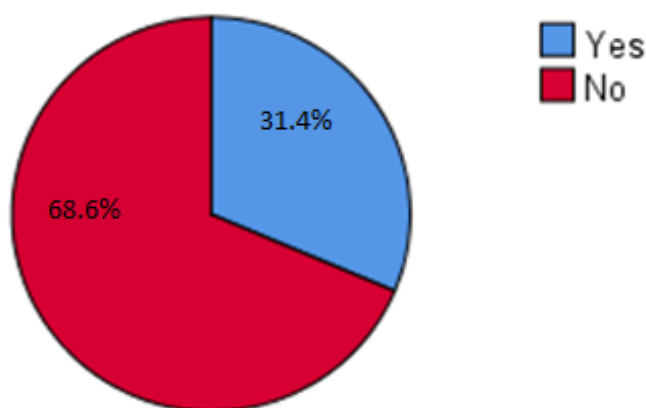


Figure 5: Availing Private PR Agency Services

84.3% of respondents believe that the PR profession is struggling with identity issues as there is no profession with the name of PR that exists in private sector companies. Private companies practice PR but under different job profiles, confusing job seekers in Oman. 92.2% of respondents said PR faces misconception issues that limit its role and job opportunities. The reasons are different, as 41.2% of respondents said that all misconceptions and identity issues are because of management's approach toward PR practices. In comparison, 35.3% said these identity issues are due to a lack of understanding of PR concepts and practices, and 23.5% of respondents said that PR practices are not recognized.

Just like public relations, advertising is also limited to print advertising for national companies, as 65.2% of respondents are involved in creating advertising for national companies. In comparison, only 17,4% of respondents try to create advertising for international companies. Table 5 shows services asked by the clients, which indicates uneven development of the advising industry.

Table 5: Services asked by the clients

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Video ad	3	13.0	13.0	13.0
	Print ad	8	34.8	34.8	47.8
	Brochure, pamphlet, banner	8	34.8	34.8	82.6
	Printing of hoarding and billboards, and posters	4	17.4	17.4	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	

39.1% of respondents believe that the advertising market has become better than before, while 30.4 % believe that digital media platform has accelerated the demand for advertising. However, 17.4% of respondents said it is still emerging. Some loopholes slow down the growth of advertising. 26.1% of respondents believe that corporate houses are reluctant to invest in advertising, while 30.4% said it is because of a lack of advertising awareness. A significant percentage, 43.5, believes both are the reasons behind this slow development (fig.6).

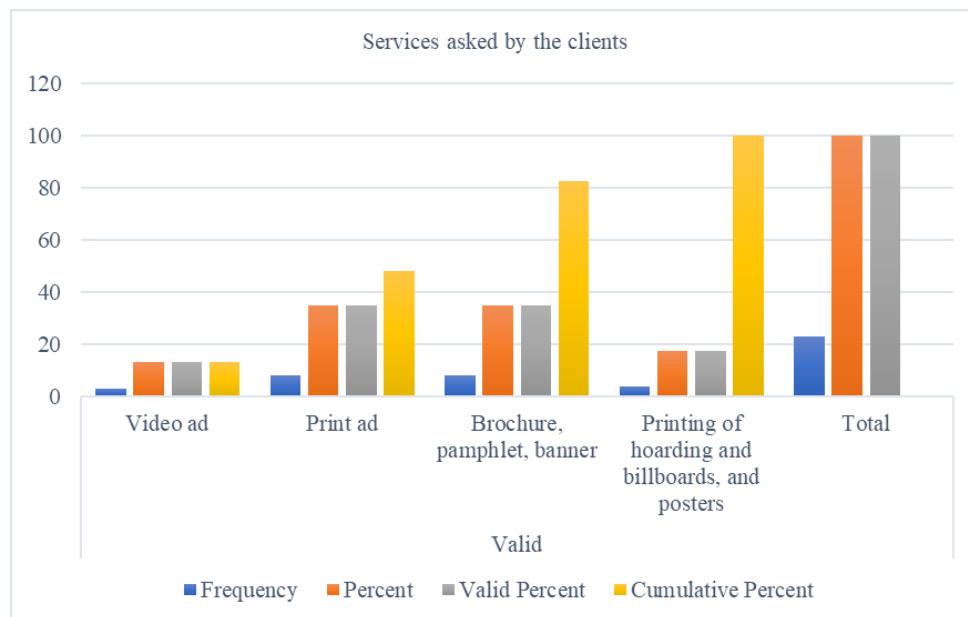


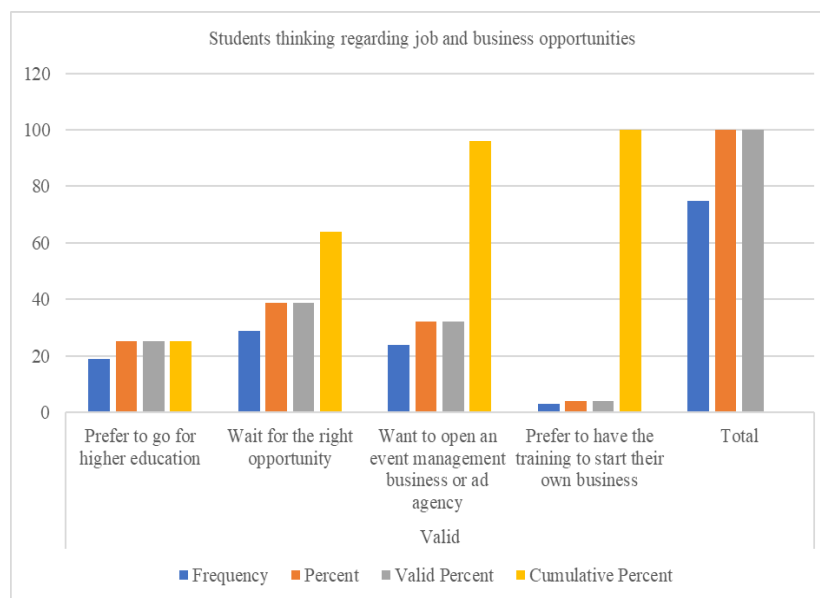
Figure 6: Services asked by the clients

Due to loopholes, 52.2 % of respondents believe that Oman advertising is not competing with the international ad market, while 47.8% believe they are trying to compete internationally. However, Oman's advertising looks full of hope, as 60.9% of respondents believe that the future of advertising is very bright in Oman. While 39.1% still believe it needs more promotion and skilled human resources for its future growth.

Table 5: Students thinking regarding job and business opportunities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Prefer to go for higher education	19	25.3	25.3	25.3
	Wait for the right opportunity	29	38.7	38.7	64.0
	Want to open an event management business or ad agency	24	32.0	32.0	96.0
	Prefer to have the training to start their own business	3	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	75	100.0	100.0	

Though PR is a male-dominated industry in Oman, we found a different trend in educational institutions, as 69.1% of female students opted for this major. In comparison, the male percentage is only 30.7% of students. Moreover, 72% of respondents said they like to select a PR major, while only 28% of students have opted for an advertising major. PR selection major is high because students think it has more job opportunities as it is an emerging sector. However, they still prefer jobs more than entrepreneurs. Table 6 shows it clearly.

**Figure 7:** Students thinking regarding job and business opportunities

Now these issues raise many concerns related to graduates' careers (fig.7). 32.0% of students think that they should be connected directly to the industry by providing first-hand training either in fields or in classrooms, while 9.3% believe that they should be prepared to meet all kinds of requirements of the job industry. A significant percentage 58.7 believe all the above approaches should be utilized to solve their job-related issue.

5. Finding

The present findings display the complete advertising and PR status scenario in Oman:

- Due to Oman government efforts and facilitation of agency licenses, PR and advertising significance have increased in the last couple of years. As a result, public and private sector companies are practicing it with high priority. However, PR practices are not recognized as the PR profession; instead, these practices are done under the names of different departments such as the media and communication department, administrative and management, customer dealing, ad and branding departments, etc.
- PR practices under different names lead to confusion regarding their role. Dissimilarity in practices reduces the effectiveness of different PR activities.
- This misconception towards PR is found due to companies' management approach.

- PR identity issue limits job opportunities for PR graduates because available jobs in the market are under different names, while PR graduates are unaware of the PR identity crisis.
- PR identity issue limits the growth of PR agencies, event management agencies and consultancy services as its supportive industry.
- The results show that public and private companies are not practicing marketing research and PR campaigns, which are hardcore work of PR agencies. In lack of such demands, it demotivates Omanis to start their PR and its supportive agencies.
- Every year, a high percentage of females graduate with ad and PR majors, but in adverse, both sectors are dominated by males in the actual workplace, which limits the skilled human resource in the industry. So it can be a big jolt to the Omanization process as well.
- Like the PR sector, the advertising industry is limited to print as the maximum demand they are receiving for printing and publishing advertising rather than video advertising. It shows that the Omani advertising industry is still in its infancy period.
- PR courses need a more practical approach and exposure from the industry to align with the job requirements.
- Colleges and students should also be aware of ongoing changes in the Omani job market.
- Through training and field exposure, graduates should be prepared not only for jobs but with this idea of creating self-opportunity.

6. Conclusion

Our conclusion can be considered a recommendation. Based on the discussion and findings, we can say that companies need to change their perception of PR practices and unite their work as hardcore PR practices. Colleges can do it as they need to make companies aware of their offered PR courses allying with their job requirement. The advertising work of the students can be showcased to the industry. Occasionally, exhibitions can be planned, and industry professionals can be invited to exhibitions. Colleges can also hold awareness programs and workshops to rectify PR misconceptions in the industry. As PR is mistaken with publicity and marketing communication, this thin-line difference should be communicated to encourage PR and its benefits and effectiveness to the industry. This will positively enhance the demand for different types of PR services and help generate job opportunities for job seekers. For advertising development, parallel demand and awareness can be generated, such as the need and benefits of corporate film, company promotional ads etc. Virtual networks can also address international demand. For skilled labour, industries must provide internship programs and a high level of training for employees and students in association with academic institutions. Companies have to encourage male and female Omani students to join the industry for the parallel development of the nation.

6.1. Limitations of the Research

The researcher faced many issues as this research work is highly original in its topic and critical approach. We approached many Dhofar region public and private sector companies during data collection. These companies straight away denied participating in this survey. They mentioned that they are not having any PR department in their companies. Some companies got ready but were in a dilemma because they needed to have PR departments practicing PR- advertising under different names. Getting data from.

Data Availability Statement: This study is based on survey data collected from different institutions in Dhofar Region. This is a fresh study done by the authors.

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Ethics and Consent Statement: The consent has been taken from the Colleges during data collection and has received Ethical Approval and Participant Consent.

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