

**SHAPING CAREER PATHS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS:
HOW CULTURAL, ETHNIC, AND FAMILY INFLUENCES AFFECT DECISIONS TO
PURSUE PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A CAREER**

By: Rashpal Rai

Program: Master of Communications Management

Student Number: 400488705

Supervisor: Josie Cassano Rizzuti, MCM, APR

Department of Communications Studies and Media Arts, McMaster University

Summer 2024 MCM 740 Capstone Final Paper

March 31, 2025

Abstract

Career decisions are often shaped by personal interests, educational opportunities, financial concerns, and societal experiences. For some people of colour, their ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, and parental expectations also play a significant role. This research explored how these influences impact career choices, particularly in entering the public relations profession for first- and second-generation Canadians. It examined the pressures to pursue prestigious careers like law or medicine and how PR is increasingly seen as a viable option. Through interviews, surveys, literature review, and autoethnography, the findings revealed a shift in family attitudes toward PR, with growing support as parents recognize its opportunities and stability. The research highlighted the importance of mentorship, networking, and diverse role models for BIPOC students and practitioners in PR, emphasizing that a more inclusive industry fosters professional growth and organizational success, reflecting a cultural shift toward valuing personal fulfillment.

Keywords: diversity, representation, ascribed and avowed identities, individualist and collectivist cultures, critical race theory, excellence theory, requisite variety, autoethnography

Acknowledgements

This Capstone project represents the culmination of 40 years of personal and professional growth, a personal reflection in navigating through the expectations of two distinct cultures while pursuing my education and a career in public relations. This would not have been possible without the unwavering support and guidance of the incredible people in my life.

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my amazing wife, Simerjit, and my beloved twin daughters, Aman and Taran, for their steadfast support throughout this journey. This was a family endeavor and having them by my side was invaluable. Pursuing my MCM was a family decision, one that we made together. The commitment demanded by this program affected our family life just as much as it did my work and volunteer commitments, and their love and encouragement made it all possible.

To my fellow MCM'16 cohort: thank you for the camaraderie, encouragement, and for lifting each other up every step of the way in our two and a half year journey. A special thank you to my dear MCM friend, Amy Kennedy. Her suggestion to use autoethnography as a methodological approach gave life to my Capstone project and made it achievable. Amy, your insight was transformative and I am deeply grateful. And to Kevin Floether for his support in helping me with doing a data analysis on the comments and interviews from one of the participant groups. It was an immense help. Thank you.

To Alex, Dave, Mark, Adam, Aislin, Brie, Moe, and our TAs, thank you for your guidance and encouragement throughout the MCM program. Your support made each term more manageable and contributed to the success of every MCM'16 cohort member. And, thank you as well to Kayla and Lorraine for your assistance and support throughout the MCM journey.

I also extend my thanks to the students, instructors, practitioners, and parents who participated in this research. I recognize the sensitive nature of the topic explored and appreciate your openness, trust, and willingness to share your experiences.

A heartfelt thank you to my friend and CPRS colleague, Patricia (Trish) MacNeil. Our conversation back in 2016 about my personal journey in PR and the challenges I had faced was a turning point for me. I'll always remember how deeply and thoughtfully you listened—and how your gentle push, “So what are you going to do about it?” challenged me to act. That moment reminded me of the power of sharing my story and finding my own way to make a difference in this industry. This capstone is part of that journey. Thank you, sincerely, for helping spark it.

A heartfelt thank you to my Capstone supervisor, Josie. From the moment this topic took shape, I knew you were the perfect guide to help me navigate the care, compassion, and academic rigor required to bring this personal research to life. I appreciate the many conversations we had as this study took shape and in being a calming presence through the challenges. Your support was instrumental, and I am profoundly grateful.

Finally, my deepest thanks to Dr. Terry Flynn. Terry, you have been my mentor, colleague, friend, and strongest supporter for over 15 years. Since that day in Vancouver in 2008 when you entrusted me with managing the operations of the CPRS National Conference, you have been a constant source of encouragement, always pushing me to see beyond my perceived limits in this profession. You have been one of my greatest supporters, inspiring me to break new ground and continue to pursue a career path that I once thought was beyond the reach of someone who looked like me. You inspired me to apply for the MCM program and gave me confidence to succeed. I owe so much of this journey to you. I am here today completing my Capstone and my MCM because of you. Thank you, Terry!

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	7
Research Problem	8
Research Questions	9
Literature Review.....	12
Canadian Population Statistics	12
Dimensions of Diversity.....	13
Individualist vs. Collectivist Cultures	14
Excellence Theory, Diversity, and Requisite Variety	17
Diversity and Representation in Public Relations.....	18
Stakeholder Relationship Management.....	22
Critical Race Theory	23
Understanding Diversity and Inclusion.....	23
Autoethnography as a Method	24
Autoethnography – My Lived Experience.....	26
Research Methods.....	38
Dataset and Data Collection Method	41
Data Analysis Techniques	42
Data Security and Privacy.....	43
Results/Analysis.....	44

RQ1: How and to what extent do cultural, ethnic, and familial preferences and expectations influence a student's decision to pursue post-secondary education and career in public relations?	47
RQ2: What factors do parents, especially immigrant parents, consider significant when advising on educational and career pathways and which careers do they prefer their children pursue and why?	52
RQ3: How can PR instructors and PR education programs better support students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in developing their career aspirations in the field and acquiring parental and familial support?	57
Q4: How did PR practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds perceive and navigate familial expectations in their career choices, and what guidance and support systems do they recommend for students considering or pursuing a career in public relations?	65
Discussion	72
Limitations	76
Practical Applications and Further Research	79
Conclusion	80
Ethics Statement and Considerations	81
References	83

Introduction

Career decisions are typically influenced by a variety of factors, including personal interests, educational opportunities, financial considerations, and societal experiences. However, for some people of colour, their ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds, as well as expectations and preferences from their parents and family, can have a profound impact on their career trajectories. These influences can either constrain or support their aspirations in specific fields, including public relations and communications. In industries traditionally dominated by a predominantly white, Western-centric practitioners, culture, ethnic, cultural, and family influences can present both opportunities and barriers for people of colour in balancing their lives in two cultures.

This research examined how these factors shape career decisions in public relations (PR) and communications among people of colour. By considering cultural values, family expectations, and ethnic identity, this study provided insight into the motivations and obstacles people of colour faced as they navigated their professional career paths. It focused on the unique perspectives of immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation students and practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and their parents, as well as PR educators. Insights and personal experiences were gathered through various methods, including surveys, interviews, and a comprehensive literature review, and incorporating my lived experience through autoethnography.

Inspired by my personal experiences as a Canadian-born turbaned Sikh, this study addressed a significant gap in research on ethnic and racial diversity and representation in Canada's PR industry. It catalyzed the need for representation in leadership in public relations and established a foundation for future research on the education and professional pathway.

Research Problem

This research explored how and to what extent cultural, ethnic, and family influences affect decisions to pursue post-secondary education in public relations and its subsequent career pathways. The goal was to explore the extent of these influences and identify resources and support systems that could guide decision-making and assist both students and their parents. Elements of the autoethnography method were incorporated into this research to reflect on my life story that guided my venture into the public relations profession. My aim was to gain a better understanding if students and practitioners from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds experienced some of the same challenges, barriers, and pressures I experienced over 30 years ago, and still see today, and what, if anything, has changed.

This paper adopted a mixed qualitative and quantitative research approach, using a combination of a comprehensive literature review, interviews and surveys to gather insights for this study. Interviews were conducted with practitioners and parents of students and practitioners from diverse ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds who pursued or are pursuing careers in public relations and communications, and instructors who teach in a public relations and communications academic program. Students, instructors, and practitioners were also invited to complete an online survey. The data gathered from the interviews and surveys was analyzed thematically, focusing on the influence of cultural values, family expectations, and ethnic identity on career decisions and experiences. The initial research plan included conducting up to four student focus groups to gain additional qualitative data from this participant group. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen delays, this method was abandoned.

I reached out to post-secondary students currently enrolled in a public relations or communications academic program at a college or university in Canada, PR instructors who

teach in a public relations academic program, and with public relations practitioners from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial backgrounds. I invited students and practitioners to share research information with their parents and ask if they would be willing to participate in a parent interview. The findings could lead to identifying resources and opportunities to provide additional support to students and their families in having conversations on the benefits and outlook on pursuing public relations as a meaningful career option, and help the industry understand its role and the need for representation in the profession.

Research Questions

To evaluate this research and guide an objective content analysis of the literature available and insights collected through the qualitative and quantitative research and using autoethnography to incorporate my personal lived experience into the study, four research questions were formed to better understand the perceptions of students, parents, instructors, and practitioners on the influences that impact decisions on career paths.

RQ1: How and to what extent do cultural, ethnic, and familial preferences and expectations influence a student's decision to pursue post-secondary education and career in public relations?

This question examined how family and parental preferences on what career paths are considered desirable influenced a student's decision on what education and careers to pursue and how status within one's cultural and ethnic community can play a role in career decision-making, from the perspective of students. For this question, a link to an online survey via LimeSurvey was sent to PR and Communications program deans and directors with a request to share with their students, as well as a blog post on LinkedIn directed to students. I was hoping to conduct three to four focus groups, representing different geographic regions in Canada to gather insights

from student participants. Unfortunately, due to a lack of time, the student focus groups did not take place.

RQ2: What factors do parents, especially immigrant parents, consider significant when advising on educational and career pathways and which careers do they prefer their children pursue and why?

This question examined factors that parents, and immigrant parents, of first- or second-generation Canadians consider when advising their children on which careers to pursue and whether these factors impacted and created perception bias on what they felt their children could achieve. It looked at whether parents' preferences are based on social status within their respective communities, and integration into the larger Canadian (white) community. Insights from participating parents were gathered through personal, online interviews. Students and practitioners were invited to share my contact information with their parents if they were interested in participating in an interview.

RQ3: How can PR instructors and PR education programs better support students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in developing their career aspirations in the field and acquiring parental and familial support?

This question examined what role instructors and PR education programs can have in supporting students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in reinforcing their commitment to public relations as a career of choice and in having conversations with their parents on the value the profession and career success can bring. It delved into the experience instructors have had in conversations with these students, what they were hearing, and what resources could support them in these conversations. Instructors were invited to complete an online survey via LimeSurvey and participate in personal, online interviews.

Q4: How did PR practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds perceive and navigate familial expectations in their career choices, and what guidance and support systems do they recommend for students considering a career in public relations?

This question examined the experiences of PR practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, how they have navigated cultural, ethnic, and familial expectations as they progressed through their careers, and whether this impacted the relationships with their parents or families and perceived status in their respective communities. It identified whether their parents or family members gained a better understanding and view of public relations and see it as a valuable profession now. It also looked at what recommendations or guidance they have for students of similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds who want to get into public relations as a career. These participants were invited to complete an online survey via LimeSurvey and in personal, online interviews.

The table below shows the research methods that were used to explore each research question.

Table 1

<i>Research methods per participant group</i>			
RQ	Participant Group	Objective	Research Method
1	Students	To gather insights on whether their parents, family or ethnic community influenced their career choices.	Survey
2	Parents	To examine how cultural, ethnic, and community expectations factored in parents' preferences on career choices for their children.	Interviews
3	PR instructors	To gather insights on their experiences with diversity in the classroom and how they incorporate diverse perspectives and representation in the learning process.	Interviews Survey
4	PR practitioners	To gain understanding of their experiences in the profession, how they have navigated cultural, ethnic, and familial expectations, and what advice they would share with students.	Interviews Survey

Literature Review

For this study, I reviewed a variety of literature available to inform the development of the research questions and scope for the topic. As this topic was borne from my personal lived experience, it was difficult to gather relevant literature that would provide insight and knowledge in this subject area. I tied in available Canadian-based literature with learnings that could be adapted and related from countries with similar Western cultures and social settings like the U.S. and the U.K., as well as key public relations theories that focus on excellence theory, stakeholder theory and relationship management, cultural and ethnic identities, critical race theory, social cognition career theory, and on diversity and representation. As I used my personal lived experience in this study through autoethnography, I have included an explanation and information about this method in this literature review.

Canadian Population Statistics

According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, almost a quarter (23%) of Canada's population were either landed immigrants or permanent residents, with a record of over a million new immigrants settling in the country between 2016 and 2021 (2022a). Almost two million children younger than 15 years old had at least one parent who was born in a country other than Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Second-generation individuals often embrace a dual cultural identity, blending the traditions and values of their parents' homeland with the norms, values, and official languages of the Canadians society and serve as a bridge, connecting their immigrant parents with the broader society (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Regardless of their age, children of immigrants have contributed to economic growth and supporting a growing and diverse Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022a). The ethnic and racial diversity of the population varies across regions. For example, the South Asian, Chinese and Black populations are the

largest groups in Ontario, while the Black and Arab populations are the largest groups in Quebec, Chinese and South Asians in British Columbia, and South Asians and Filipinos in the Prairies (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

Dimensions of Diversity

To understand why the perspectives and influences of people in some cultural or ethnic communities are more impactful than others, it is important to understand the various dimensions of diversity that affect the role of culture and ethnicity. The primary dimension includes a person's features or characteristic that cannot be altered (race, age, ethnicity); secondary dimension includes characteristics that can be altered (language, income, parental status, religion) (Sha & Ford, 2007). Two additional dimensions define demographics based on ethnic or cultural identity – avowed identity (how we see ourselves) and ascribed identity (how others perceive they see us) (Sha & Ford, 2007; Sha et al., 2012; Toth, 2009). Cultural identity can be described as a sense of who we are based on our cultural experiences and in the social or community environment we live in (Antony, 2016; Sha, 2006). Avowed identity reflects on how we want to be seen as well as the cultural identity we portray, whereas ascribed identity is the attributions assigned by others who “seek to label an individual as member of a given group” (Antony, 2016, p. 126). It is assigned by another person or group and may not be the same as one's avowed identity (Sha, 2006). This dimension of identity can also be applied to the role of public relations, our avowed identities of being managerial, professional, and ethical, and the identities that are ascribed to the profession by media and the public (Sha et al., 2012).

A third dimension on cultural and ethnic identity that was addressed in this study was the role of intersectionality. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines intersectionality as “the complex, cumulation way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as

racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups” (Mariam-Webster, 2022). Every individual has numerous cultural identities, but research often focuses on one dimension on identity and excluding others (Sha et al., 2012). In the field of public relations, the focus has been on investigating the experience of women practitioners at the exclusion of race, ethnic or cultural identity, sexual orientation, or marital status (Sha et al., 2012). Intersectionality is rooted in the visible and invisible “social constructed identities [that] shapes the lived experiences and realities of individuals” (Sha et al., 2012, p. 76).

For this research, each participant’s experience and that of the researcher includes a different level of intersectionality or layer of identify that may be unique to their experience, including the education their parents achieved, where they completed their education, the amount of influence Western or an individualistic culture has played in their upbringing, and the strength and visibility of their cultural and ethnic identity. This plays a key role in how students and practitioners of diversity cultural, ethnic or racial backgrounds are seen by a profession that is pre-dominantly white and are prescribing to a Western culture. This intersectionality includes the researcher’s identity as a turbaned Sikh or a person with a head covering which is not seen or visible in the public relations industry in Canada.

Individualist vs. Collectivist Cultures

Research has shown that ethnic identity and cultural values can significantly influence career choices, particularly for individuals from collectivist cultures. In many non-Western cultures, family expectations and the desire to uphold communal values often take precedence over personal ambition or self-interest. Social Cognition Career Theory (SCCT) states that career development behaviours are affected by “self-efficacy beliefs, outcomes, expectations and career

goals and intentions which interplay with ethnicity, culture, gender, social-economic status, social support, and any perceived barriers to shape a person's educational and career trajectories" (Akosah-Twumasis et al., 2018 p. 2). SCCT outlines what we believe is our ability to effectively take a course of action towards our desired career choice, that our efforts will guide us towards the career goals we are aspiring to, and that we reach those goals (Sawitri et al., 2014). It also provides a framework for understanding the "dynamic interactions between various factors, including the individual, the environment, behavior, and career selection process" (Qonitatin et al., 2023, p. 98).

The concepts of individualism and collectivism outlines how life decisions are made. In an individualist culture, like a Western white culture (such as Canada), decisions on life events including education and career choices are made by an individual based on their hopes, desires, and aspirations (Akosah-Twumasis et al., 2018). According to Hofstede (2011), individualist cultures involve loose ties between individuals where "everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family" (p. 11). Their self-image is defined by not their relationship or sameness with a larger group, but by their independence and individualistic identity (LeFebvre & Franke, 2013). In collectivist cultures, people are integrated into large sub-groups beyond the immediate family and can include extended families (uncles, aunts, grandparents) that enrich the experience of family and joint support, with the expectation of uncompromising loyalty to the family (Hofstede, 2011). Social collectivism and the strong relationship with family and the community has a significant impact on the individual's self-image (LeFebvre & Franke, 2013). These individuals have various sub-identities that incorporate their self-image with that of collectivist identities (LeFebvre & Franke, 2013).

In individualist cultures, decisions on career choices are based on the desires and aspirations of the individual, whereas for individuals from collectivist cultures (e.g. Asian and South Asian cultures), decisions are made within groups to conform with familial, cultural or ethnic standards (Akosah-Twumasis et al., 2018; Somerville & Robinson, 2016; Qonitatin et al., 2023). Education and career choice is seen as a family or community issue, not just an individual one (Somerville & Robinson, 2016). Parents and families from a collectivist culture play a significant role in determining or influencing the career paths of their children. In these cultures, students have more of an attachment with their families or their community and tend to comply to these expectations, putting the goals aspirations of their parents or family ahead of their own (Qonitatin et al., 2023). As well, parents from collectivist cultures are expected and feel a sense of responsibility to support their children's endeavours, both financially and morally (Qonitatin et al., 2023). On the other hand, children from individualistic cultures are brought up to be more individualistic are encouraged by their parents to "follow their interests and pursue careers that suit them" (Qonitatin et al., 2023, p. 102).

Navigating Two Cultures

First-generation youth who grew up in Canada and second-generation youth who were born in Canada who enrol in post-secondary or higher education find themselves at the crossroads. They are sandwiched between managing life and making decisions within two different cultures (individualistic vs. collectivist), trying to balance the power between their own ability to decide their own path or to follow their parents' expectations and have stature within their ethnic community (Akosah-Twumasis et al, 2018; Taylor & Krahn, 2013). In other words, power imbalance occurs when they are told that they cannot have the best of both worlds and must pick one culture over the other.

These students and practitioners carry multiple identities and roles in academic and work settings, and everywhere they go. They straddle the conflicting realities, expectations, aspirations, and pressures of two or more cultures, as well as of their parents and sometimes their ethnic communities (Tsalach, 2022). Immigrant parents and parents of second-generation Canadian young adults put more value on what they deem as professional careers, and young adults feel their parents want them to do a degree that will guarantee a high income (doctor, lawyer, dentistry) which they felt would rule out careers in the arts, social sciences, and humanities (Taylor & Krahn, 2013; Somerville & Robinson, 2016). In some cultures, choosing to take an individualist approach is seen as rebelling, going against the wishes of one's parents or bringing dishonour to their ethnic community (Somerville & Robinson, 2016). In some collectivist cultures, such as East Asian or South Asian cultures, immigrant parents want their children to pursue higher education and have successful careers to buffer them from the "prejudice and discrimination they encountered in Canada" (George & Chaze, 2016, p. 95).

Excellence Theory, Diversity, and Requisite Variety

Grunig's Excellence Theory outlines principles that contribute to organizational excellence in communication and when organizations are practicing excellent public relations (Bowen et al., 2010). It emphasizes ethical, strategic, and relationship-based communication for organizational success and when organizations are practicing excellent public relations. Among these principles, Excellence Theory states that public relations professionals from diverse backgrounds should be represented in roles throughout the public relations department of organizations to ensure diverse and various viewpoints are factored in when decisions are made on communications approaches (Bowen et al., 2010; Sriramesh et al., 2013).

Although Excellence Theory includes the need for diverse representation in public relations departments, Sha and Ford (2007) state that it doesn't go far enough. To be excellent, they believe diverse understandings and perspectives need to be integrated into all areas of the profession and expanded on the concept of requisite variety (Sha & Ford, 2007; Toth, 2009). Organizations can maximize their effectiveness if their internal variety (diverse representation) matches the diversity in their external environment, thus linking diversity and requisite variety (Hon & Brunner, 2000) and that this variety be reflected in senior level roles as well so students and practitioners see themselves in leadership roles (Mundy, 2015).

Diversity and Representation in Public Relations

The need for diversity in public relations and communications is widely recognized as organizations increasingly seek to connect with a global and diverse audiences, both within the local communities they serve and abroad. However, the underrepresentation of people of colour in the industry is a persistent concern and there is currently little empirical data available on the demographic identities in the Canadian PR profession, aside from gender. It is important to conduct some research to gather the data needed to understand the extent of racial and ethnic diversity of practitioners and their perspectives on having a more diverse and inclusive representation. A first of its kind research of 1,231 public relations practitioners conducted in 2021 by the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), the Toronto chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Canadian Council of PR Firms, and Leger found that the profession was diverse in general, but that diversity did not reach the executive levels (CPRS, 2021). Of the 1,231 respondents, 76% identified as women, 21% as men and 7% as other genders or preferred not to say. When it came to ethnicity and racial background, 74% were white and 24% were from racialized and ethnic communities (Black practitioners at 6%,

South Asian practitioners at 5%, and East Asians at 3%) (CPRS, 2021). Regarding their roles within an organization, white practitioners held 84% of executive leader roles and 76% of the senior leader roles (CPRS, 2021). Racially/ethnically diverse practitioners held 15% of executive leader roles and 22% of senior leader roles (CPRS, 2021).

In comparison, the Diversity Action Alliance (DAA) in the United States published a report in July 2021 called the *Diversity Action Alliance 2020 Race and Ethnicity in Public Relations and Communications Benchmark Report* with data collected in a survey of 12,667 respondents. The survey showed that 79% of practitioners were white, compared to 21% who were “racially/ethnically diverse” (DAA, 2021). At the senior leadership level, racially/ethnically diverse practitioners (DAA, 2021) held only seven percent of executive roles and 13% of senior leader roles.

Students are the future of the public relations industry and reflect the diversity of the population now more than ever before. To help in creating career pathways, diversity needs to start at the classroom level to be elevated through the profession (Muturi & Zhu, 2019). It is important to understand the perspectives of students and post-secondary instructors to improve diversity and inclusion in the “education-industry continuum” (Bardhan & Gower, 2020, p. 104). What students learn in the classroom, who they see around them, and learning from instructors who are from diverse backgrounds will impact their perception of diversity (Bardhan & Gower, 2020). Having a lack of role models, mentors, and awareness of practitioners from similar diverse ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds, not highlighting success stories, and not seeing cultural diversity at senior management levels in PR lead some students to not consider majoring in public relations (Muturi & Zhu, 2019).

Public relations practitioners are “insufficiently diverse to provide requisite variety to organizations” (Toth, 2009, p.8), meaning the profession does not represent the diverse perspectives and voices of its practitioners. If organizations believe in having a diverse workplace and serving a diverse community, its public relations departments should bring in more practitioners from different backgrounds and perspectives to their teams (Toth, 2009). As the organization’s external stakeholders become more diverse, their public relations team members must be representative (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

Publics

The relationship between PR instructors and PR academic programs and the student population can be identified as a responsive one under Grunig’s Situational Theory of Publics. This theory provides a method for organizations, and in this case post-secondary and higher education institutions, to segment their stakeholder groups into distinct publics with whom they need to develop and maintain targeted relationships (Grunig, 2013a). The situational theory outlines three variables that describe the degree to which the public interact with an organization on a particular issue or topic: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement (Aldoory and Sha, 2007; Grunig, 2013b). Practitioners identify the demographics of these publics, can add publics together or separate them (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013), and can “segment publics into sub-groups based on essential similarities” (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013, p. 280). These publics can be segmented further to include social identities which represent, as Owens (2003) states, from “categories to which individuals are socially recognized as belonging” (as cited in Vardeman-Winter et al, 2013, p. 280).

In the context of this study, each participant group can be segmented into specific publics. These publics can be further segmented into one level of intersectionality, race, and/or

ethnic identity. They may “detect that something should be done about a situation and stop to think about what to do” (problem recognition) (Grunig, 2013b, p. 836). They may consider the extent to which they may or may not want to be involved (level of involvement) (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Grunig, 2013b) based on their perception of how the academic programs and the industry respond to matters of anti-racism, diversity, and representation. They may also be reluctant to be involved due to their lived and living experiences and institutional harm they may have experienced in the past (constraint recognition) (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Grunig, 2013b).

In the initial model, Grunig considered a fourth variable, referent criterion, which explained how members of the public “communicate in specific situations” (Illia et al., 2013, p. 95). This variable posits that some individuals will seek less information concerning the situation as they will have gained knowledge and experience from an earlier situation and may not require or seek additional information (Illia et al., 2013).

Sha (2006) further conceptualizes the situational theory in tying the integration of cultural identity in intercultural public relations to further define the use of the four variables:

In situations where the avowed cultural identity is salient, differences in identification with a cultural group will predict differences in problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, and type of communicative behaviour; therefore, if an organisation and its public hold different avowed identities salient to the situation, intercultural public relations becomes a necessary aspect of excellence public relationships (p. 46).

In this context, PR practitioners must acknowledge the differences in these cultural identities to communicate effectively with internal and external publics whose cultural identities and backgrounds may be different from the communicator (Sha, 2006). Thus, PR teams and

organizations must ensure requisite variety and make efforts to ensure that their public relations and communications departments reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the organization's employees and external communities.

Stakeholder Relationship Management

Stakeholder relations and relationship management is key to ensuring PR and communications students and practitioners feel that their concerns are considered when looking at diversity in the PR profession. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) define organizational-public relationships as follows:

Organizational-public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. Though dynamic in nature, organization–public relationships can be described at a single point in time and tracked over time (p. 19).

Public relations demonstrates its value partly by the relationships it creates with the organization's stakeholders and key publics. Strategic public relations can “help build mutually satisfying relationships, which contributes to an organization's purpose of being” (de Bussy, 2013, p. 83). Using stakeholder theory, public relations analyzes the relationships between the business or organization and the groups of individuals, from a stakeholder perspective, who are affected by a decision made by the organization (de Bussy, 2013). To be effective, organizations must find ways to solve the issues or problems to achieve its goals and those of its stakeholders (Grunig, 2008). Stakeholder theory and relationship management theory will help organizations,

and their public relations departments identify diverse stakeholders, the varying power and influences on organizational decision-making, and in gaining trust (Mundy, 2015).

In the linkage model developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), functional linkages are those stakeholders who are crucial for an organization's operations and are categorized into two types: input functions, employees and supplies that support in the production of goods or services, and output functions, the customers and retailers who utilize these goods or services (as cited in Rawlins, 2006).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic framework that focuses specifically on “racial inequality and the construction and function of race as an aspect of (group) identity shaped by social structures” (Edwards, 2012, p. 59). CRT challenges the idea of white experiences as the normative standard and instead bases its framework on the unique experiences of people of color (Taylor, 1998; Pompper, 2005). It uses storytelling to combat negative stereotypes and is grounded in the “realities of the lived experience of racism” (Taylor, 1998, p. 122). As public relations is still a young but growing discipline, it would benefit from diversity by integrating practitioner’s diverse minority communities into the profession (Pompper, 2005). CRT recognizes that race is part of an intersectional identity, emphasizing that different aspects of a race-informed identity become prominent depending on the context (Edwards, 2012).

Understanding Diversity and Inclusion

It is important for public relations instructors to understand their role and responsibility for bringing about and supportive changes when it comes to diversity and inclusion in the classroom (Bardhan & Engstrom, 2021). As Sison (2017) points out, “inclusion is necessary for diversity to work, and it entails giving voice and opportunity for advancement to those who have

historically been oppressed and excluded from societal processes” (as cited in Bardhan & Engstrom, 2021, p. 6). Inclusion is also about having an organizational culture that respects equity and does not perceive it as “just an “add-on” to already existing culture” (Appelbaum & Walton, 2015, as cited by Bardhan & Englestrom, 2021, p. 6; Mundy 2015).

Addressing diversity in public relations is long overdue and has many benefits for organizations. As Grunig (2005) said “organizations become more effective when they have incorporated diverse values and talents into their structures and culture” (as cited in PR Coalition, 2005, p. 3).

In outlining the general principles for organizations to be effective in global public relations, Vercic et al. (1996) stated that, “when a public relations department embraces a diverse workforce – men and women practitioners who have different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds – it can better understand the divergent perspectives, values, and expectations of organizational stakeholders” (as cited in Sriramesh et al., 2013, p. 112). This sense of diversity and representation starts at the academic level to help students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds see practitioners who look like them represented at all levels in public relations and communications, including positions of power and influence and in the dominant coalition. In turn, practitioners have an opportunity to be mentors and connect with students from similar backgrounds to show that there are professionals in the industry that look like them.

Autoethnography as a Method

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography. Autoethnography “draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings,

emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues” (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). It is a style of writing and research that links personal experiences to cultural aspects and experiences, situating the individual within a broader social context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holt, 2003) and combines one’s experiences with the external influences that impact their lives (de Andrade, 2014). An autoethnographer aims to make personal experiences meaningful and cultural experiences captivating while also “be able to reach wider and diverse audiences that traditional research usually disregards” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277). It also positions the researcher as both the subject and the researcher, allowing them to draw meaningful connections between their lived experiences and the broader sociocultural context.

This method attempts to give “credence to a view that does not fit with the mainstream view and might shed some light on the ‘other’” (Muncey, 2005, p. 78). The researcher reflects on their personal experiences to explore and provides a unique perspective by integrating these insights that might not be accessible through other research methods. As such, the researcher adopts both their academic and personal identities to share autobiographical narratives about aspects of their daily experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Incorporating autoethnography into scientific or theory-based research as a qualitative approach can be challenging but it offers a voice to personal experiences (Wall, 2008). Autoethnography can demonstrate how cultural, ethnic, and racial identities are formed, negotiated, and explored in the realities of postgraduate students from various cultures (de Andrade, 2014).

Although autoethnography brings the human element into the research and connects the researcher at a personal level, its use in academic and scientific research comes with risks and ethical implications. By sharing their personal lived experience in research, autoethnographers implicate not only themselves in the research, but also other people in their lives who might be

identified in some way (Ellis et al., 2011). Additional steps would need to be taken, such as altering characteristics of others involved to ensure their safety and privacy (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach could be seen as the researcher putting their purpose and perspective before science, making assertions that go beyond what the data and evidence shows (Wall, 2008).

In the context of this study, I used autoethnography to incorporate my lived experience in navigating my personal preferences and career aspirations with that of the expectations from my family, perspectives and influences from members of the Sikh/Punjabi community, and from the stereotypes or bias attached to my identity as a turbaned Sikh man. This provides the context to the purpose of studying this research topic.

Autoethnography – My Lived Experience

This research topic was 40 years in the making and was borne from my own lived experience as likely the first turbaned Sikh to enter and practice in the public relations and communications field in Canada in 1999. I have used autoethnography writing to give my “voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” (Wall, 2008, para. 1) and provide the opportunity for me to incorporate the literature mentioned above with my experience and perspective related to these concepts. This paper gives me the opportunity to reflect on my identity and self-awareness with a topic that has not been covered in Canada at this level.

To understand how cultural and ethnic influences, ethnic identity, and the role of power and parental expectations led to challenges I faced as I pursued my academic and career pathway in public relations, it is important to provide some context to my ethnic identity, both ascribed and avowed.

My Reflection

During a conversation I had with a fellow senior communications colleague about 10 years ago, she challenged me to ‘WOW’ her with a significant accomplishment from my now 25+ years of experience in the public relations/communications industry. It took me a couple of minutes to think of one, but it didn’t occur to me at the time that my ‘WOW’ factor had more to do with something we never talked about – being likely one of the first turbaned Sikhs in the industry in the entire country.

People might not see this as a major "WOW" factor, but it's important to recognize the challenges I've faced—and still face—as a turbaned Sikh. The stereotypes attached to my identity, particularly the remarks from within my own ethnic community, as well as society’s expectations of what a public relations or communications professional should "look like" (ascribed vs. avowed identity) add layers of complexity to my experience. The dimensions of identity played a factor in how I saw myself and how others saw me, including those in the Punjabi/Sikh community. As Sha, Tindall, and Sha (2012) state, identities are multifaceted and include many cultural identities or layers within a culture that an individual may identify with (avowed identity). In my experience as a turbaned Sikh, these identities occurred within a collectivist cultural context as well, where people within the Sikh/Punjabi community perceived me as being ‘old fashioned’, ‘not letting go of the old country’, and not ‘integrating into the mainstream, white society’ where I grew up simply because I wore a turban and didn’t drink or party.

My personal identity

I am a second-generation Canadian who was born in Victoria, British Columbia, to parents who immigrated to Canada in 1969. Growing up, my sibling (who was born in Punjab,

India and came to Canada with our parents when she was four months old) and I were taught that family came first and to put the interests of others before our own, even if that meant those actions or decisions didn't benefit us in any way. This meant that the interests and influences of our family and our community came first. The virtuous perspective of our moral obligations and values was that doing good onto others and addressing their needs to their satisfaction was a benefit and reward unto itself for us. Thus, we had grown up in a collectivist culture where our parents had some power and influence over key decisions in our lives, including which academic or career paths to pursue, and the commitment to family and our ethnic community was not negatively impacted. As I grew older and went to high school, I started to look at things in a different way; how others lived their lives around me, the activities they did after school, and the freedoms they had on the choices they made. I adapted to a more individualistic mindset, which sparked an internal struggle as I tried to reconcile my personal ambitions with the expectations and traditions of the collectivist culture I was raised in.

“You can't live in two cultures. You must pick one.”

That is the comment that some of my family and relatives made to me when I first told them of my desire to pursue a career in public relations. It was a tale of trying to live in and get the best of two cultures, the division of individualistic and collectivist cultures, or as some would say, “having your cake and eating it too”. My family upbringing was closely aligned with the influences and some teachings of the Sikh faith and of the Punjabi community, being a collectivist culture where family and community expectations was paramount, which I believe are quite different to what most communicators in my cohort or the profession would understand. The connection of second-generation youth of both Punjabi/Sikh and Canadian identities create

challenges and difficulties, and the value and cultural conflict that are faced by second generation Punjabi/Sikh Canadians (George and Chaze, 2016).

The emphasis on commitment to serve others and consider perceptions of the Punjabi community over self-interest was reinforced. And then there was the whole journey of keeping my hair and wearing a turban. The turban is one of the five symbols that some Sikhs wear to represent their beliefs and faith to the world.

I was one of only two turbaned Sikh boys in the city; most of other kids from the Sikh/Punjabi community seemed to ‘fit in’ seamlessly with the general student population. As I became more immersed in my school environment, I was drawn to the sense of autonomy and individualism that my white friends and classmates had in how they chose to live their lives and what future choices they would make. This is where the two cultures collided and I had to navigate the expectations of my parents and the general perception bias of members of the Punjabi community regarding turbaned Sikh men at the time and the level of success I could attain with my own personal and career aspirations.

My decision to pursue a career in public relations had much to do with avoiding the common academic paths that my grade 12 classmates were going to take; many of them wanted to go into teaching, the sciences, finance, health, or in business. These options didn’t excite me, nor did I have any interest in them or the big three careers – doctor, lawyer, engineer. Plus, I didn’t know if I would get accepted into those programs if other students were considering those fields of study. My parents weren’t pushing me to follow those careers, but instead suggested I could go into accounting, if anything professional, or go with more manual labour, ascribing to the professional or work identity they thought I should have to avoid being too noticeable and avoid the racism and discrimination I might experience as a Punjabi and a turbaned Sikh like

what they may have experienced when they moved to Canada. A school friend in grade 11 suggested that I would do great in PR. Neither of us understood what public relations was and what the career options would be, but they felt it might be an ideal profession for me.

When I shared my decision and my desire to rise through the ranks and, eventually, take on a managerial or leadership role, the reaction I received from my friends, my parents and family, and from members of the Sikh/Punjabi community was quite different. My friends and classmates felt I was making a great choice and were intrigued that I was moving to Halifax, Nova Scotia to take the Bachelor of Public Relations (BPR) degree program at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). Growing up in an individualist, Western cultural environment, they supported the idea of making my own career and life decisions; it was what they were taught at home and in the Canadian way of living. They could not understand that, for someone from a different ethnic background, the influences from my parents and family, and sometimes community perceptions, would be significant factors in the career decision-making process.

Your turban will be an obstacle

On the other hand, the reaction I received from some members of my community, including my family and relatives, wasn't so positive or encouraging. They felt that many businesses and organizations in Canada were racist, and that no organization would ever want, or allow, a turbaned Sikh to reach management or a leadership role. As Somerville and Robinson (2016) alluded to, it was as if I was rebelling against the wishes of my parents and norms within my family by thinking as an individual or being selfish and not following or considering that the opinions or the perspectives of influencers in our community should be paramount. My perspective and outlook on life was drastically different from that of my family, which caused me to be seen as a rebel or a black sheep. Perhaps they were reflecting on their own experiences

with prejudice, discrimination, and racism or if they were preparing me for the challenges I was going to face, but I found their reaction unsettling, but not surprising. The suggestions from my family and members of the Punjabi/Sikh community in my hometown fell into two buckets which showed the contrast of the identity they subscribed to me (ascribed identity) compared to my self-identification or authentic self (avowed identity):

1. Don't even try; rather, get a job in a warehouse or someplace safe. Don't even think about going into a career in public relations or communications, you'll never make it.
2. If you want to get into the field and eventually become a manager, lose the turban, become clean shaven (no long hair or beard), conform, fit in to how others look and you might have a chance.

This sharp contrast between the two options showed how ascribed and avowed identities can be applied to the perceptions in a collectivist culture, especially within the Punjabi/Sikh community in Victoria. My parents told me to trust only people from my ethnic community as the only people I can depend on. However, my personal experiences showed me different. Neither of the two options were acceptable to me. I did not reach out to the people in our community who held influential roles such as in politics or law to look for career opportunities, as my family were pushing me to do.

The problem was that I couldn't point my finger or look to others in the profession who looked like me and say, "look, he/she did it". I had no role models or trailblazers to look up to, no other turbaned Sikh or someone with a head covering to turn to and seek advice or a perspective. I couldn't identify anyone from within or outside of the Punjabi/Sikh community who would advocate for me or support me or understand the internal struggles I was going through. If I were to pursue career in PR or communications, I would have to navigate the path

myself as I went along, finding ways to demonstrate to my family and community members who doubted my choices that it is possible to blend two cultural identities and perspectives, thrive in the public relations field and reach managerial and senior leadership roles as a turbaned Sikh, without losing my authentic identity.

Charting my own path – being a self-advocate and self-role model

I quickly realized that whatever path I chose, I would be forging it alone. So, I went with option #3—going solo and becoming my own advocate, mentor, and role model, and forging ahead with starting my career in public relations. It was up to me to navigate uncharted waters, chart my own path, and tackle the bumps, roadblocks, and any barriers along the way; and what some would say, being a trailblazer. Being a turbaned Sikh is a core part of my identity, and I had been navigating the preconceptions that come with it my entire life. Changing who I was just to fit in or conform to others' expectations was simply not an option. I also did not want to conform to what people thought public relations or communications practitioners looked like (a uniform look) or the dominant demographics of the industry at the time, which was predominantly white, clean shaven, and shorter hair.

My parents and family weren't happy with my decision, especially when it meant that I'd have to move to a different province to study. I didn't know anyone there and I had no idea what the Punjabi/Sikh experience was like there. My parents weren't fully supportive of my choice, but as they felt they had to support both of their children equally, they did eventually let me move to Halifax and provided financial support to cover tuition, books, rent and living expenses. From a cultural perspective, Punjabi/Sikh parents felt it was their duty to support their children with their education and in establishing their own lives and families (Qonitatin et al, 2023).

To help manage their concerns, I did connect with one of my dad's co-workers from our ethnic community who had a relative in Halifax. They were somewhat helpful in connecting me with their relatives to establish a relationship, providing some context on the Punjabi community there, and insights on the best areas for me to look for a place to rent. The promise to connect with the members of the Punjabi/Sikh community in Halifax did put my parents' minds somewhat at ease.

I moved to Halifax in 1994 and enrolled in the BPR program at MSVU, likely one of the first students with a head covering to do so. I was the only non-white student in my class. Throughout my university experience, I remained aware of the fact that I had no idea how many turbaned Sikhs or people with head coverings lived in Halifax, or what experiences Halifax residents had in interacting with someone like me. I stayed vigilant, as there were times when people I encountered, including some of my fellow BPR students, made inappropriate comments about my appearance or ethnic background. I also had to contend with the geopolitical issues following the Air India bombing and the public debate of retired turbaned Sikh military members being refused entry to Royal Canadian Legion halls for not removing their turbans. Being the only one in that situation meant I had to tread carefully in my responses, unsure of how those around me would react or whether I would receive any support.

Also, I had my own bias of the local Punjabi/Sikh community, viewing them as having similar assumptions as the community I left in Victoria. I dissociated myself from the local community so I could fully immerse myself in an individualistic culture and form my own approach on how best to manage living in two different cultures.

My public relations and communications career

When I first entered the public relations field to look for work, I connected with CPRS, a national professional association of public relations and communications practitioners that supports its members, provides professional development and networking opportunities, and advocates for the profession. Attending their events and national conferences, I could see there was a lack of diversity in the membership and the profession, and there was a significant lack of representation in their senior leadership and board roles. Some may have seen the lack of diversity as a reason not to work in PR, but for me, I told myself that if I didn't see myself represented at senior levels, I might as well work at getting there myself and being a self-advocate.

I began my career in 1999 at Langara College in Vancouver where I primarily handled administrative tasks. Later that year, I landed my dream job with Envirotest Canada, the contractor for the now-defunct AirCare vehicle emissions inspection and maintenance program. Over my 15+ years there, I progressed from a specialist role to leading the department and getting a seat at the senior leadership table, a position I held for over nine years. In this capacity, I led the department and provided strategic advice to senior leadership of two organizations. My work encompassed internal and external communications, stakeholder relationships, community and media relations, crisis and issues management, and government relations. I also spearheaded communications for several change initiatives, including three program launches that significantly altered the services offered to Vancouver's driving public, ensuring stakeholders were well-informed about the changes and their implications.

One of the key highlights of my career was in 2012 when the B.C. government announced the permanent closure of the AirCare program, set for December 31, 2014. This

decision also meant the shutdown of both Envirotech Canada and the government oversight agency by the end of 2014. As the sole communications lead, I used my senior-level leadership skills and experience to develop and execute a comprehensive communications plan, which effectively guided the communications strategy and stakeholder relations throughout the closure process for both organizations and for the program.

Since then, I've held managerial and leadership roles with provincial crown corporations, a local health authority, and in higher education.

Throughout my career, I have continued to bring my authenticity as a turbaned Sikh to my work and my workplace every day. Understanding that my avowed identity of a public relations and communications practitioner who is also a turbaned Sikh may not align with the ascribed identity of a practitioner, I have taken steps to introduce who I am in every new work setting. I've often shared Punjabi food as an equalizer to break the ice and open a conversation about various ethnic cultures and identities that may not occur in the workplace.

Barriers and bias

I have seen and experienced some barriers in my progression into the field, both internal bias and external bias. Early in my career, I couldn't shake the thought that those who doubted my ability to enter management because of my turban might be right and that I would face my own glass ceiling. I shared this with my manager at the time when he asked about where I saw my career going. He reminded me that because of my lived experiences and the layers and challenges I had and would continue to go through, I could provide a unique perspective on management, leadership, and thought leadership that no one in Canada could.

Having a foreign sounding name on my resume may have impacted whether I was considered qualified and skilled enough to be considered for roles. It was hard to say if this was

the case, but it was something I heard through interactions with other practitioners. I also experienced some bias during job interviews I'd had. A seemingly innocent question like 'In communications, we wear many hats...' would show to me that the interviewers were not in tune with what they saw in front of them. At first, I wouldn't react as I thought I was taking the comment too literally. After the second or third time it happened, I found it important to call it out and address the perceived bias in the questioning that assumed an ascribed identity of, not just a public relations or communications practitioner, but any seasoned professional in any field.

As I progressed in my career, the reaction from my parents and my family was indifferent. They still felt I would experience roadblocks that would prevent me from reaching management and so I shouldn't be loyal to any organization. It was not until I was promoted to manager and leader of the public relations and communications department and joined the senior leadership table (dominant coalition) in 2006 that my family finally stopped their criticisms.

The barriers outside of the public relations and communications industry cannot be dismissed. There have been countless times when I have been mistaken for a delivery person, a bus driver, or a taxi driver. People have also been surprised that I don't speak with a Punjabi or Indian accent, that I have an 'amazing' command of the English language, and that I'm not an immigrant. The ascribed identity others have of a turbaned Sikh continue today.

Lack of Diversity and Representation in the Industry

I've also made significant contributions through volunteering. Since 1999, I have been an active member of CPRS, where I found a welcoming and supportive network at both local and national levels. I have served on the board of directors at the local and national levels, making history as one of the first turbaned Sikhs and person with a head covering to do so. I am currently a director on the CPRS National Board. In 2014, I achieved my Accreditation in Public Relations

(APR) from CPRS. Again, my parents and family don't see the value of volunteering at this level and weren't swayed or showed any interest in my achievements, nor did they show interest in my completing the MCM program.

Throughout my involvement, I have noticed that most CPRS members I met at conferences or on various boards were white, with little representation of individuals like me, particularly in senior roles. At times, I was the only non-white practitioner at the conference. Discussions about diversity often focused on increasing the presence of women in leadership positions, which I fully support given that a majority of members and practitioners in the industry are women. It was essential though to carve out my own space and advocate for full representation.

As a man, you have a better chance at career advancement and leadership roles than a woman

I've often heard that men have an easier path to career advancement and leadership roles in public relations or communications compared to women, and that, as a man, I couldn't fully grasp the challenges that women face. While this holds true in a general sense, I strongly disagree when it comes to my personal experience. Such statements often overlook the complexities of intersectionality. As Sha (2006) states, a person's identity is comprised of a "myriad of cultural identities, any one or combination of which may become relevant in a given situation" (p. 53). This includes the intersection of not just ethnicity and race, but different visible and invisible identities on religion and faith. Men and women of colour often face more discrimination and may not receive the same advantages as white practitioners, regardless of gender.

Being a Sardar—a man who wears a turban—comes with its own set of challenges and my appearance carries stereotypes that impact my professional journey. I have been called "old-fashioned," assumed to be a taxi driver, or even subjected to derogatory comments such as looking like a terrorist. These misconceptions create barriers that are overlooked, highlighting that my experience in the workplace is not as straightforward as the stereotype suggests.

It's essential to recognize that we each have our own individual experiences. The barriers I face illustrate that the landscape of professional advancement is far more nuanced and complex than a simple comparison between genders might suggest.

My experience today

It was not until three years ago that I met another turbaned Sikh public relations and communications professional in Canada, and I have become aware of a few other communications experts who wear a head covering.

That's my "WOW" factor. While I may not have accumulated any awards or accolades, I take pride in a significant milestone: being one of the first turbaned Sikhs to work in the public relations and communications field in Canada. I stand proud of my authenticity every day, never compromising who I am.

Research Methods

For this study, I took a mixed-methods research approach, using both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (surveys). I had intended to conduct up to four focus groups sessions with students to gather more in-depth insights from this participant group.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints and unexpected delays in the ethics clearance process and compressed time to conduct the focus group and data analysis, I did not proceed with this method. Due to the sensitive nature of the research and the type of data and insights needed for

meaningful results and for students, parents, and PR practitioners to share their personal stories in a comfortable environment, interviews were used to gather additional insights from parents and practitioners. These methods can be helpful in gathering data from families of various ethnic, cultural and diverse backgrounds (Chope, 2005).

Questions were formed out of the types of career-related information the family provided, what support was provided by family members and if there were any 'strings attached', any emotional supports provided, concerns on the impacts of the career choice on the family, and whether family helped if asked (Chope, 2005).

A mix of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling were used to share the research invitations to students, instructors and PR practitioners through personal email invitations with information on the study, a link to the survey and a method to schedule an interview if they wished, and a request for them to share the research information with their networks. Also, emails were sent to the PR program heads or directors of college or university public relations or communications academic programs with a request to make the information, invitations and research links available to students and instructors. I used LinkedIn to amplify the invitations to my connections. The interviews took place via Microsoft Teams upon the consent of the participants. Students and practitioners were asked if their parents would be willing to participate in interviews and requests were made through them.

I used LimeSurvey, the platform recommended by McMaster University, to set up and conduct online surveys and to collect the data and analyze the results. Three surveys were developed and used to gather data from students, PR instructors, and PR practitioners. The surveys included multiple choice, Likert scale, and short answer questions, and took about 15 minutes to complete. The surveys also included demographic questions and a question

confirming that the respondents fit within the participant demographic criteria to ensure validity. The research was done over a nine-week period.

Due to the delays in research launch, I did a soft launch on December 2024 via posting three blogs on LinkedIn, each directed to a particular participant group and sent emails to instructors and practitioners from my personal contact list. I then did a full launch of my research period in January 2025 to coincide with back to school and back to work post-holiday seasons. This full launch included sending email invitations to directors and administrators of the various PR and Communications academic programs at Canadian colleges and universities, reposting blogs on LinkedIn, and sending invitations to instructors and practitioners in my personal contacts list.

It is important to state that as the researcher, I am a senior PR practitioner with 25 years of experience in the industry, am a second-generation Canadian from a diverse background and a PR program alumnus. This topic came about through my lived experience as being likely one of the first turbaned Sikh or person with a head covering to enter the Canadian public relations education and career over 30 years go. For this study, I used the autoethnography method to incorporate my personal lived experiences in making the decision to enter public relations, the cultural and family challenges and perceived barriers I faced, and how these experiences shaped my career path in the profession and how my experiences related to this research study.

Measures were taken to avoid any potential implicit bias by remaining “open to contrary advice” (Yin, 2018, p. 86). Also, multiple sources were used to ensure the validity and credibility of this study (Yin, 2018). The insights and data from the participant interviews and surveys, and the literature review outlined above validated my story of lived experience. This scientific research and analysis added rigor and objectivity to this study.

Dataset and Data Collection Method

In conducting this research, it is preferable to gather information from multiple sources or data points to ensure validity. This case study employed three data points to collect insights and information: interviews, surveys, and content analysis of the literature available (Yin, 2018), as well as reflections of my own lived experience related to this research topic through autoethnography. The research methods were conducted using the following timeline, factoring in the condensed period available:

- Interviews were held from December 18, 2024 to February 28, 2025.
- Online surveys ran from December 6, 2024 to February 9, 2025.

The following table shows the number of completed surveys and interviews per participant group:

Table 2

<i>Completed surveys and interviews per participant group</i>		
Participant group	Surveys Completed	Interviews Completed
Students	21	n/a
Parents	n/a	3
Instructors	18	5
Practitioners	14	12

As a senior PR practitioner with connections in the PR industry across Canada, I used my network and contacts to reach out to instructors in PR programs to inform them and their students about the research study and seek opportunities to share research information and links. To create a list of the PR and Communications education programs in Canada, I searched the education ministry website page of every province and territory to identify a list of colleges and

universities. I then visited the college and university websites to search for any public relations or communications program at each institution, reviewed each program page to confirm the program description and course content matched the foundational skills needed in public relations and communications. I then recorded the necessary program and contact information into an Excel worksheet. I also asked public relations and communications practitioners in my personal contact list to share the information and survey links and interview invitations with their connections and amplifying these messages to my LinkedIn connections.

Data Analysis Techniques

Of the four general strategies for analyzing data outlined by Yin (2018), the data for this research study was analyzed through the theoretical propositions of Excellence Theory and requisite variety, social cognition career theory, individualist-collectivist cultural identities, critical race theory, stakeholder relationships, and understanding ascribed and avowed cultural identities. This approach helped with reviewing and presenting the analysis from the data collected “pointing to relevant conditions to be described as well as explanations to be examined” (Yin, 2018, pp. 168-169). As this topic was borne from my personal experience in navigating ethnic and family expectations and biases, I was both the researcher and a subject in this research. I utilized the autoethnography method to incorporate my experiences for this study.

Using the theoretical proposition provided evidence, insights, and an explanation on how students and PR practitioners see how cultural, ethnic, and family influences impacted their public relations education and career paths. Qualitative content and thematic analysis was done of the interview responses to identify themes for the topics raised by participants. This data was triangulated with findings and results from the surveys to respond to each research question and insights from the literature review. For the surveys, I used the reports available via LimeSurvey

to create tables showing results of the multiple choice and Likert scale questions. A thematic analysis was done on the open-ended responses to identify, analyze, organize, interpret, and report the themes from the qualitative data (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis is used to identifying patterns in the participants' views and lived experiences to "understand what participants think, feel, and do" (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297). This approach effectively analyzes diverse participant perspectives, identifying commonalities and distinctions while uncovering unexpected insights. (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Security and Privacy

Data privacy and security are critical considerations to ensuring the validity of the research and removing bias in content and thematic analyses of interviews and surveys. This is especially important due to the sensitive nature of the topic that could have potentially made participants uncomfortable sharing their experiences. All interviews were recorded and secured with data and reports from the surveys on my personal laptop and my personal access password has not been shared with anyone else. All survey results and feedback have been securely stored on the LimeSurvey platform behind a secure, password protected firewall. Privacy and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing data and removing all personal information of participants' responses from the research methods. As an additional layer of privacy, research results and insights gathered was used in aggregate and was not segmented or tailored to share geographic- or institution-specific insights so as not to identify any research participant. Also, students and instructors were not asked to identify which college or university they associated with, nor were they asked to identify the academic program they were connected to.

Results/Analysis

The first two questions for each survey were screening questions to determine the suitability and eligibility of participants to complete the survey. As the main survey questions were focused on gathering information and insights from students and practitioners who are of diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and are studying or practicing in the Canadian public relations industry as well as PR and Communications program instructors, participants had to indicate that they met these criterium. For the parent, instructor, and practitioner interviews, the first question confirmed that they met the research eligibility (see Table 1 on page 12 for the research method used per participant group).

Students

From the screening questions for the student survey, one participant indicated that they were not enrolled in a public relations or communications academic program at a Canadian college or university and six indicated they were not members of a cultural, ethnic, or racialized community (not White or European). A further 24 participants did not proceed with the survey past the screening and demographic questions. Therefore, the final number of completed student surveys was 21, or $N = 21$.

Parents

Parent participants were already prescreened through their children who had completed the student or practitioner survey, so only a confirmation question pertaining to their cultural, ethnic, or racial background was required. Three parents participated in interviews.

Instructors

From the screening questions for the instructor survey, four participants indicated that they were not an instructor or in the faculty of a public relations or communications academic program at a Canadian college or university. A further 17 participants did not proceed with the

survey past the screening and demographic questions. The final number of completed instructor surveys was 18, or $N = 18$. There were five instructors who participated in interviews.

Practitioners

From the screening questions for the practitioner survey, four participants indicated that they were not currently working in the public relations or communications field in Canada, one preferred not to answer this question, and four participants indicated that they were not members of a cultural, ethnic, or racialized background (not White or European). A further 15 participants did not proceed with the survey past the screening and demographic questions. The final number of completed practitioner surveys was 14, or $N = 14$. There were 12 practitioners who participated in interviews.

Demographics of student and practitioner participants

For this research, I wanted to gather demographical information on the cultural, ethnic, racial identities of student and practitioner participants to confirm that they identified themselves as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour) as these groups were the focus of my research. I used the same terms to identify ethnicity as were used in the industry survey conducted in 2021 and my research project for the COMMGMT 712 course on PR Research. I included a note saying that ethnicity descriptions coincided with categories used by Statistics Canada and may not accurately represent ethnic groups and did not refer to country of origin. This note was emphasized as some of descriptions reflected geographic regions or countries and could not portray the numerous cultural and ethnics groups in many countries, including Canada.

Table 3

Breakdown of gender and ethnic identity for students and practitioners

Participant group	Gender		Ethnic Identity				
	Female	Male	South Asian	East Asian	Black	Southeast Asian	Latin American
Students	81%	19%	33%	14%	29%	19%	n/a
Practitioners	86%	7%	71%	14%	7%	n/a%	7%

Of student survey respondents, 81% (n=17) of participants identified as women and 19% (n=4) identified as men. No other gender was selected. 33% (n=7) of respondents were South Asian, 29% (n=6) were Black, 19% (n=4) were Southeast Asian, and 14% (n=3) were East Asian.

Of practitioner survey respondents, 86% (n=12) of respondents identified as women, 7% (n=1) identified as a man, and 7% (n=1) identified as cisgender. No other gender was identified. 71% (n=10) were South Asian, 14% (n=2) were East Asian, 7% (n=1) were Latin American, and 7% (n=1) were Black.

In selecting this question, I understand that some respondents may not have been comfortable with the terms used to identify their ethnicity as some descriptions may reflect country of origin, not their cultural, ethnic, or racial background. This would especially have been difficult for second-generation Canadians as answering this question may lead those reviewing the results and reports to mistakenly identifying this group as being landed immigrant which would not be correct. This is partially based on my experience of being asked to respond to this question in surveys and in job applications where potential employers are seeking demographic information from potential candidates.

RQ1: How and to what extent do cultural, ethnic, and familial preferences and expectations influence a student's decision to pursue post-secondary education and career in public relations?

This question explored the extent to which cultural, ethnic, and familial preferences shaped a student's decision to pursue post-secondary education and a career in public relations. Three themes emerged from the data: cultural and parental career influences, supporting individual career choices and balancing cultural identity with personal aspirations. These themes provide insight into the complex dynamics and growing normalcy of individual career aspirations and the traditional role that cultural and familial contexts play.

Cultural and Parental Career Influences

To understand if students felt pressured by their parents and cultural influences on their career decision-making, the survey asked two specific questions related to influence. The first question asked students how influential their parents and families were in their decision to pursue higher education, and the second question asked to what extent those expectations and that of their cultural traditions influenced their choice of study. 62% (n=13) said the opinions of their parents or family were somewhat or very influential in their decision to pursue higher education, and 71% (n=15) said those opinions or expectations had little or no influence on their decision on their course of study. This means that although some parents may have had some influence over wanting their child to enrol in a college or university, that influence did not extend to the students on which field of study to pursue.

Table 4

Influence from parents and families on pursuing higher education and choice of field of study

Level of Influence	Very Influential	Somewhat Influential	Neutral	Not that Influential	Not at all Influential	Don't Know	I prefer not to answer
How influential were your parents' or family's opinions in your decision to pursue higher education?	38%	24%	0%	19%	19%	0%	0%
To what extent did your family's or cultural/ethnic traditions or expectations influence your choice of field of study?	19%	10%	0%	29%	43%	0%	0%

Note: N = 21

Some students from East Asian and South Asian backgrounds mentioned experiencing strong familial preferences for careers viewed as “stable” and prestigious. They reported familial preferences in fields like law, medicine, accounting and engineering. There is often a preference for careers that are familiar and socially respected within these cultural or ethnic communities. One student mentioned that their parents think “intelligence comes from the job” and being a lawyer, doctor or engineer is “something they praise” and “people in these fields know everything”.

One respondent noted, “they want me to pursue an academic career,” highlighting how family pressures can not only influence career choices but also reinforce the importance of traditional educational and professional paths. Similarly, another individual stated that their family, particularly extended family, expected them to pursue a career in healthcare or law, reflecting a broader cultural trend of emphasizing high-status professions.

In some cultures, especially those focused more on personal success or living in an integrated individualistic and collectivist culture, this trend is changing. Some students described

a generational shift or evolving awareness as their families are becoming more open to non-traditional career paths, such as public relations. One student respondent said that they had not experienced a strong push by their parents to pursue a certain career now whereas when they were younger, “there was more of an implied expectation among the extended family”. Other student respondents mentioned that their parents wanted them to choose a career that was best for them, that they would be happy with, and where there were potential opportunities for employment.

Supporting Individual Career Choices

Despite the pressures some felt to conform to familial expectations, many students reported that their parents and families supported their chosen career path, particularly once their families gained a clearer understanding of the public relations practice. Student respondents were asked two survey questions about the support they received from their parents and families when they chose to enrol in a public relations or communications academic program and again during their studies. The first question asked how supportive parents and their families were when they chose to study public relations, and the second question asked how supportive they were at the time this survey was being conducted. 81% (n=17) said their parents and families were very or somewhat supportive of their decision to pursue public relations as a career, and 90% (n=19) said their parents and families were very or somewhat supportive now. 10% (n=2) indicated that they did not know whether their parents or families supported them in their career aspirations. One student expressed a disconnect with their family and cultural or ethnic heritage, not related to academia, and said they don’t have status in the community. The student went on to say, “I’ve learned to completely disregard my cultural, ethnic, and familial expectations to prioritize my own personal interests and career aspirations”.

Table 5

Support given by parents and families to their children who pursue public relations education

Level of Support	Very Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Neutral	Not that Supportive	Not at all Supportive	Don't Know	I prefer not to answer
How much support did you receive from your parents and family when choosing to study public relations?	71%	10%	0%	5%	10%	5%	0%
How do your parents and family view your career path in public relations now?	71%	19%	0%	0%	0%	10%	0%

Note: N = 21

For students pursuing public relations, this often involved educating family members about the scope and stability of the profession. One respondent shared that while their parents were initially uncertain about the viability of public relations, they eventually recognized it as a legitimate and stable career option. “Once they saw the possibilities of the field, they began to support me.” Another student respondent said that their parents worry about how the skills they learn in the classroom will lead to getting their first job in the PR industry, but once they explained that communications is an expansive field with a variety of options to focus on areas such as social media, media relations, or internal communications, they were supportive. This highlights how awareness and exposure to new career paths can ease familial apprehensions and result in greater acceptance.

Moreover, several students emphasized the unconditional support they received from their families once their passion for public relations was evident. One student noted that their parents were excited and proud of their choice to study public relations, signaling a significant shift in perception from initial reluctance to genuine support. Another respondent, whose parents

both worked in academia, shared that their father's background in communication made him particularly supportive of their career choice.

Balancing Cultural Identity and Personal Aspirations (living in two cultures)

The challenge of balancing familial and cultural expectations with personal career aspirations emerged as another important theme. Some students described the internal conflict they faced when pursuing a career that was perceived as unconventional or less prestigious compared to more traditional fields. One respondent revealed that they faced cultural judgment, noting that among their community, "if you're not a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, you feel somewhat left out." This sentiment reflects the societal pressure placed on some students from ethnic backgrounds to pursue careers that align with long-standing cultural norms, creating a tension between personal career goals and cultural identity.

However, several respondents expressed how they managed to reconcile this tension or focused on their personal aspirations. For example, one student shared that they "try to learn how to communicate effectively and transfer my ideas in a way that politely impacts my culture." This strategy of adapting their personal aspirations to align more closely with family values through creating awareness and understanding of the profession reflects a broader theme of cultural negotiation. Another student, who pursued a career in public relations despite familial expectations, emphasized that demonstrating the value of their chosen profession helped bridge the gap between their personal goals and familial expectations. By excelling in their field and demonstrating the tangible benefits of public relations, they were able to gain familial respect for their career choice.

Interestingly, some student respondents reported feeling liberated from these pressures altogether, describing their ability to prioritize personal happiness and career satisfaction over

cultural or familial expectations. One participant stated, “I tend to focus on myself more than care about what others think,” suggesting that for some students, the pursuit of a personal passion like public relations is more important than conforming to traditional expectations. Another student respondent felt that every person should be able to make their own choices about what they want to do with their lives, with no intervention from their parents or families. They said, “I just think people should have the right to choose what they want to be. If they let others dictate their future, they won’t be happy in the long run.”

Overall, student respondents do recommend that others from similar cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds go into public relations as their diverse perspectives and voices are needed in the field. One student respondent chose to go into journalism, and later into public relations, because it broadened their opportunities to learn and get involved with their community. Another respondent spoke to the importance of representation as a Black person and how Black people, especially Black women, should be more represented and have space in the field to have a voice. They commented that having a PR instructor who was Black increased their ability and confidence to speak publicly. They said, “it goes to show how powerful representation can be”. Others cautioned that before getting into a PR academic program, students should have a clear understanding of what public relations is, have a passion for it, and determine if their personality and ability to manage conflict would be conducive to the requirements of the profession.

RQ2: What factors do parents, especially immigrant parents, consider significant when advising on educational and career pathways and which careers do they prefer their children pursue and why?

To answer the question of what factors parents, and immigrant parents, of first- or second-generation Canadians consider when advising their children on their educational and

career choices, I conducted interviews with three parents to gather their perspectives. Through the interview feedback, three themes emerged: balancing job security and passion, parental guidance vs. career independence, and the evolution of cultural expectations.

Balancing Job Security and Passion

All three parents emphasized that they wanted their children to follow a career that would provide them with job security, stability, and financial viability, and where they could build a quality life and support a family. While the parents stressed the importance of higher education, they recognized the need for their children to balance their career aspirations and personal fulfillment, encouraging their children to select a field according to their passion and interests. The parents cited their upbringing in their countries of origin where stable government or professional roles, such as those in law or medicine, were highly valued. One parent shared, “in our culture, we valued professions like doctor or lawyer, but now we realize that what makes a child happy and fulfilled is more important than just stability.” Over time, the parents shifted their expectations to focus more on their child’s interests and strengths. One parent who is from a Chinese background said that “every parent wants their child to get higher education, and the focus should be their personal interests and desires and what career is best related to their talents and interest”. He felt that the role of the parent is to guide their children by asking questions that help them see the big picture and to let them figure out for themselves what career path would best fit their interests. This stems from their personal experiences growing up in a culture where their own parents provided similar freedoms.

Another parent recalled growing up in Hong Kong and was taught to value and honour their parents and ancestors with respect to culture and upbringing. His parents wanted him and his siblings to get a better education than they did, but did not influence them in directing which

career to pursue, saying “we had lots of freedom to choose what we wanted to study”. This is a sentiment and belief that each parent participant passed on to their children.

As their understanding of career options like public relations expanded, the parents began recognizing the importance of aligning careers with their children’s interests. A common sentiment was expressed by one parent, who explained, “I want my child to feel fulfilled and happy in what they are doing. Career stability is important, but passion matters too.” Another parent began to see how the ethical and community service areas of public relations align with the values he and his family follow through Confucianism where he says the core beliefs of “harmony between human and social relations” and “humanity, harmony, and service builds harmonious relationships” which he says are important in public relations. One parent, who was also a retired pharmacist who worked in a hospital, highlighted the importance of the hospital's communications department in addressing issues and effectively engaging with both internal and external stakeholders. “They must be very objective and unbiased, not swaying one way or the other. They need to present the facts in a non-biased objective way”.

Parental Guidance vs. Career Independence

Another theme in all three parent interviews was an early shift in parental attitudes regarding career guidance and how they approached conversations around career aspirations with their children. Traditionally, many immigrant parents steered their children toward certain professions, such as studying to become lawyers, doctors, engineers, and accountants. Two of the parents said they grew up in Hong Kong at a time when it was still a British Colony and they went through the British-style education system. Their parents would provide some guidance, but with the British influence, they guided their children to follow their desires and interests in

choosing which careers to follow. One parent recalled, “I didn’t get the sense that my parents were enforcing their wishes as to what to study”

These parents said they placed greater emphasis on enabling their children to have the autonomy to choose careers based on personal interest and strengths. One parent noted, “I never pushed my children to follow my profession. I wanted them to figure out what made them happy, what they were passionate about.” Another parent said, “I wanted to give some guidance to my kids, but I didn’t want to force them into what career to pursue. I don’t want them to feel pressured into making a choice”. One parent added that she encouraged her children to pursue higher education to get grounded for a future career and for their life ahead”. This transition reflects a broader cultural adaptation. The parents shared that, although they provided guidance, they ultimately respected their child’s autonomy in decision-making. “They had to decide for themselves.” All three stressed that the focal point for their children should be to choose a career and course of study that aligns with their interest, talents, and desires which would involve their own self-awareness and help them answer the question “what do they want to do when they grow up”. One parent mentioned the importance of picking a career that was versatile so her children could “pick something that will allow you to go into different areas of work and won’t be limiting”.

Cultural Expectations and Adaptation

The cultural shift regarding career expectations was significant, as many immigrant parents moved from strictly adhering to traditional career paths to recognizing diverse opportunities in the modern job market. One parent highlighted the traditional emphasis on science-based careers, saying, “in our community, there was always pressure to go into science because it was considered more secure. Public relations wasn’t even considered a career choice

in the past”. However, as PR gained recognition as a dynamic and versatile field, some parents have come to appreciate its value. One parent reflected, “I didn’t know much about PR before, but now I see how much potential it has. If my child is happy and their career aligns with their personality, I’d support them in pursuing it”. This shift is also evident in the way parents approach their children's career choices, focusing more on whether the child feels fulfilled and whether the career fits their personality, rather than adhering to rigid cultural norms.

Family expectations do play a role in some of the aspirations one parent has for her child outside of career and professional life. “I wanted my child to choose a career that would allow her to bring up a family in the future, and perhaps to work part-time”.

The evolving nature of cultural expectations, combined with greater awareness of diverse career opportunities, indicates a more flexible and supportive approach for parents to use in guiding children through post-secondary education and career decisions, providing a balance between personal fulfillment and job security. As one parent noted, “Ultimately, it’s about ensuring that our children are happy and secure in whatever path they choose, even if it’s something we never considered before.”

Advice for Other Parents

Interviewees had some advice for other parents of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds on how to approach discussions around education and career decision-making with their children:

- Allow your children to choose their career path – parents should support their children’s career choices instead of imposing or directing them to a career that might not be for them.
- Recognize individual interests and talents.

- Start early and stay involved – engage with your children’s education and extra-curricular activities from an early age and help them research career options to make more informed decisions.
- Support and guide them by asking inquisitive questions so their children can find out for themselves where their interests and aspirations lie and broaden their understanding.
- Encourage open communication – communicate more openly with your children to understand their interests and aspirations.
- Avoid excessive academic pressure – having high academic expectations can create unnecessary stress. A balanced approach that values interest, talent, and long-term happiness is more beneficial.

By considering this advice, parents can better support their children’s educational and career aspirations in a way that aligns with both individual interests and the evolving professional landscape in Canada.

RQ3: How can PR instructors and PR education programs better support students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in developing their career aspirations in the field and acquiring parental and familial support?

This question explored how public relations and communications instructors and academic programs could support students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in their academic journeys, and whether they had a role in interacting with parents. Interview and survey feedback from instructors highlighted that diversity in the PR student population and the PR classroom has increased over time. 94% (n=17) of instructors say they always or frequently have students from different cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds in their classes and programs, and

66% (n=12) always or frequently incorporate discussions around cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity in the profession in their classroom teaching.

Table 6

<i>Diversity in the PR classroom: students and curriculum discussions</i>						
Level of diversity	Always	Frequently	Neutral	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
How often do you have students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds in your program?	83%	11%	0%	6%	0%	0%
How often do you incorporate discussion about cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity in the profession in your classroom teaching?	22%	44%	0%	33%	0%	0%

Note: N = 18

Instructors reported that many of their classrooms include a significant number of international students, particularly from India, China, South Korea, Nigeria, Ghana, and Mexico. In some cases, over half the class is composed of students from diverse backgrounds in which a strong understanding of business English would be considered a barrier. The findings highlight three general themes: challenges and barriers for students from diverse backgrounds, institutional and program support for diversity, and the need for greater diversity and representation in the PR industry.

Challenges and Barriers for Students from Diverse Backgrounds

Underrepresented students often face significant challenges, such as language barriers, cultural adaptation issues, and a lack of role models in the field. These barriers can impact their academic success, career development, and familial support. Also, they said that many international students and immigrant students who grew up in another country where English

may not be the first language they were taught face challenges in PR programs, particularly in writing-intensive coursework. As one instructor noted, “Students with English as a second language face significant difficulties in courses that rely heavily on writing.” Additionally, cultural adaptation and mental health struggles can impact academic performance and career confidence. Regarding their awareness that these challenges exist, 89% (n=16) of instructors said they were very or somewhat knowledgeable about the challenges students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds face in pursuing a career in public relations, and 50% (n=9) felt that students are significantly or somewhat significantly impacted by their respective cultural and ethnic influences.

Table 7

<i>Instructor knowledge of cultural, ethnic, racial influences on students</i>					
Level of knowledge	Very Knowledgeable	Somewhat Knowledgeable	No very Knowledgeable	Not at all Knowledgeable	I Prefer not to Answer
How knowledgeable do you feel about the specific challenges faced by students from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds in pursuing a career in public relations?	39%	50%	0%	6%	6%

Note: N = 18

While representation in undergraduate programs tend to be more diverse than the industry, instructors said challenges remain for students, particularly those from racialized backgrounds, to see opportunities in communication-related careers. Moreover, career concerns persist, with some students expressing to their instructors the fear that their ethnic background may limit job opportunities, especially those from India or Pakistan. However, there is also optimism. “Workplace acceptance has improved, and there is growing support for diversity in hiring,” said one instructor. Another instructor stated that PR programs must ensure that students receive the necessary resources to navigate these barriers and thrive in the industry.

Some students of certain cultural and ethnic backgrounds such as South Asians, still face resistance or pressures from their families who may not recognize public relations as a viable career compared to more traditional careers (e.g. accounting or medicine). During an interview, one instructor mentioned, “I’ve had students in the past whose parents didn’t want them to go into PR. They wanted their children to be accountants or possibly nurses”. She went on to say that these students struggled with getting parental support because their parents felt getting to PR “was not a good use of their time”. To overcome this, one instructor suggested “it is okay if their parents do not understand or know much about it [public relations]. Educating them and showing them examples of the jobs in the field will help them begin to understand”.

Institutional and Program Supports

78% (n=14) of instructors indicated that they do take steps to incorporate different cultural and ethnic perspectives into their course and program curriculum, and 11% (n=4) said they were not very effective.

Table 8

<i>Effectiveness in incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum</i>						
Level of effectiveness	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Very Effective	Not at all Effective	I Don’t Know	I Prefer not to Answer
How effectively does your curriculum incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and practices?	22%	56%	11%	0%	6%	6%

Note: N = 18

Table 9 shows services that programs or institutions offer to support students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds to overcome barriers in public relations. 84% (n=15) said that their programs were doing well or somewhat well in making support services available to diverse students who need them.

Table 9

Support services available to support students to overcome barriers

Supports	n	Percent
Networking opportunities with PR pros	13	72
Career Counselling	12	67
Mentorship programs	11	61
Workshops on diversity	7	39
Other	3	17
Don't know	2	11
Do not offer support services specific to these students	1	6

Note: N = 18

Comments in the Others response was that cultural and ethnic diversity is part of their curriculum and that “diversity is interwoven into the program by its nature”. One instructor said they connect students with their local CPRS chapter for their mentorship program which connects students with practitioners in their region.

Despite these challenges, instructors reported that institutional support, such as tutoring and community networks, helps bridge these gaps. Beyond the classroom, PR instructors recognize that mentorship plays a vital role in helping students navigate their career paths for first- and second-generations Canadians and for international students. Instructors emphasized one-on-one mentorship and career guidance as a means of fostering student success. In general, instructors said that through networking opportunities, internship placements, and individualized coaching, students gain valuable industry exposure and professional confidence. One-on-one sessions help students explore their values, aspirations, and the impact they want to make in the industry. As one instructor shared, “I encourage them to find their core values first and then to pursue those, where they will find they’re greatest conviction and commitment, which will give

them confidence and credibility.” Added another instructor, “we facilitate a fourth-term internship, which encourages students of all backgrounds to get important work experience.”

Representation and having the right mentors also matter for students to see people who look like them in the industry. During an interview, one instructor described how a PR graduate from their program who is a Black woman and has done very well in the sports communications in the National Basketball Association. The practitioner established a scholarship for Black women coming to the PR program at her university. “The scholarship includes a mentorship element with the practitioner throughout the year, and that’s a game changer,” said the instructor.

Many instructors also provide networking opportunities, connect students to professional organizations, and promote scholarships geared towards BIPOC, women, and neurodivergent individuals. However, supporting international students requires additional effort. Faculty members report helping students adapt to the Canadian PR industry, with some identifying access to wellness sessions to check in on international students' transition to life in Canada.

Parental and familial understanding of public relations as a career path remains a challenge. Some instructors indicated programs have recruitment days, milestone celebrations, and graduation events where parents can engage with faculty and learn about career prospects. However, there is limited structured parental support at the higher education level, which could be an area for development. Two instructors indicated that privacy and confidentiality of individuals meant that they could not interact or discuss their students’ academic activities with their parents. One instructor mentioned that students are adults so they don’t talk to parents.

Diversity and Representation

A recurring theme is the need for greater representation of professionals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds in the profession, in the classroom, and in academia. One

issue is the lack of role models. “Many students from underrepresented backgrounds don’t see themselves reflected in the industry, making it harder to visualize a successful career path,” said one instructor. To address this, instructors have brought in guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, looked into mentorship initiatives, and connected with alumni networks to show that there are people that look like them in the field and in leadership roles. Networking opportunities, career panels, and industry partnerships also play a crucial role in bridging the gap between students and employers. “When students see professionals who share their cultural background succeeding in public relations, it boosts their confidence and motivates them to persist.”

One instructor stressed the importance of diversity and representation in the public relations industry. “Canada is a diverse country and the communications/PR industry must reflect that or it will face barriers (lack of understanding, biases) in engaging with different publics”. Another added, “it is critical for the profession to address the current lack of diversity in the PR profession in Canada. We must represent the communities we strive to serve”. Another instructor noted the role of the academic community by saying, “we need to represent the Canadian multicultural realities in the profession through education”.

Several stressed the need to ensure that faculty becomes more diverse, bring in PR and communications professionals from diverse backgrounds as guest speakers to talk, not just about examples of how the theories and concepts learned in class are applied in a real-life environment, but also about diversity and their lived experience.

There is some caution as well on ensuring diversity is matched with equity and that credibility and validity of the profession is maintained. One instructor commented, “My classrooms and faculty have become very diverse in the 18 years that I have been teaching. I am

more concerned by equity in the industry rather than its diversity, which has been naturally increasing as our population has become more diverse”. Another mentioned, “PR education is merit based. If a student performs well, it does not matter their sex, their religion, their ethnicity. However, we do require high level language and writing skills”. This instructor also expressed concerns of the reliance that higher education institutions have on revenue generation through charging much higher fees to international students which they say is “unethical for both the student and education systems.

Recommendations for Support and Resources

Instructors were asked to share any insights or suggestions they had on what resources and supports that PR and Communications academic programs could provide for their students, especially those from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. One instructor shared the following as a starting point:

Students come from all walks of life, cultures and ethnic backgrounds; some of which are complex with different socio-economic influences or even mixed parenthoods. Some were born in other countries while others are first- or second-generation Canadians whose families might still carry on certain traditions. It is important to have resources and frameworks but it is also important to have approaches that provide sufficient flexibility and are informed by the students who are in the classroom at a given time.

The instructors shared the following recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of PR and Communications academic programs in supporting diverse students in their career aspirations:

- Incorporate more case studies and examples showcasing the work, campaigns and initiatives done by PR and Communications professionals from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds as part of the curriculum.

- Ensure diversity in the guest speakers, panelists or guest lecturers to classes.
- Emphasize storytelling from PR professionals of diverse backgrounds, focusing on barriers they faced and how they overcame them.
- Implement faculty training on intercultural competence to improve pedagogy and student support.
- Increase efforts to hire faculty from diverse backgrounds to reflect student demographics.
- Ensure instructors and professors are trained to create safe, inclusive classroom spaces and build trusting relationships with students.
- Engage in targeted outreach to diverse Canadian communities through cultural organizations and events to raise awareness of public relations as an academic and career option to first- and second-Canadian students and their parents.
- Establish paid internship opportunities specially for diverse students to increase their access to career pathways.

By integrating diversity and representation into the program experience, expanding mentorship and networking opportunities, addressing the specific challenges faced by diverse students, and implementing these recommendations, PR education programs will be better suited to support the career aspirations of students.

Q4: How did PR practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds perceive and navigate familial expectations in their career choices, and what guidance and support systems do they recommend for students considering or pursuing a career in public relations?

This question explored the experience of PR practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds who currently work in the field on whether they had to navigate any parental

or family expectations in their career decision-making process. To provide some background in the profession, I asked practitioners how many years of experience they have in the profession. Of the 14 survey respondents who answered this question, 50% (n=7) have been working in the industry for 10 years or more. Many practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds navigate family expectations, systemic barriers, and identity-related challenges while pursuing careers in PR. From the interview and survey feedback from practitioners, three themes emerged: family expectations and support, systemic barriers and career advancement, and networking, mentorship, and representation.

Family Expectations and Support

Feedback from practitioners indicated that there was a shift in the expectations that parents and families placed on children on their career paths, partly due to the traditional beliefs and expectations, the parents' upbringing, and the influence of a Western (white), individualistic culture. 79% (n=11) of survey respondents said the parents or families had little or no influence over their decision on which career path they chose, and 65% (n=9) said their parents and families were significantly or somewhat supportive of their decision to pursue a career in public relations or communications.

Table 10

<i>Influence from parents and families on choosing career paths</i>							
Level of Influence	Very Influential	Somewhat Influential	Neutral	Not that Influential	Not at all Influential	Don't Know	I prefer not to answer
To what extent did your parents' or family's expectations influence your decision on which career path to choose?	7%	14%	0%	36%	43%	0%	0%

Note: N = 14

Table 11

Support from parents and families on choosing public relations as a career path

Level of Support	Very Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Neutral	Not that Supportive	Not at all Supportive	Don't Know	I prefer not to answer
What was your parents' or family's initial reaction to your decision to pursue a career in public relations / communications?	29%	36%	36%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Note: N = 14

Although most practitioners experienced support and little to no pressure on career choices from their parents', cultural or ethnic influences, some said their parents didn't fully understand public relations and the opportunities that would be available in pursuing it as a career. Their parents were more open-minded about their career options so as long as they pursued higher education that led to a financially stable career. While parents often did not fully understand public relations as a profession, they became more supportive over time, especially when they saw tangible results, such as media appearances or prestigious awards. One practitioner shared, "they didn't understand PR, but as long as I was doing well, it was about the pursuit of excellence." Another explained, "my parents were relatively open to what I pursued, just as long as I pursued a post-secondary education." In an interview, one practitioner mentioned that what sold her mom about public relations being a rewarding and valuable career was when she explained a real-life experience of how her company responded to a crisis where their customers' personal information was impacted by a computer hack. She explained that "someone in PR played some role in developing the response and public statement and were involved in getting this across all the channels to their customers". After that, her mom began to understand what she did for a living.

Some practitioners said that family influences still play a role in career decision-making, while others experience more freedom. “Growing up, there was an expectation for me to pursue a career as a nutritionist, but my passion was always in marketing and communications. I wanted to tell stories, connect with people, and shape narratives, so I decided to follow that path” said one practitioner who is of East Asian background. Others felt some pressure to consider a career as a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or an accountant, but that seemed to subside as parents became keener on ensuring that their children were happy with their careers. Some recounted that they may have felt less pressure on career choices than their older siblings did. One interviewee who was from an East Asian background, commented that her sister loved art, painting and creative, but their dad was adamant about her career direction. “My dad was firm on her and said, no, you’re going into accounting”.

Financial stability and cultural values often shape career choices, requiring individuals to justify their paths to their families as well as the ability for work-life balance where, in the case of East Asian and South Asian communities, raising and caring for a family was important. Some practitioners who identified themselves as South Asian also mentioned a cultural base that is intertwined with a different concept of family, called living in a “sandwich generation”. Recalls one interviewee, “we are expected to take care of our parents, our kids, and be more closely connected with our extended family”. Another mentioned growing up in a “joint family” with her dad’s brothers and their families living together, which can compound family pressures on not just choosing a career to pursue, or to focus on family, especially for women.

Over time, success and visibility helped families understand and support PR careers. One practitioner mentioned that their parents preferred they join a traditional stream of work, but once they explained what PR entailed and were able to have a conversation about it, “we were

able to easily resolve any concerns or questions they had”. In the end, many reported that if they were financially secure and excelled at their work, their parents were fully supportive.

Systemic Barriers and Career Advancement

Systemic challenges such as biases, limited mentorship, and workplace barriers impact career advancement. 50% (n=7) of survey respondents indicated that their cultural, social, or racial identity may have impacted their progression in public relations, while 29% said that they weren't sure or preferred not to answer.

Many professionals encountered microaggressions, pay disparities, implicit and explicit bias, and expectations to conform to workplace norms that may not align with their cultural backgrounds. This included name discrimination and seeing limited diversity or representation in leadership roles. Said one practitioner in navigating the hiring process, “I started to get more interviews when I modified my resume to go by my shortened name”. Another practitioner who moved to Canada from India found that when she used her Indian last name on her resume, she only had a few call backs over a six month period but added “when I updated my LinkedIn profile with my married last name [a white last name], I landed a new job within three weeks”. A practitioner who moved to Canada faced microaggressions and bias regarding their English proficiency. Despite working for an international agency in their home country, handling global brands in English, they were told during a Canadian job interview, “we’re pleasantly surprised by how well you speak English.” With frustration, he said, “I thought maybe she was mistaken. Did you assume that I don’t speak English”.

Some practitioners felt that they have to work twice as hard to be heard and to prove their credibility. One practitioner found that they had to prove their work, even though they were born and raised in Canada. “My language skills were constantly questioned and despite proving my

abilities, the same deliverables I had written versus one from my white colleague were reviewed differently”.

Another barrier raised was tokenism or being pigeon-holed. Some expressed concerns of being “diversity hires” and not being taken seriously. One interviewee stated that although she embraced the idea of communicating directly to her South Asian community on important health issues impacting them, “I ended up getting pigeonholed in projects that always had an ethnic piece, which was frustrating because why was I asked to only communicate to that demographic”. Another said, “if you start to get pigeon-holed, you never get out of it”.

Two male practitioners commented that there weren’t too many people in the field that looked like them. One mentioned, “I stood out and looked different. I knew that walking into a room, people were looking at me. You can tell because they give you a different look. I’ve gotten that look throughout my career”. He went on to say that he stood out like a “sore thumb” in a room of white professionals. The other male practitioner saw that PR was a “pink collar industry” and was dominated by white women professionals. He didn’t face any barriers being a man but did acknowledge that he was the “only non-white guy at some PR industry events I’ve attended”.

Networking, Mentorship, and Representation

Despite these obstacles, embracing cultural identity is seen as a strength in PR. Diversity enhances communication, bridges cultural gaps, and fosters authenticity in messaging. In the practitioner survey, 28% (n=4) said they believe the PR industry in Canada were supportive of professionals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the profession, while 35% (n=5) felt they were not. Many said that the PR industry needs to play a role and show support for diversity and representation.

Table 12*Industry support for culturally and ethnically diverse practitioners*

Level of Support	Very Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Neutral	Not that Supportive	Not at all Supportive	Don't Know	I prefer not to answer
To what extent do you believe the Canadian public relations and communications industry is supportive of professionals from diverse cultural and ethnic communities being in the profession?	7%	21%	29%	21%	14%	7%	0%

Note: N = 14

Many practitioners emphasized advocacy, mentorship, representation, and leadership as essential to breaking barriers and creating more inclusive spaces. One respondent said the industry's commitment to diversity and representation must go beyond making performative statements, "let their actions speak for themselves, rather than speaking to it". Another said, "representation matters, not just those at entry levels, but at all levels of an organization so people see that there is space for them". Another practitioner added "you need to make sure you have diversity and representation at the table, at events, in training and in leadership". He went on to say that getting a seat at the decision-making table and keeping that seat are two different things, there is also a need to focus on leadership. "Being good in the world of PR and communications might get you a seat at the table, showing leadership skills keeps you at the table".

Advice for Students

When asked, practitioners provided some advice to students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds when considering a career in public relations:

- Educate your parents about the PR field through sharing success stories, the diverse specialty areas and industries you can get into, and the long-term career prospects in PR.
- Follow your passion, communicate your aspirations clearly to your families, and pursue your careers with confidence. Whether or not you gain immediate support, perseverance and strategic networking will help you succeed.
- Seek mentorships from professionals with similar backgrounds and connect with peers in diverse communities to gain valuable guidance and support.
- Networking is essential, as local connections may offer early opportunities to gain experience through paid internships, freelancing, or social media projects.
- For immigrant or international students, understanding cultural sensitivities in different professional environments will help in gaining positive experience.
- PR skills are highly transferable across industries, offering stability and growth potential. Leverage your unique perspectives and cultural knowledge as strengths in the field, as PR thrives on diverse viewpoints and communicating to diverse audiences.
- Long-term success in PR requires not only strong technical skills but also leadership abilities to secure and maintain a seat at the table.
- Career development should be maximized before major life commitments, and students should push past systemic barriers to create change in the industry.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the ongoing complexity that some students and practitioners face when navigating cultural expectations, parental and familial influences, and systemic barriers while pursuing public relations as a career. Some felt caught between personal aspirations and the expectations of their parents and cultural communities, often straddling the

divide between individualist and collectivist values (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Taylor & Krahn, 2013). Based on my own experience, I referred to this as “living in two cultures” and being pressured to choose between adhering to familial and cultural expectations or forging my own professional path; hence told to pick one or the other.

Parents of first- and second-generation Canadians from diverse backgrounds often prioritize careers they perceive as prestigious and financially stable—such as medicine, law, and engineering—over lesser-known professions like public relations (Taylor & Krahn, 2013). The research confirmed that in certain ethnic communities, such as South Asian families, there is still some pressure to pursue these high-status careers; however, this tends to diminish if other family members have already entered these fields, allowing those interested in public relations or other non-traditional careers to follow their passions with less resistance. In some cultures, choosing a different path is even seen as “rebellious,” with individuals distancing themselves from family and ethnic communities to pursue their dreams (Somerville & Robinson, 2016).

There is a growing acceptance and support towards non-traditional paths like public relations. Although 62% of students surveyed reported that their families influenced their decision to pursue higher education, 71% said this had little impact on their specific field of study. Parents interviewed acknowledged the importance of their children choosing careers based on personal interests and talents rather than rigid societal expectations. While stability was once the primary concern, many now emphasize happiness and fulfillment.

Despite initial skepticism, parental support for public relations careers increased as families gained a better understanding of the field’s stability and opportunities. The research revealed that 81% of students initially received family support when choosing public relations, a figure that rose to 90% over time. Families became more accepting of public relations as a valid

career choice as they saw tangible signs of success, such as media appearances and professional recognition. Open conversations and education about industry played a crucial role in bridging generational gaps, demonstrating that perceptions can shift with increased exposure to career realities. This change reflects a broader cultural shift in which parents increasingly prioritize their children's personal interests over rigid occupational norms.

As Western education systems encourage greater career independence, many individuals find ways to balance their cultural identity with personal aspirations. Open communication with family members, coupled with the presence of PR role models, has helped many students and professionals feel validated in their career choices. The upbringing of parents also plays a role in the level of autonomy they grant their children. Some parents who were raised in individualist environments, such as the British education system, encouraged their children to follow their interests and aspirations, rather than influencing those decisions (Qonitatin et al., 2023).

While family pressures have eased for many and parents support their children in making their career choices, influenced by living in or adapting to individualistic thinking, systemic challenges within the public relations industry persist. Half of the practitioner respondents reported that their cultural, social, or racial identity have had an impact on their career progression. Common barriers included microaggressions, pay disparities, and hiring biases, such as name-based discrimination. Some professionals reported modifying their résumés to include a shortened or anglicized version of their names to increase their chances of securing job interviews. Additionally, international professionals, despite their fluency in English, often faced biases regarding their language proficiency, highlighting the racial and cultural prejudices embedded in hiring practices. Some professionals also found themselves pigeonholed into

diversity-focused roles, limiting their opportunities for broader career advancement and leadership positions.

Feedback from students, instructors, and practitioners reflects the tension between ascribed and avowed cultural identities (Sha & Ford, 2007; Sha et al., 2012; Toth, 2009). Research participants shared examples of biases they encountered, such as assumptions about their capabilities based on their ethnicity. For instance, an Indian PR practitioner's language proficiency may be unfairly scrutinized, or a South Asian Canadian professional may face greater scrutiny than a White colleague despite having similar qualifications. My own experience reflects this reality. I was often perceived as better suited for roles such as warehouse work, taxi driving, or bus operation rather than leadership positions in public relations simply because I am a turbaned Sikh. Like many others, I had to actively assert my professional avowed identity to challenge these preconceived notions and stereotypes.

With increasing numbers of international students enrolling in public relations and communications programs, instructors have raised concerns about English proficiency, particularly in business writing. The perception is that many international and immigrant students, even those from English-speaking countries, face challenges in writing-intensive coursework, which can impact their confidence and success in PR programs.

The research also underscores the critical role of representation in helping students and professionals from diverse backgrounds envision success in the industry. Cultivating a more diverse profession begins in the classroom and extends into the industry (Muturi & Zhu, 2019). How students see themselves represented in the classroom, in the faculty and the practitioners they see that look like them in the industry will impact their perceptions of diversity (Bardhan & Gower, 2020). Not seeing myself represented in any level in the profession when I first started

was both a challenge and an opportunity. Instead of backing away, I took on the role of being my own self-advocate and self-role model to make space for myself as I progressed through my career from my entry level roles to the senior leadership team.

A diverse PR workforce is better equipped to understand and engage with the varying perspectives, values, and expectations of organizational stakeholders (Vercic et al., 1996, as cited in Sriramesh et al., 2013, p. 112). To promote diversity, academic programs are incorporating guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, mentorship initiatives, and alumni networks to demonstrate the presence of successful professionals from underrepresented communities. Networking opportunities, career panels, and industry partnerships also help bridge the gap between students and employers. Many participants emphasized that mentorship and connections with faculty members were instrumental in helping BIPOC students and practitioners build their networks, develop their skills, and connect with the next generation of industry professionals.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in conducting this type of research. There is limited, recent data available on the state of diversity of the student population in PR academic programs as well as practitioners in Canada. Much of the literature focuses on experiences in the U.S. or other countries with a different ethnic, racial, or cultural demographic than Canada. There isn't much literature or research available, aside from the EDI and PR industry study conducted in January 2021, that speak to diversity in the profession in Canada to ensure practitioners of diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds see themselves represented at all levels of the profession.

The surveys and interviews were conducted in English only; therefore, some students, practitioners, and instructors whose preference is to receive their communications and to be engaged in French or their own language may have chosen not to participate in the research. If

the option was made available to conduct the surveys and interviews in French or their preferred language, this may have removed the language barrier for some parents, inviting more respondents in each group to participate and enriched the data and insights gathered.

Due to timing and delay in ethics clearance, I was unable to schedule and conduct the student focus groups. These sessions would have given students the opportunity to reflect on their experience and get context to the feedback and insights for what students had provided in the survey responses, adding credibility and validity of the research data from this participant group. Further research in understanding the experiences of students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the PR classroom should include either three or four focus groups or invitations to participate in student interviews. Another option could be work with PR program or instructors to conducted interviews and focus groups part of the PR Research classes to give students a chance to not only the experience of participating in PR research, but to provide insights in an active research project with implication on the Canadian PR industry. This additional research or an extension of this study could segment the student stakeholder groups to first- and second-generation students as well as international students to explore the experiences of each student segmentation and the growing diversity and representations in the Canadian PR industry.

The review of literature and my discussions of this topic with colleagues also revealed a perception bias based on ascribed identity that diversity means having immigrant students and professionals, and international students enter the public relations education and career pathway; they did not seem to consider second-generation Canadians who were born in this country. Anecdotally, there is also a bias that having more diversity on teams means sacrificing knowledge, skills, and abilities which stigmatizes practitioners from diverse ethnical, cultural,

and racial backgrounds as not having the same level of expertise as white practitioners or as the perceived normative standard as outlined in critical race theory. (Taylor, 1998; Pompper, 2005). This experience would provide an opportunity to conduct further research on the experience of international students and practitioners immigrating to Canada to pursue their career in public relations.

Another limitation was the potential need to gain ethics clearance from other college and university research ethics boards before engaging with their public relations and communications academic program administrators to request their assistance in sharing research information with their students and instructors. Two institutions I contacted informed me that this step was required for their students and instructors to participate. In the interest of time, I did not proceed any further with these institutions. Although the additional clearance would have added to the data collection phase, extra time could have been taken to involve the PR students and instructors into the research and include richer insights to the study. An opportunity could have been identified to conduct a more thorough study involving multiple institutions on this topic.

There is also potential bias on my part as a turbaned Sikh Canadian who is using his own experience as a basis for this study which may lead some to question the objectivity and validity of this research. This bias was minimized by using the autoethnography method to balance the reflection on my lived experience with traditional scientific research.

I recognize that there will be questions on why this study is focused on diversity and representation of practitioners of different cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds and why it doesn't include other marginalized or less represented groups such as women, the LGBTQ2+ community, or people with invisible or visible disabilities. It is important to note that there is no intention of disrespecting the unique experiences and needs of these groups. I have chosen to

focus on this marginalized group due to the lack of research done to identify the experiences of these groups and the need to identify and fill a research and knowledge gap.

Practical Applications and Further Research

The purpose of this study was to understand how cultural, ethnic and family preferences play a role in influencing education and career decision-making and how students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds managed these expectations. Once this project is completed, I hope to share the key findings through meetings, presentations and discussions with PR instructors, college and university programs, and professional associations like the CPRS or IABC on how they can actively play a role in building more diversity into the profession and ways to support practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Further research is needed on the importance of diversity in the Canadian public relations industry and the need for diverse representation at all levels, including senior leadership (dominant coalition). The insights gained from both qualitative and quantitative data collection could build on the findings from this study and help close the knowledge gap and identify new opportunities for collaboration, learning, and research.

Findings from this study highlight the need for further exploration of diversity and representation, particularly in understanding the career experiences of BIPOC public relations professionals. Future research could segment participant groups to gain deeper insights into how first- and second-generation Canadians navigate an individualistic culture and how this influences their industry experiences. This study also uncovered barriers faced by some professionals based on ascribed identities, such as skin color or foreign-sounding names, even when they believed their cultural or ethnic background should not impact their careers. Further investigation could explore how these professionals address and overcome such challenges.

Additionally, the study identified a growing number of international students enrolling in PR and Communications programs, as well as practitioners immigrating to Canada to continue their careers. Further research is needed to understand how this trend will affect the profession—not only in terms of the available talent pool but also its impact on Canadian-born youth who may face challenges accessing PR education.

Finally, there is a need to examine the experiences of senior practitioners from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds in advancing their careers and securing leadership positions. This aligns with a key finding of this study—the importance of diverse representation at senior levels, ensuring that practitioners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds can see role models who reflect their identities in leadership positions.

Conclusion

Career choices are shaped by various factors, including personal interests, education, finances, and societal experiences. However, for many people of colour, ethnic, cultural, and familial expectations play a significant role in shaping career paths. These influences can either support or limit aspirations, particularly in fields like public relations and communications, which have traditionally been dominated by a Western-centric white professional culture.

This research examined the impact of cultural, ethnic, and family influences on decisions to pursue post-secondary education and careers in PR. The study aimed to assess the extent of these influences and identify resources that can support students and their families in navigating career choices. Using interviews, surveys, literature review, and incorporating my own lived experience through autoethnography as one of the first turbaned Sikhs to practice public relations in Canada significantly dominated by white practitioners, the research gathered insights from

students, professionals, parents, and PR instructors to explore how these factors shape career decision-making.

This study highlighted how cultural expectations, family influence, and systemic barriers can still shape career choices in public relations. Some first- and second-generation Canadians face pressure to pursue prestigious careers like medicine or law, while PR remains less recognized. However, this pressure is easing as other family members have already entered high-status professions or children have created an awareness and have educated their parents on the job prospects, stability and versatility of public relations.

Acceptance of non-traditional careers like PR is growing, with parental priorities shifting from financial stability to personal fulfillment because of balancing the desirable qualities from both individualist and collectivist cultures. While many students felt family influence in pursuing higher education, most reported little impact on their specific field of study. Parental support for PR careers increased over time as families recognized the industry's opportunities and saw their children succeed, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward valuing personal aspirations.

Greater representation in PR is essential, with mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and diverse role models helping BIPOC students and practitioners advance. A more inclusive industry benefits both professionals and the organizations they serve.

Ethics Statement and Considerations

This research has ethical considerations as the methods used involved collecting data and lived experiences from human subjects that was of a highly personal nature. As well, I participated in this study both as a researcher and as a subject or participant by reflecting on my personal experiences related to this research topics. All data collection and analysis were done for the sole purpose of completing the program requirements for this Capstone Research Project

for McMaster's Master of Communications Management (MCM) program and followed the guidelines outlined by the McMaster Ethics Review Board. It will not be used for any other purpose. The data was collected anonymized, aggregated, and kept confidential to remove any personal or sensitive information, and any duplicates were removed to ensure validity of the analysis, and that no data was calculated twice. Any data collected is stored on my personal computer for the time needed to complete this research project and then will be permanently removed once this program is completed.

The information will only be shared with my instructor Dr. Alexandre Sevigny, tutorial assistant for our capstone research course (COMMGMT 740), Amber Daugherty, and my capstone supervisor, Josephine Cassano Rizzuti, for the purposes of evaluating and grading this research paper as part of the successful completion of the MCM program.

Participants were invited to share personal experiences related to their education, career aspirations, and the impact these had on their relationships with their parents, family, or ethnic community. I acknowledge that some topics may have emerged during this process that could have made participants feel uncomfortable. To address this, I reassured participants that the interview process was a safe place to have an honest conversation, reviewed the steps that were taken to ensure their identity remained strictly confidential, that their insights would be anonymized and aggregated to safeguard their identity, and that only I have access to the recorded discussions. As well, I indicated that their participation was purely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the research at any time and their responses would be removed from the research. The research was be conducted in an ethical and responsible manner.

References

- Akosah-Twumasi, P., Emeto, T. I., Lindsay, D., Tsey, K., & Malau-Aduli, B. S. (2018). A Systematic Review of Factors That Influence Youths Career Choices—the Role of Culture. *Frontiers in Education (Lausanne)*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2018.00058>
- Aldoory, L & Sha, B-L. (2007). The Situational Theory of Publics: Practical Applications, Methodological Challenges, and Theoretical Horizons. In E.L. Toth (Ed.), *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 365–382). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613967-27>
- Antony, M. G. (2016). Exploring diversity through dialogue: avowed and ascribed identities. *Communication Teacher*, 30(3), 125–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2016.1192663>
- Bardhan, N. R., & Engstrom, C. L. (2021). Diversity, inclusion, and leadership communication in public relations: A rhetorical analysis of diverse voices. *Public Relations Journal*, 12 (4). (pages ??)
- Bardhan, N.R., & Gower, K. (2020). Student and faculty/educator views on diversity and inclusion in public relations: The role of leaders in bringing about change. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 6(2), 102-141. <https://aejmc.us/jpre/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2020/08/JPRE-6.2-complete-issue-1.pdf#page=108>
- Broom, G. M., Casey, S., & Ritchey, J. (2000). Concept and theory of organization-public relationships. In J. A. Ledingham & S. D. Bruning (Eds.), *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations* (pp. 13–21). Routledge.

Bowen, S. A., Rawlins, B., & Martin, T. R. (2010). An overview of the public relations function (1st ed.). Business Expert Press.

Canadian Public Relations Society. (2021, May 31). *Canada's PR industry release first comprehensive diversity and inclusion survey*. Canadian Public Relations Society. Retrieved on February 1, 2025 from <https://www.cprs.ca/Learn/Archived-Webinars/Canadian-EDI-Survey-Results-Webinar-%E2%80%93-What-the-data-says>

Chope, R. C. (2005). Qualitatively Assessing Family Influence in Career Decision Making. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 13(4), 395–414.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072705277913>

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>

de Andrade, M. (2014). Public relations and Aca-Media: Autoethnography, ethics and engagement in the pharmaceutical industry. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 3(1), 113–136.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X13519813>

de Bussy, N.M. (2013). Refurnishing the Grunig edifice: Strategic public relations management, strategic communication, and organizational leadership. In J.-N. Kim, K. Sriramesh, & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *Public relations and communications management: Current trends and emerging topics* (pp. 79-92). Routledge.

Diversity Action Alliance. (2021, August 10). *Diversity Action Alliance 2020 Race and Ethnicity in Public Relations and Communications Benchmark Report*. Diversity Action Alliance. from <https://www.diversityactionalliance.org/>

- Edwards, L. (2012). Critical race theory and public relations. In D. Waymer (Ed.), *Culture, social class, and race in public relations: Perspectives and applications*, Lexington Books, p. 57-78.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research (2nd Ed.)*, Sage Publications, p. 733-768
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research (Köln)*, 36(4 (138)), 273–290.
- George, U., & Chaze, F. (2016). Punjabis/Sikhs in Canada. In *Migration, Mobility and Multiple Affiliations* (pp. 91–104). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316337950.005>
- Grunig, J. E. (2001). Two-way symmetrical public relations: Past, present, and future. In R.L. Heath (Ed.) *Handbook for public relations*. 1 – 20. Sage.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452220727.n1>
- Grunig, J. (2008). Excellence theory in public relations. *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiece047>
- Grunig, J. (2013). Furnishing the edifice: Ongoing research on public relations as a strategic management function. In J.-N. Kim, K. Sriramesh, & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *Public relations and communications management: Current trends and emerging topics* (pp. 1-26). Routledge.

- Grunig, J. E. (2013b). Situational theory of publics. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (pp. 835–836). essay, Sage. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452276236.n450>
- Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>
- Holt, N. L. (2003). Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200102>
- Hon, L. C., & Brunner, B. (2000). Diversity Issues and Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(4), 309–340. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1204_2
- Illia, L., Lurati, F., & Casalaz, R. (2013). Situational Theory of Publics: Exploring a Cultural Ethnocentric Bias. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 25(2), 93–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2013.758581>
- LeFebvre, R., & Franke, V. (2013). Culture Matters: Individualism vs. Collectivism in Conflict Decision-Making. *Societies* (Basel, Switzerland), 3(1), 128–146. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc3010128>
- Merriam-Webster (2022). Retrieved on December 4, 2022 from, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>
- Muncey, T. (2005). Doing Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4(1), 69-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690500400105>
- Mundy, D. (2015). Diversity 2.0: How the public relations function can take the lead in a new generation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiative. Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved from: <https://instituteforpr.org/diversity-2-0-public-relations-function-can-take-lead-new-generation-diversity-inclusion-di-initiative/>

Muturi, N., & Zhu, G. (2019). Students' perceptions of diversity issues in public relations practice. *Journal of Public Relations Education*, 5(2), 75-104.

https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/60975291/Muturi_Zhu_2019_PR_Perceptions20191021-40854-g1a7du-libre.pdf?1571701996=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DStudents_Perceptions_of_Diversity_Issues.pdf&Expires=1721505609&Signature=ZBU~u7qwe6M8SmJkOnfs1bWNpGJjAz9UWut54S1sTKFsPD02go7OzJzBV0qpLEchGOYxoNBM3viZfNixcxsv9--b6gIL4FqSlnkMs-

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>

Pompper, D. (2005). "Difference" in Public Relations Research: A Case for Introducing Critical Race Theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(2), 139–169. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1702_5

Poulos, C. N. (2021). *Essentials of autoethnography*. American Psychological Association.

PR Coalition. (2005). Focus on diversity: Lower our barriers, raise the bar.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f3d4ff90cfe7a50ea56bde6/t/61114ba6723fd06b0583da00/1628558553395/DAA+Benchmark+Report+%28Jul+2021%29>

Qonitatin, N., Sawitri, D. R., & Dewi, E. K. (2023). The Role of Culture in Student' Career Aspirations: A Preliminary Study. *Proceedings of International Conference on Psychological Studies (ICPsyche)*, 4(1), 96–104.

<https://doi.org/10.58959/icpsyche.v4i1.28>

- Rawlins, B. (2006). *Prioritizing stakeholders for public relations* [White paper]. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from Institute for Public Relations.
<https://instituteforpr.org/prioritizing-stakeholders/>
- Sawitri, D. R., Creed, P. A., & Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J. (2014). Parental influences and adolescent career behaviours in a collectivist cultural setting. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 14(2), 161–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-013-9247-x>
- Sha, B.-L. (2006). Cultural Identity in the Segmentation of Publics: An Emerging Theory of Intercultural Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18(1), 45–65.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1801_3
- Sha, B.-L. & Ford, R. (2007). Redefining “Requisite Variety”: The Challenge of Multiple Diversities for the Future of Public Relations Excellence. In E.L. Toth (Ed.) *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 407–424). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613967-29>
- Sha, B.-L., Tindall, N. T. J., & Sha, T.-L. (2012). Identity and Culture: Implications for Public Relations. In *Culture and Public Relations* (1st ed., pp. 67–90). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203149232-6>
- Somerville, K., & Robinson, O. (2016). Keeping up appearances within the ethnic Community: A disconnect between first- and second-Generation South Asians’ Educational Aspirations. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 48(2), 99–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2016.0015>
- Sriramesh, K., Rhee, Y., & Sung, M. (2013). Aligning public relations with the demands of globalization: Conceptual foundations for a theory of global public relations. In J.-N.

- Kim, K. Sriramesh, & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *Public relations and communications management: Current trends and emerging topics* (pp. 108-125). Routledge.
- Statistics Canada (2022a, October 26). *Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians*. Government of Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada (2022b, October 26). *The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity*. Government of Canada Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>
- Taylor, A., & Krahn, H. (2013). Living through our children: exploring the education and career “choices” of racialized immigrant youth in Canada. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(8), 1000–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.772575>
- Taylor, E. (1998). A Primer on Critical Race Theory. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 19, 122–124. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998940>
- Toth, E.L. (2009). *Diversity and public relations practice*. Institute for Public Relations. Available at: <https://instituteforpr.org/diversity-and-pr-practice/>
- Tsalach, C. (2022). Lost wants? An autoethnography of class and ethnicity on the long path to higher education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 25(5), 722–737. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1718073>
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690800700103>

Vardeman-Winter, J., Tindall, N., & Jiang, N. (2013). Intersectionality and publics: How exploring publics' multiple identities questions basic public relations concepts. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2(3), 279-304. DOI: 10.1177/2046147X13491564

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE Publications.