



**THE EXPERIENTIAL BRIDGE: EXPLORING STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON
SERVICE-LEARNING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION IN GHANA**

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STUDENT’S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the outcome of my own original research. Except for quotations and references to it other published works, which have all been duly acknowledged, This work is entirely my own. It has not been submitted, either in whole or part for another degree elsewhere.

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DECLARATION BY SUPERVISORS

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation/Thesis laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication UniMAC-GIJ.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of public relations students participating in a service-learning course at a public university in Ghana. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research examined how experiential engagement and reflective practices shaped students' perceptions, learning integration, and readiness for professional practice. Anchored in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), the study found that students initially viewed the course as a routine academic requirement. However, engagement in real-world projects enhanced active participation, responsibility, and application of theoretical knowledge to practical challenges. Findings revealed that service-learning significantly contributed to bridging the gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations by developing students' skills in campaign planning, audience targeting, message development, and client engagement. Participants reported benefits including personal growth, professional competence, academic enrichment, and improved career readiness, despite challenges such as time constraints and uneven group collaboration. The study concludes that service-learning acts as an experiential bridge between theory and professional practice, equipping public relations students with reflective, transformative, and market-relevant skills essential for meeting employer expectations in Ghana's dynamic communication industry.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the cherished memory of my late mother, Madam Cecilia Nkrumah, whose unwavering love, sacrifice, and guidance laid the foundation for all my achievements. Her enduring values of perseverance, humility, and compassion continue to inspire and sustain me. Though she is no longer physically present, her influence remains deeply woven into every aspect of my journey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Introduction

This chapter gives an introduction to the thesis by providing background data on the research and discussing the primary issue that the study aims to resolve. In addition, it justifies the study by listing the aims and objectives, the main research questions the study seeks to address, the study's significance as well as the study's overall scope.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The Future of Public Relations Workplace

The Public Relations (PR) profession continues to go through profound transformation, shifting from its conventional one-way communication to a broader and more complex strategic mandates. This expansion, driven by continuous advances in technology, global economy trends, political dynamics, evolving societal expectations and international conflicts has redefined the PR profession. Consequently, there is a growing need for professionals who possess not only foundational communication and writing skills but also the capacity to navigate dynamic environments and adapt effectively to ongoing transformations (Abdullah et al., 2023). Given this continual evolution, it is imperative to regularly evaluate emerging skill requirements to ensure that academic curricula remain responsive to the dynamic needs of the industry (Meganck et al., 2020).

Acknowledging this transformation, the 2023 signature report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) emphasized the increasing expectation among employers for talented entry-level practitioners who are; (1) critical and strategic thinkers; (2) who understand the impact of data (3); who have learned the standards for ethical practice; (4) who understands the need for addressing the issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI); (5) Who understands the role of public relations in contributing to social change (Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2023, p. 3). To mitigate this persistent gap between employer expectations and graduate competencies, prior studies have identified service-learning, which is a type of experiential learning, as an effective approach that integrates academic theory with practical, real-world engagement. (Muturi et al., 2013; Gerholz, 2018; Shea et al., 2023). As a result, many universities have begun offering experiential learning opportunities that enable students to apply their skills by working on communication projects for actual clients. Through such initiatives, graduates can expand their capabilities beyond traditional PR functions, thereby creating new opportunities and enhancing the visibility of PR across diverse sectors (Thompson, 2018). In this manner, graduates can leverage their abilities to expand beyond the confines of current Public Relations positions, thereby creating new opportunities and demonstrating the significance of public relations across other sectors (Thompson, 2018). However, as Thompson (2018) argues, the key challenge for emerging economies like Ghana lies in establishing and sustaining professional education programs that effectively balance the unique characteristics of theory and practice.

1.1.2 Opportunities for Service-Learning

As the PR profession continues to evolve, a pressing concern emerges regarding how effectively educational institutions are keeping pace with the shifting demands and skill expectations of the industry. A survey conducted by Meganck et al. (2020) among hiring agencies identified through communication groups on LinkedIn and professional email networks, examined the skills required for entry-level public relations positions, as reflected in 1,000 PR job advertisements.

The most frequently requested skills in the sampled postings include written communication skills, organizational skills, administrative software skills, social and digital media skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, and graphic design skills (Meganck et al., 2020). Since developing critical skills among entry-level PR professionals has become a crucial component of public relations education, service-learning, widely recognized as a form of experiential learning, integrates students' active participation with the rigor of the academic curriculum (Muturi et al., 2013). In essence, service-learning helps bridge the gap between classroom learning, with real-world professional expectations. Gerholz (2018) describes service-learning as a reflective, relational pedagogy that blends academic knowledge acquisition with civic learning. Understanding the unique position of service-learning however requires distinguishing it from other forms of experiential learning, most notably volunteerism and internships. While all three involve community engagement, their primary goals and structural components differ significantly. As an altruistic act, volunteerism involves the act of assisting society without expecting compensation or exchange of goods (Nowakowska, 2022). According to Omoto and Packard (2016) volunteerism represents a voluntary and intentional act aimed at supporting others or advancing collective causes, undertaken out of free will and often guided by an individual's personal motives, needs, and values.

Internships, however, as a type of experiential learning is typically detached from the formal academic curriculum and without the component of structured reflection. Jackson and Bridestock (2021) describe internships as a cooperative education and work-based experiential learning. This is mainly because it combines theoretical learning with practical work experience.

According to Amisah et al. (2023) inadequate space, health insurance cover for interns, poor attitude towards training and outmoded curricula, are four major challenges in accepting student for internships. Unlike volunteer work or other forms of community service, service-learning gives critical attention to classroom reflection, which is a fundamental key to learning and impact (Sekyem & Ngan-pun, 2012). According to Mules (2018), reflective practice remains a crucial component in service-learning, providing a tangible way to measure students learning outcomes. As such, by collaborating with non-profit and community organizations through service-learning initiatives, students move from the classroom to the community, thereby integrating community service with academic study as well as in-depth reflections to enhance students' learning outcomes of a program or course (Chan et al., 2021; Hawes et al., 2021). It is interesting to know that the field of service-learning research is not new, surprisingly, there is a paucity of studies that have explored service-learning in public relations education, especially in emerging economies in sub-Saharan countries with the exception of Botswana, which has made significant contribution. This study however explores and interpret the lived experiences of public relations students as they reflect on and make meaning from their engagement in service-learning. Specifically, it focuses on how reflection fosters personal transformation and professional growth. By investigating students' reflections, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on service-learning and its role in public relations education by exploring public relations students' reflection on a full-term service-learning experience.

As part of the full-term service-learning course, students participated in the UniMAC Pitch Day, an experiential project designed to apply public relations theory to real-world client projects (UniMAC-IJ, personal communication, 2025). In addition, the study highlights how this pedagogical approach bridges academic theory and professional practice, fostering experiential learning environments that cultivate reflective thinking and the practical competencies essential for effective professional practice in the field.

1.2 Problem Statement

Service-learning has emerged as a widely recognized pedagogical strategy in higher education, including within public relations (PR) education, due to its capacity to integrate theoretical instruction with experiential, community-based engagement (Witmer et al., 2009; Werder & Strand, 2011; Akpabio, 2012; Muturi et al., 2013; Farmer et al., 2016; Place, 2018; Huda et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2021; Shea et al., 2023; Huang, 2024). By integrating academic learning with real-world practice, service-learning provides students with opportunities to engage meaningfully with communities and organizations, thereby fostering skills, attitudes, and reflective thinking that extend beyond the classroom. Despite this growing body of scholarship, important gaps remain in understanding how service-learning is experienced and interpreted by students within discipline-specific professional contexts. Existing research has largely emphasized measurable outcomes such as attitudinal change, perceived skill acquisition, civic responsibility, and course effectiveness often employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches. For example, Huang (2024) examined the short-term effects of a service-learning course on students' public service motivation, Shea et al. (2023) explored the influence of course design on students' civic attitudes, Chan et al. (2021) investigated shifts in students' perceptions of service-learning, and Huda et al.

(2018) highlighted its potential for fostering ethical engagement and leadership. While these studies provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and relevance of service-learning, they tend to prioritize quantifiable outcomes, pedagogical structures, or stakeholder perspectives, thereby offering limited insight into students' subjective and reflective learning experiences. This gap is particularly significant in public relations education, where professional readiness depends on students' ability to integrate theory into practice, navigate real client engagements, and develop a professional identity. Although studies such as Place (2018) and Farmer et al. (2016) underscore ethical development and institutional outcomes, they provide limited understanding of how students personally experience, interpret, and apply their learning through service-learning. Similarly, Akpabio (2012) and Muturi et al. (2013) foreground beneficiary and motivational perspectives but do not sufficiently capture the reflective processes through which students derive professional and personal growth. Furthermore, much of the existing literature is situated within Western or developed educational contexts, raising questions about the applicability of these findings to emerging economies where institutional structures, community needs, and professional practice environments differ. In the contexts of Ghana, where public relations education is expected to respond to both professional demands and broader societal development goals, there is a corresponding need to examine how pedagogical approaches intended to meet these expectations are experienced and interpreted by students. Consequently, a critical gap exists in understanding how public relations students experience service-learning, reflect on their engagement with real clients, apply theoretical knowledge in practice, and develop professional competence within emerging economy contexts.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of public relations students engaged in a service-learning course. The study focuses on how students reflect on and make meaning from their engagements with real clients, apply theoretical concepts in practice, and how these experiences contribute to the development of professional skills, dispositions, and readiness. By centering students' reflective narratives, the study seeks to extend service-learning scholarship beyond outcome measurement and contribute deeper insight into the pedagogical, reflective, and professional dimensions of service-learning in PR education.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and reflective processes of public relations students engaged in a service-learning course in Ghana. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how students interpret and make meaning of their participation in service-learning, how they apply theoretical concepts to real-world client engagements, and how these experiences are understood by students as contributing to the development of professional skills, dispositions, and readiness. By adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this research aims to provide in-depth, qualitative insight into the pedagogical, reflective, and career-related competencies of service-learning in public relations education, thereby addressing gaps in the literature regarding students' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes, particularly within the context of an emerging economy.

1.4 Research Objectives

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following objectives were set:

1. To explore how public relations students reflect on and make meaning of their service-learning experiences.
2. To explore how students interpret and apply public relations theories in practice through engagement with real clients.
3. To analyze how students make sense of the way reflective engagement in service-learning relates to their developing sense of professional competence and readiness for public relations practice.

1.5 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do public relations students reflect on and make meaning of their participation in a service-learning project?
2. In what ways do students interpret and apply public relations theories in real-world contexts through service-learning?
3. How does reflective participation in a service-learning project contribute to students' professional competence and readiness for public relations practice?

1.6 Significance of The Study

It has been established in the background that service-learning, which is widely regarded as a type of experiential learning, incorporates students' participation into the dynamics of experiential learning as well as the structure of the academic curriculum (Muturi et al., 2013; Gerholz, 2018; Shea et al., 2023; Huang, 2024). This makes the study highly significant for various reasons. Fundamentally, the research contributed to the broader field of public relations education by focusing specifically on student's reflection in service-learning in a strategic community relations course. By exploring students' reflections, the study contributed to the limited body of public relations scholarship in Ghana on service-learning in PR education, providing in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, challenges, and changes in perceptions among Ghanaian public relations students for engaging in a full-frame service-learning course. The study provided valuable data for Ghanaian universities considering implementing service-learning initiatives, thereby helping them to address challenges and improve support systems. The findings of this study also had significant practical implications for various stakeholders. For example, the insights gained from this research can inform public relations educators in designing and implementation of more effective service-learning programs in PR curricula, helping educators to better prepare students for the industry. For students, understanding the benefits and challenges from a student perspective will help future students better navigate their own service-learning experiences and inform them of the career decision making processes. For the Public Relations industry, the research findings shed light on how service-learning contributes to the development of industry-ready graduates, which is beneficial for employers and the profession as a whole.

Hence, this study aims to contribute to the body of scanty literature on the benefits and challenges of service-learning in public relations education by exploring students' reflections in younger economies with different cultural dynamics.

1.7 Scope of The Study

The scope of the study focused on service-learning as both a pedagogical approach and a type of experiential learning approach in PR education. It did not explore other forms of experiential learning or examine public relations or public relations education in general. The study employed qualitative inquiry with the core focus on how public relations students make meaning of their service-learning experiences through reflection on their engagement with real clients. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how students reflect on and integrate public relations theory into practice, navigate professional and ethical challenges, and develop professional competence and readiness for practice through participation in a service-learning project. The research was specifically confined to the context of Ghana, addressing a contextual gap in the existing literature. The research data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via google meet. The study was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The research was conducted at a single institution; the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UNIMAC-IJ). Data collection was limited to students from the university. The study used a purposive sampling technique to select participants for the interviews.

1.8 Organisation of The Study

The study is divided into five unique parts, each with its own title. The first chapter gives an overview of the study's general background. It captures the goals and objectives, the real study issue, the significance of the study, and the scope the study. The second chapter focuses on literature review, examining related research publications, concepts related to the studies and theories. This helps to identify research gaps and avoids the risk of duplicating an existing study. The third chapter focuses on the data collection and analysis methods employed in the study. It encapsulates the research approach, study design, sampling strategy, data collection procedure and data analysis technique. The fourth chapter focuses on the research results and their interpretation. The fifth chapter concludes the study and provides recommendations for future studies.

1.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces the research by providing a comprehensive background on the evolving field of Public Relations (PR) and the growing need for new professionals to possess both foundational and adaptive skills. It establishes that PR has expanded into a more complex role, influenced by significant changes in technology, society, and the economy. The chapter highlights the gap between academic theory and professional practice by citing reports from the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE), which emphasize the need for experiential learning opportunities for public relations students. It posits that service-learning, a critical pedagogical approach, integrates the academic curriculum with meaningful community service, thereby preparing students for the modern workplace.

The chapter also identifies gaps outlined in the problem statement, which are addressed by the study's research objectives, research questions, significance, and scope. Overall, this chapter provides a foundational overview of the study and its rationale.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on reviewing previous studies concerning theories and empirical studies that have been conducted around service learning, and other relevant public relations education elements present in the use of experiential learning approaches. This was done to gather relevant information to help shape and enhance the study.

2.1 Service-Learning

As argued by Butin (2010, p.13), “There is no one thing called service-learning”. Butin asserts that, acknowledging the various divergent and often contradictory ways by which service-learning is practiced in higher education, demonstrates that there is no singular, unitary or universally applicable model for how which service-learning should be implemented. However, where there appears to be common ground among scholars, has been the enormous advantages imparted by service learning (Akpabio, 2012; Chan et al., 2021; Shea et al., 2023). As a distinctive pedagogical approach, service-learning has gained significant prominence in higher education as a form of experiential learning. Shea et al. (2023) defines service-learning as an instructional teaching approach that allows students to critically reflect on community service. According to Shea et al. (2023) this merger of community service with experiential learning is aimed to develop and promote mutually beneficial goals for both students, faculty, beneficial organizations as well as the community via the academic perspective of civic responsibility and critical evaluation.

Gerholz et al. (2018) posit that, service-learning is a reflective, relational pedagogy that blends academic knowledge acquisition with civic learning. From the academic lens of critical reflection, service-learning fosters the development of morally conscious and actively involved citizens as well as promoting beneficial goals for both students and the community (Harkins, 2017). These reflective practices enable students to acquire a significant understanding of the academic content, and also assist them by improving student academic learning and interpersonal behaviour (Place, 2018; Huda et al., 2018). Thus, reflection in service-learning is critical for students' comprehension of the societal systems that drive the community issues they are tackling (Johnson et al., 2021). While many instructors and academic institutions provide service-learning as a choice for students, others make it a mandatory part of their curricula (Chan et al., 2021). However, considering the substantial empirical evidence supporting its instructional usefulness (Jameson et al., 2013), It's not surprising that service-learning has gained widespread acceptance among educators. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of service-learning's unique position requires distinguishing it from other forms of experiential education, most notably internships and volunteerism. While all three involve community engagement, their primary goals and structural components differ significantly. Volunteerism generally refers to charity works that benefit society and individuals (Mokhzan et al., 2023). Internships, in contrast, are a formal integration of academic study with hands-on professional experience, primarily focused on 'work-based schemes with the purpose to provide skills and knowledge in the workplace (Stewart, 2021).

2.2 Critical Foundation of Service-Learning in Public Relations Education

Service-learning pedagogy and research can be traced to the philosophical works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Regarded as the most influential American philosopher and educationist of the 20th century, Dewey revolutionized educational theory and practice and founded on the idea that; experience combined with reflection equals learning (Giles & Eyster, 1994). Dewey saw education as a process of gaining knowledge through experience and combined with reflective thought, which will eventually foster, good citizenship, democracy and community well-being (Muturi et al., 2013). The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire also provides another academic foundation for service-learning. According to Freire (1970), education should lead people to become change agents in their communities and that learning should be combined with reflection and action. From a historical perspective, service-learning developed in the 1960s was as a way by which universities would transform society by solving real life problems, but has now been framed as a means of improving students' learning (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001). Thus, the blending of academic knowledge with civic engagement enables students to effectively comprehend course objectives and also acquire skills as compared to other less engaging pedagogical techniques or volunteer programs which students decide to participate (Billig, 2002). In the case of public relations education, there is plenty of evidence to support the suitability of service-learning initiatives in Public Relations courses (Witmer et al., 2009; Werder & Strand, 2011; Akpabio, 2012; Muturi et al., 2013; Gerholz et al., 2018; Place, 2018; Huda et al., 2018; Chan et al., 2021; Shea et al., 2023).

Gleason and Violette (2012) argue that, public relations campaign classes functioning as a capstone course are usually well-suited for service-learning, especially when consideration is given to the 10 standards in Honnet-Porter and Poulsen's widely-cited report, "Principles of Good

Practice for Combining Service and Learning”, published in May 1989. These standards are the outcome of an in-depth discussions with more than 70 organizations. According to the standards, a properly designed campaign course should be capable of (a) engaging people in responsible and demanding actions for the common good; (b) offering structured opportunities for individuals to reflect critically on their service experience; (c) articulating clear service and learning goals for everyone involved; (d) allowing for those with needs to define those needs; I clarifying the responsibilities of individuals and organizations involved; (f) matching service providers and service needs in a way a that recognizes changing circumstances; (g) expecting genuine, active, and ongoing organizational commitment; (h) incorporating training, supervision, monitoring and assessment to achieve service and learning goals; (i) assures flexibility, and in the best interests of all parties engaged; (j) is committed to program involvement by and with groups. Wood (2011) concurs with this natural fit, arguing that in other to be good professionals, public relations students must develop a service mentality that requires them to learn how to meet the demands of clients regardless of who hires them.

2.3 Service-Learning Participation, Knowledge, Skills and Career Readiness

Among the competencies required of entry-level public relations professionals, attributes such as critical and strategic thinking, data literacy, ethical practice, and understanding how the world connects to clients are particularly essential (CPRE, 2023, p. 3). These expectations underscore the importance of embedding practical, hands-on experiences into PR curricula. Service-learning, as a form of experiential education, is designed to provide students with opportunities to engage in meaningful community projects while simultaneously developing academic knowledge and civic responsibility (Motley & Sturgill, 2014). Unlike traditional classroom instruction, service-

learning enables students to actively apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems for a community partner. This active participation allows learners to cultivate a range of cognitive, interpersonal, and professional skills highly valued by employers. From a cognitive perspective, service-learning facilitates the practical application of classroom concepts, thereby enhancing understanding and retention of academic knowledge (Resch & Schritteser, 2023). In addition, this pedagogical approach allows students to integrate personal goals with academic learning and to navigate complex, real-life situations, bridging the gap between theory and practice (Sek-yum & Ngan-pun, 2012). Participation in service-learning also promotes the development of professional skills crucial for career readiness. These include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, ethical decision-making, and client management, all of which contribute to the formation of a professional identity. By engaging directly with community partners and clients, students gain firsthand experience in applying public relations strategies, managing stakeholder relationships, and responding adaptively to challenges. Such experiences not only strengthen technical competence but also foster confidence, resilience, and self-awareness which are key components of career preparedness.

Despite its numerous benefits, service-learning presents several challenges for students, educators, and host organizations. While many educators agree on the pedagogical advantages of service-learning, debate exists regarding whether participation should be mandatory (Henderson et al., 2019). Mandatory programs may create tension among students who are reluctant to engage, potentially affecting performance and motivation (Chan et al., 2021). Additionally, logistical constraints such as time, financial costs, and resource availability can hinder effective implementation (Whatley, 2017; Chidwick & Chen, 2023). In particular, students from less privileged backgrounds may struggle to cover expenses associated with field-based experiential

education, including transportation and materials. Some learners may also feel intimidated by experiential learning opportunities, especially when optional, limiting their willingness to participate fully (Hunter-Jones, 2012). Nevertheless, empirical research demonstrates that the advantages of service-learning outweigh its challenges. Participation shows that service-learning enhances learning outcomes, professional skill acquisition, and civic engagement, thereby preparing students for successful careers in their chosen fields (Place, 2018; Gerholz et al., 2018; Condon et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2022).

2.4 The Role of Reflection in Public Relations (PR) Education

Reflection is widely acknowledged as a central pedagogical process in professional education, enabling learners to critically examine experiences and integrate theory with practice. Foundational scholarship frames reflection as an iterative process through which individuals engage in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to develop professional judgment and adaptive expertise (Schön, 1983). Within higher education, reflection has been recognized as essential to deep learning, critical thinking, and professional development (Moon, 2004).

Similarly, experiential learning theory positions reflection as the mechanism through which concrete experiences are transformed into meaningful learning and knowledge construction (Kolb, 1984). In public relations education, reflection has gained increasing scholarly attention due to the profession's ethical, applied, and relationally grounded nature. The evolving nature of public relations practice demands professionals who can navigate complex social, ethical, and organizational contexts through informed judgment and reflexive decision-making. Reflective practices enable students to examine stakeholder relationships, ethical dilemmas and power dynamics inherent in PR work, thereby fostering ethical awareness and professional responsibility

(Place, 2018). Public relations students must therefore not only acquire technical skills but also cultivate reflective capacity through experiential learning that enables critical examination of their actions, decisions, and professional roles (Witmer et al., 2009). Within this context, service-learning provides a situated learning environment in which students actively construct meaning through reflective engagement with real-world public relations practice. Studies examining service-learning and client-based PR courses also demonstrate that structured reflection enhances perceived course effectiveness and improves students' understanding of professional expectations (Werder & Strand, 2011; Farmer et al., 2016). This makes reflection particularly significant within service-learning contexts, where learning is grounded in real-world engagement. In communication and PR education, reflective activities such as guided prompts, journals, and debriefing discussions have been shown to deepen students' learning, civic-mindedness and ethical sensitivity (Huda et al., 2018; Shea et al., 2023). These reflective processes encourage students to question assumptions, perceive complexity in professional contexts, and draw meaning from practical experiences. Moreover, reflection plays a crucial role in facilitating the integration of classroom theory with professional practice.

Kolb's (1984) learning cycle emphasizes reflection as the link between experience and conceptual understanding, a process that is particularly essential in public relations education, where students interact with real clients and organizational difficulties. Empirical studies shows that reflective engagement enables students to better apply theoretical concepts, enhance problem-solving skills, and develop professional confidence (Werder & Strand, 2011; Chan et al., 2021). Engaging in reflection enables students to progress beyond surface-level task engagement and to critically interpret how theoretical concepts shape practice and, in turn, how practice informs theory. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of reflection in PR education, the literature reveals

notable gaps. Several studies have focused on outcomes such as student attitudes, motivation, and perceived skill acquisition, often employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches (Muturi et al., 2013; Huang, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, they offer limited understanding of the subjective and reflective processes through which students experience service-learning and construct professional meaning. Moreover, the predominance of existing scholarship is grounded in Western educational settings, resulting in limited empirical attention to reflective learning practices in public relations education within emerging economies (Akpabio, 2012). Consequently, there remains a need for in-depth, qualitative research that foregrounds students' lived experiences and reflective meaning-making within PR education. By examining reflection as an experiential and interpretive process, particularly within service-learning contexts, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how PR students make meaning of their service-learning experience, apply theory to practice, and prepare for professional roles.

2.5 The UniMAC Pitch Day

The UniMAC Pitch Day constitutes a core experiential learning activity embedded within the Bachelor of Arts program in Public Relations at the University of Media, Arts and Communication–Institute of Journalism (UniMAC-IJ) in Ghana's national capital region. Designed as part of the service-learning component of the Strategic Community Relations Management course, the UniMAC Pitch Day provided students with an opportunity to apply public relations principles to real-world organizational environments (UniMAC-IJ, personal communication, 2025). The program was implemented during the seventh semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.

Its primary objective was to equip students with advanced conceptual understanding and practical competencies for fostering shared value between organizations and communities. Throughout the course, students engaged with public relations concepts such as community relations, corporate and CEO activism, campaign planning and PR ethics. These concepts were operationalized through participation in the Pitch Day, providing the experiential context for reflective learning, which is central to this study.

2.5.1 Stages, Timeline, and Evaluation Points

The Strategic Community Relations Management course was delivered over a ten-week period and structured to integrate prior coursework and practical experiences in public relations. At the start of the semester, the instructor assessed students' prior knowledge of PR concepts, reviewed the syllabus, and outlined the expected learning outcomes, including the development and presentation of a strategic PR campaign plan for a real client. Subsequently, students were introduced to the UniMAC Pitch Day project (UniMAC-IJ, personal communication, 2025). Due to the large enrollment, students were organized into six distinct cohorts to ensure structured participation during the Pitch Day activities. Each group appointed a ten-member executive team to manage the project and oversee the formulation of the campaign plan, while the broader class supported research, planning, and implementation. The PR campaign consisted of strategic activities designed to either enhance organizational visibility, raise awareness of social issues, or influence public attitudes. Students attended structured briefings before each stage, followed by debriefings to evaluate their performance and strategic choices.

These sessions fostered reflective engagement and critical meaning-making, providing the foundational context for the in-depth interviews conducted in this research

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1 Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb's experiential learning theory, which is based on the theory of constructivism, describes knowledge as created through the transformation of experience. Kolb (1984) posits that experiential learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. As the name suggests, this method directly integrates classroom theory with practical experiences, enabling students to apply concepts learned in lectures to real-world situations, thereby deepening their understanding (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). This type of real-world learning technique not only helps students build subject-specific information, but also transferable abilities that will be useful as they enter their respective businesses (Gavillet, 2018). In addition, allowing time for reflection and self-assessment permits students to recognize opportunities for personal growth while adopting approaches to enhance performance. This ongoing process of development, coupled with thorough self-analysis, elevates success levels (Eckhardt, 2024). For the purpose of this study, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory involves four stages through which experience is transformed into knowledge; (1) concrete experience (where the learner is involved in an experience); (2) reflective observation (where the learner reflects on the experience); (3) abstract conceptualization (where the learner explores perspective and ideas about what could have been done differently to improve the outcome); (4) active experimenting (where a learner designs or tests new ideas to guide future practice) and learning from the experience (Kolb, 2015). Acquiring knowledge through personal experience is another crucial component of experiential learning. This approach involves obtaining knowledge through direct or indirect experiences, reflecting upon those experiences, and subsequently applying the newly acquired knowledge in new situations

(Kolb & Kolb, 2022). According to Skilton (2011) students must be able to learn from the experience, feedback, reflection and evaluation, to enhance their skills for practice placements. For the purpose of this study, Kolb's (2015) four stages of the experiential learning cycle was adopted to explain how experience is transformed into knowledge in public relations education. The theory identifies the characteristics of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. There are several researches that have employed ELT in their study. For example, Eckhardt (2024) study investigated and aimed to support the influential role of experiential learning program on participants' professional and personal development. The researcher revealed that the challenges posed in the curriculum were real and implemented in a way that allowed students to apply their academic learning to real-life situations. The study's findings revealed that, the service experience significantly enhanced participants' verbal and written communication skills and leadership skills. In addition, the program's focus on self-evaluation allowed participants to pinpoint where then need improvement, discover opportunities for professional growth, discover opportunities to network and developed ways to advertise themselves for the job market. Similarly, Jonathan and Laik (2019) study sought to explore the processes of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and demonstrate how these processes can be applied within a university program to better prepare undergraduates for the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) of today's environment and workplace. The researchers found that the ELT method is useful in cultivating appropriate learning perspectives and inculcating habits that enable students to adapt to new situations, which is especially crucial in a VUCA world. In addition, the researchers revealed that the ELT framework is far more versatile than conventional teaching methods today. It has been shown to be equally applicable in both academic (e.g., computer simulation) and non-academic (e.g., overseas trip) activities for

undergraduate development. According to Jonathan and Laik (2019) ELT can improve both the breadth and depth of students' learning when applied correctly. The ELT framework will thus be utilized in this study to analyse students' reflections on their service-learning experience, specifically examining how that experience shapes their preparedness for the future PR workplace.

2.6.2 Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (1985) defined Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), as the process through which individuals achieve critical consciousness regarding their psychocultural assumptions and cultural assumptions that restrict their worldview. Mezirow (2003) defines Transformative learning is a learning through which individuals critically examine and reconstruct their established frames of reference, which consist of underlying assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives, in order to develop more inclusive, reflective, discerning, and adaptable ways of understanding and engaging with the world. According to Mezirow (1985), this process involves restructuring those assumptions to integrate experiences in more inclusive and discerning manner, thereby enabling action based on these new insights. Expressed in simpler terms, Mezirow's theory, argues that every individual has their own unique view of the world. This particular worldview however, may or may not be properly stated, yet it is typically founded on a set of paradigmatic assumptions derived from the individual's upbringing, culture, life experience, or education (Christie et al., 2015).

Mezirow's arguments, as presented in the collection, *In Defence of the Lifeworld* (Welton, 1995), were informed by his own comprehensive national study, which he conducted in 1978 under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education. The Department aimed to investigate the reasons behind the increasing number of women returning to school and the impact their education had on them.

Mezirow was able to indicate that returning to school frequently resulted in consciousness raising on the part of many women, and that the process typically occurred in a series of steps. He listed these as: (1) Disorienting dilemma; (2) Self-examination; (3) Sense of alienation; (4) Relating discontent to others; (5) Explaining options of new behaviour; (6) Building confidence in new ways; (7) Planning a course of action; (8) Knowledge to implement plans; (9) Experimenting with new roles; (10) Reintegration. Originally intended for adult education. There are several research studies that have applied TLT framework in their work. For example, Stuckey et al. (2022) utilized the framework to evaluate and validate quantitative measurement model they developed in 2013. The study concurrently replicates, validates, and enhances the development of the Transformative Learning Survey, while also advancing Transformative Learning Theory through the identification of key drivers that influence learning outcomes. The Transformative Learning Survey (TLS) was administered as a cross-sectional web survey to 467 respondents recruited from a variety of sources. The survey instrument was structured around two categories of measurement: four transformative learning outcome measures (acting differently, deeper self-awareness, holding more open perspectives, experiencing a deep shift in worldview) and 14 transformative learning process measures in three domains (extrarational, rational, social critique). The study revealed that real, lasting personal transformation is most likely to happen when a person is both forced to question their beliefs by a major life event and acts on that questioning, while also gaining a sense of personal power and a critical understanding of social inequality.

The study also found that, transformative learning may contribute to a better understanding of the trajectory of transformative decisions, and the kinds of changes that not only contribute to a natural progression toward greater transformation, but also those that inhibit progression or result in regression of transformation.

Similarly, Mälkki (2011) explored how a disorienting dilemma, a life-event crisis, may trigger reflection. The findings of the study confirm several issues within Mezirow's (1981, 1991, 2003) theory of transformative learning, while also providing further insights into issues insufficiently considered within the theory. First, the findings demonstrate that the role of reflection within the non-facilitated context of life-event crisis is distinct from the more commonly discussed role of reflection in facilitated contexts. Second, disorienting dilemmas appeared to be inherently emotional experiences. This did not diminish the importance of rational and critical thinking, rather, it appeared that reflection could be useful in processing these experiences. Third, reflection does not only bring positive issues in its wake. The researcher revealed that views changed through reflection may also lead one into new kinds of misunderstandings and disagreements with significant others, as the previously shared views may also become changed. According to the researcher, these differences in assumptions became evident through unpleasant feelings, which in turn may trigger further reflection in terms of these breaks in communication. The TLT framework will thus be utilized in this study to analyse students' reflections on their service-learning experience, specifically examining how that experience shapes their preparedness for the future PR workplace.

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the existing literature on service-learning, with particular focus on its application within Public Relations education. It established a strong foundation for the study by defining key concepts, outlining various service-learning models, and situating the pedagogy within historical and theoretical lenses. From the literature reviewed, it is evident that scholarship on service-learning in PR education, particularly in emerging or growing economies, is limited. Based on these gaps and other methodological limitations identified, this study seeks to address these voids in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the research approach used to investigate the topic under study. The chapter outlines the research paradigm, approach, design, sampling strategy, sample size, data collection techniques, data collection processes, data analysis, credibility and ethical considerations, and provides a summary of the chapter.

3.1 Research Paradigm

According to Park et al. (2020) research paradigms govern scientific discoveries through their assumptions and principles. Assumptions are about the nature of reality, how we can know reality, the methods we use to explore it, and the values inherent in the research process (Ryan, 2018). Rehman and Alharthi (2016) asserts that a paradigm forms the basic set of beliefs as well as a theoretical framework that makes assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methodologies. Following these assertions, the interpretivism paradigm was used in this study because of its ability to provide an understanding of the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Interpretivism holds that, knowledge and truth depend on people's experiences and how they interpret them and are therefore subjective as well as culturally and historically placed (Flick, 2014). As a result, the interpretivism paradigm is ideal for the study because it emphasizes on understanding the persons and their interpretation of their surroundings.

In the context of the understudied topic, the researcher explored the understanding of PR students' reflections after participating in a mandated full-term service-learning course.

3.2 Research Approach

In the context of this study on students' reflection on service-learning in PR education, a qualitative methodology was employed to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of PR students in a Ghanaian public university. Qualitative research is a method of investigating and comprehending the meanings that individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Brennen (2017) posit that, the qualitative method emphasizes understanding complex concepts and developing a sense of language, both of which are frequently based on personal and interpersonal experiences. Thus, the qualitative research approach aids in understanding a human or social issue by concentrating on establishing a thorough, comprehensive picture using words, relaying particular viewpoints of informants, as well as taking place in a natural situation (Creswell, 2003).

3.3 Research Design

Research design refers to the procedural framework, which is essential for guiding the process of conducting research (Asenahabi, 2019). It encompasses the decision-making regarding the type of data measurement, timescale and location of data gathering, nature of participants or respondents, data sources, variables, and methods of data collection and analysis (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024). This study employed a phenomenological research design, underpinned by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Phenomenology is primarily focused on individuals' meaning making as the fundamental element of the human experience (Patton, 2002).

This implies that phenomenology is well-suited for exploring people's lived experiences in order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Worthington (2013) the key contribution of phenomenology is the realization of a phenomenon's meaning as seen and perceived through the direct experience of those which have experienced it. Given its focus on in-depth engagement and uncovering meaningful patterns, the phenomenology research design also allowed the researcher to investigate how participation influenced their understanding and application of public relations theory in real world situations. Ultimately, this design is well-suited for studying the nuanced perceptions and contextual factors that shape PR students' reflections on their service-learning experience.

3.4 Sampling Strategy and Participants

3.4.1 Sampling Strategy

Sampling strategy guides the selection of participants and provides a rationale for their relevance to the research purpose. The purposive sampling strategy was adopted as a result of the study's focus. Thus, the deliberate predetermination and planning of the units of study support methodological rigour by ensuring that data collection remains focused on participants whose experiences are directly relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore public relations students' reflections on a full-term service-learning project. Consequently, only students who played key roles and had directly participated in the service-learning course and the UniMAC Pitch Day were selected.

This ensured that participants possessed the characteristics and experiential background necessary to provide rich, reflective accounts relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

3.4.2 Sample Size

Sample size refers to the number of participants selected for inclusion in a study (Silverman, 2010). In this study, a total of six (6) participants were selected from the 2024–2025 academic year cohort following their completion of the full-term service-learning course. All participants were final-year public relations students who had participated in the UniMAC Pitch Day. In keeping with the idiographic commitment of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study intentionally employed a small sample. IPA prioritises depth of analysis and detailed engagement with individual cases rather than large sample sizes or statistical generalisation. A sample of six participants was therefore considered appropriate for generating rich, in-depth accounts of lived experience and supporting rigorous interpretative analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

3.4.3 Participants

Ethical considerations relating to participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly observed. Creswell (2013) emphasises the importance of protecting participants' anonymity in qualitative research. In accordance with this guidance, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Eligible participants consisted of public relations students from the 2024–2025 academic year who had participated in the UniMAC Pitch Day. This experiential activity required students to work in teams to develop and pitch a public relations campaign for an external client, thereby providing a structured and authentic context for reflective practice.

The six participants were assigned the following pseudonyms: Abena, Emerald, Kojo, Yaw, Elikem, and Kwaku. The use of pseudonyms protected participants' identities while preserving the integrity of their accounts.

These selection criteria supported the development of a purposive, relatively homogeneous sample, consistent with IPA's methodological emphasis on in-depth exploration of shared lived experiences within a small sample (Smith et al., 2009).

3.5 Data Collection: Procedures and Instrument

The data collection process followed a structured, step-by-step plan that guided the implementation of the selected data collection technique and the use of the data collection instrument. According to Yin (2018), data collection involves the deliberate use of appropriate techniques such as interviews, observations, surveys, or experiments to obtain information relevant to the research objectives. In this study, primary data were generated solely through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted after the UniMAC Pitch Day to allow participants sufficient time to reflect on their service-learning experiences and meaning-making processes within the context of public relations education. This timing supported the study's interpretivist orientation and the IPA emphasis on reflective engagement with lived experience. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the data collection process. The study ensured participants' confidentiality, minimized potential risks, and adhered to all institutional ethical guidelines. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a brief synopsis of the interview to facilitate adequate preparation. Each of the six purposively sampled participants provided written informed consent and was fully informed of their right to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Data collection was conducted between October and November 2025. All interviews were conducted virtually via Google Meet, providing a convenient and accessible platform for participants. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide designed to focus on students' lived experiences of service-learning, while allowing

flexibility for participants to elaborate on their perspectives and interpretations. This approach ensured consistency across interviews while enabling depth and richness of data. With participants' consent, all interview sessions were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of responses. Following each interview, field notes documenting non-verbal cues, contextual factors, and the overall interactional atmosphere were compiled to support subsequent transcription and analysis. The researcher employed probing techniques throughout the interviews to explore points of interest, emotional responses, and nuanced interpretations raised by participants. Immediately after the completion of the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original phrasing, linguistic emphasis, and conversational flow. These transcripts formed the primary dataset for analysis using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

3.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews and Interview Guide

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique. To ensure a systematic and focused approach to data gathering, an interview guide was developed in line with the study's objectives and the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). The interview guide was provided and designed to elicit participants' reflections, focusing on their lived experiences and meaning-making processes related to service-learning in public relations education (see Appendix A for interview guide).

The interview questions explored participants' experiences of service-learning, their understanding and application of classroom concepts, and their perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with participation in a full-term service-learning course. Particular attention was given to how participants made sense of these experiences and how they perceived their preparedness for the future public relations workplace.

In developing the interview guide, IPA guidelines outlined by Smith et al. (2009) were followed. These included constructing open-ended questions capable of eliciting rich, detailed accounts; organising questions to move from descriptive narratives to more reflective and interpretative responses; and allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. The guide comprised approximately nine to eleven open-ended questions, supported by prompts where necessary. Given the study's focus on subjective interpretations and lived experience, the semi-structured interview format provided the flexibility required to probe complex ideas, clarify responses, and explore individual perspectives in depth. The in-depth virtual interviews offered a direct and interactive platform for accessing participants' lived experiences and facilitated the generation of rich qualitative data.

3.6 Data Analysis

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), data analysis involves synthesising research findings and identifying patterns and relationships in line with the study's research questions. This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the analytical framework. IPA is grounded in three interrelated philosophical traditions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, which together guide its methodological focus. Drawing from phenomenology, IPA seeks to explore individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Influenced by hermeneutics, IPA emphasises the interpretative nature of qualitative inquiry through a double hermeneutic, whereby participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher, in turn, interprets these sense-making processes.

According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA moves from a detailed, idiographic analysis of individual cases to the identification of shared patterns across cases, while preserving the integrity of participants' subjective meanings. The data analysis followed the six-stage IPA process outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

- (1) reading and re-reading;
- (2) initial noting;
- (3) developing emergent themes;
- (4) searching for connections across emergent themes;
- (5) moving to the next case; and
- (6) looking for patterns across cases.

The analysis began with immersion in the data through repeated reading and re-reading of each interview transcript. For each transcript, the corresponding audio recording was simultaneously reviewed to ensure transcription accuracy and to retain contextual understanding of participants' responses. This process enhanced familiarity with the data and facilitated the identification of initial ideas and patterns. The second stage involved initial noting, during which detailed exploratory comments were generated for the first transcript. This stage required close, line-by-line engagement with the text and focused on capturing participants' meanings, language use, and underlying interpretations. Exploratory comments were organised into three categories: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual as recommended by Smith et al. (2009). These notes formed the foundation for subsequent theme development. In the third stage, emergent themes were identified by synthesising related exploratory comments.

This process involved reducing the volume of detailed notes while maintaining analytic complexity by mapping relationships and patterns across the data (Smith et al., 2009).

Emergent themes represented an integration of participants' expressed meanings and the researcher's interpretative engagement. The fourth stage focused on identifying connections among emergent themes within each individual case. Related themes were clustered to develop superordinate themes, reflecting broader patterns of meaning within participants' accounts. Only themes directly relevant to the study's focus on students' lived experiences of a service-learning course were retained. These themes were organised into coherent analytic structures that captured key aspects of participants' experiences. In the fifth stage, the same analytic procedure was applied to each subsequent transcript in chronological order. To maintain IPA's idiographic commitment, prior interpretations were consciously bracketed during the analysis of each new case (Smith et al., 2009). For each participant, distinct exploratory notes, emergent themes, and superordinate themes were developed. Finally, in the sixth stage, patterns were examined across all cases. Superordinate themes from each transcript were compared to identify points of convergence and divergence. This analysis aimed to capture both the distinctive features of individual experiences and the shared meanings evident across the dataset, consistent with the interpretative and idiographic principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Qualitative research prioritizes trustworthiness to ensure that findings accurately reflect participants' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013). In this study, member checking was employed to enhance credibility: interview transcripts were returned to participants to confirm whether their accounts had been accurately captured. Participants reviewed the transcripts and verified that the data reflected their experiences.

To support dependability, detailed field notes were maintained during and after the interviews, capturing non-verbal cues, context, and researcher observations. An audit trail was kept to document decisions made during coding and theme development. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining reflexive notes that highlighted the researcher's assumptions and their potential influence on interpretation. Interpretations were explicitly grounded in participants' quotes, ensuring that conclusions were faithful to the data.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC-IJ) prescribes standard research ethical codes for students conducting academic research. The researcher strictly adhered to these guidelines throughout data collection and analysis. Ethics refers to the moral principles that guide conduct and decision-making in research (Agwor & Osho, 2017). Key ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and maintaining confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to voluntarily participate in the study and to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and confidentiality was maintained by protecting all personal information and participant identities throughout the research process.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a summary of the research methodology employed to investigate the study's focus. It outlines the research paradigm, approach, design, and the specific strategies used for sampling, data collection, and analysis. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was adopted to gain in-depth insights into participants' reflections on their experiences.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants, resulting in a sample of six individuals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed for data analysis to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of participants. Throughout the research process, strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, and ethical rigor, to maintain the integrity of the study and the quality of its findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of interview data collected for this study. The purpose of the chapter is to describe how participants experienced and made meaning of their engagement in the UniMAC Pitch Day, a full-term service-learning project designed to integrate classroom theory with real-world public relations practice, and to demonstrate how these experiences address the study's research questions and broader objectives. Guided by an interpretative analytical approach, the chapter provides a systematic account of how raw data were transformed into meaningful patterns of understanding. The chapter is organized into four main sections. It begins with an overview of the analytic process used to derive themes from the transcripts. This is followed by a presentation of the thematic structure, which outlines the superordinate themes and corresponding clusters generated from the analysis. The final section provides a detailed interpretation of each theme, supported by participants' narratives and reflections from the UniMAC Pitch Day. Together, these sections provide a comprehensive and coherent account of the lived experiences shared by participants during the service-learning project, highlighting how they reflected on and made meaning of their practical engagement in public relations tasks.

4.2 Overview of Superordinate Themes

Through a rigorous and iterative analytic process, five superordinate themes and nineteen clusters were developed to represent the core meanings expressed in the data from participants' engagement in the UniMAC Pitch Day service-learning project. These themes capture how students experienced, interpreted, and made sense of their participation, highlighting both the transformational learning opportunities and the challenges encountered throughout the process. The thematic structure provides an overview of the findings and serves as a conceptual roadmap for the detailed analysis presented in the subsequent sections. It illustrates how similar ideas, feelings, and experiences were organized into clusters, which were then refined into broader superordinate themes reflecting shared meanings across participants' narratives. Information on the number and proportion of participants contributing to each theme is provided in Appendix B, while a summary table outlining the superordinate themes and corresponding clusters is included in Appendix C.

4.3 Superordinate Theme 1: Experiential Learning as Transformational

This superordinate theme captures how participants interpreted their experience the service-learning project as a deeply transformative educational process. Across the accounts, participants consistently described the project as a shift from passive learning to active engagement, where theoretical knowledge was tested, adapted, and internalised through authentic tasks. The emergent themes of Learning by Doing, Discovery of Hidden Competencies, Shaping Career Direction, and Theory Meets Practice are all connected by the participants' focus on personal development that resulted from engaging in real-world problem-solving as opposed to classroom simulations.

The project created conditions for students to expand their skill sets, build confidence, and recognise capabilities they had not previously associated with themselves. Overall, students expressed that this hands-on mode of learning fundamentally changed how they understood public relations practice and their role within it. The combination of autonomy, responsibility, and real-life consequences encouraged them to move beyond surface-level knowledge and develop a more grounded, reflexive sense of competence. Their narratives depict the project not only as an academic requirement, but as a meaningful learning encounter that shaped their emerging professional identities and future aspirations.

4.3.1 Learning by Doing

This cluster captures participants' reflections on how direct engagement in the service-learning project enhanced their understanding of public relations concepts. In alignment with the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants described their learning as most meaningful when theory was applied through real-world action. Their experiences suggest that hands-on involvement served as a bridge between academic knowledge and practical application, resulting in deeper comprehension, stronger retention, and a more grounded grasp of course content. As Kojo stated:

“When I learn something and get to practice it, I hardly forget it. The hands-on nature of the project made all the difference in my understanding.”

His reflection highlights the role of embodied learning, suggesting that experiential tasks enabled him to internalize concepts more effectively than through traditional classroom methods alone.

The emphasis on hands-on engagement highlights the transformative impact of active participation on memory and understanding. Emerald similarly described the enhanced meaningfulness that emerged from applying theoretical concepts to authentic community issues. She shared:

“Connecting theories to real-life issues was much more meaningful than reading to pass exams.”

Her statement demonstrates a shift from transactional learning toward deeper intellectual engagement. By situating theory within lived community contexts, the project helped students move beyond academic performance toward genuine comprehension and relevance. As Elikem put it:

“I understood what a campaign actually entails when we had to implement even the small details ourselves.”

This comment suggests that active participation exposed him to the nuances and complexities of professional practice, enabling him to grasp the interconnected tasks that constitute a full campaign. His experience indicates that learning occurred not only through major tasks but also through attention to operational details. Taken together, participants’ narratives demonstrate that learning by doing was central to their understanding and retention of course material. The service-learning environment provided a space in which theory and practice converged, allowing students to translate abstract concepts into lived experience.

This experiential grounding fostered a sense of ownership over their learning and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the professional demands associated with public relations practice.

4.3.2 Discovery of Hidden Competencies

This cluster captures participants' reflections on how the service-learning project enabled them to uncover previously unrecognized skills. Within the interpretative phenomenological analysis framework, this theme reflects the personal meaning-making that occurred as students engaged in authentic public relations tasks. Rather than simply applying existing knowledge, participants described moments of self-discovery in which the project illuminated new abilities and expanded their sense of professional potential. Kojo's narrative illustrates this process of emerging competence. He shared:

“I stayed up all night redesigning the campaign materials and later realized I could actually earn income from graphic design.”

His experience demonstrates how immersion in creative tasks facilitated a shift in self-perception, revealing a talent that he had not previously identified as marketable. Similarly, Abena expressed that the hands-on nature of the work surfaced skills she had not recognized before, noting:

“Working on messaging and visuals brought out skills I didn't even know I had.”

Her reflection suggests that experiential learning allowed her to move beyond theoretical understanding toward a more embodied sense of capability. Elikem's insight expands this theme by illustrating how students discovered strengths in multitasking and project coordination. He explained:

“I discovered that I could manage multiple project roles and still contribute creatively.”

This revelation indicates not only the identification of creative skills but also the recognition of organizational and leadership capacities emerging through active participation. Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how the service-learning environment served as a catalyst for uncovering hidden competencies. Participants' reflections suggest that real-world engagement enabled them to reinterpret their abilities, leading to increased confidence and a broadened understanding of potential career trajectories. This aligns with IPA's emphasis on how individuals make sense of significant experiences in ways that reshape their self-concept.

4.3.3 Shaping Career Direction

The analysis revealed that the service-learning project played a significant role in shaping participants' emerging professional identities and career aspirations. Consistent with the interpretative phenomenological analysis focus on meaning-making, the data suggest that students used their experiential engagement as a lens through which to evaluate their interests, strengths, and preferred areas of specialization within public relations. Participants described the project as clarifying previously vague understandings of the profession. As Elikem explained:

“I've decided that community relations is the area I want to specialize in.”

This reflection indicates that hands-on engagement allowed him to identify a specific pathway that resonated with his personal values and professional ambitions. His statement reflects a process of career crystallization supported by direct involvement with community stakeholders. Similarly, Kwaku noted that:

“The experience opened my eyes to how communication actually works with real stakeholders.”

This reflection demonstrates how the practical demands of stakeholder engagement enabled him to refine his perception of public relations work beyond theoretical classroom instruction. The experiential context served as a reality check, offering insight into the relational, strategic, and responsive nature of professional communication. Emerald also emphasized the clarifying function of the project, stating:

“This project gave me clarity on what professional PR work looks like.”

Her comment suggests a transition from conceptual understanding to concrete professional awareness. The project served as a formative space in which she could envision herself operating competently in the field. For Abena, the project experience represented a direct rehearsal of professional life. Her reflection linked the service-learning process to the operational realities of agency and freelance practice, positioning the course as a practical simulation of the professional environment. As Abena put it:

“Whether as a freelancer or in an agency, you’ll need to pitch, plan, and execute campaigns just like we did.”

Abena’s account captures a sense of vocational alignment. The recognition that academic exercises can authentically mirror industry processes. Her experience reflects a transition from student to practitioner, framed by a confidence in the immediate applicability of learned skills.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate that the service-learning project acted as a catalyst for career direction formation. Participants interpreted the experience as instrumental in helping them make informed decisions about the areas of public relations that align with their capacities and interests. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that authentic, practice-based learning environments support students' career decision-making processes by linking academic content with real-world professional contexts.

4.3.4 Theory Meets Practice

Participants consistently described the service-learning course as a transformative bridge between abstract theory and practical application, though each narrative highlighted unique engagements and learning pathways. For Emerald, the project clarified procedural workflows she had previously encountered only in theory. While she had understood campaign development conceptually, her prior experience was largely confined to classroom presentations:

“We had learned the stages of campaign development in class, but I was just doing it for presentations back then. Through this experience, I got to apply them practically from research to execution and even measurement and evaluation. It made everything clearer.”

Emerald's account highlights the movement from intellectual comprehension to embodied, actionable understanding, as the course enabled her to experience the sequential stages of professional practice. Abena emphasized contextualization and concreteness in the use of theoretical concepts.

Campaign planning moved from an abstract exercise to producing tangible outcomes. Students acknowledged the practical value of setting measurable objectives. As Abena put it:

“The SMART approach made us plan better because we knew exactly what we wanted to change and how to measure it.”

Participants interpreted this process as strengthening their strategic planning abilities. For Abena, integrating theory and practice meant translating classroom discussions into decisions that directly affected the target audience, highlighting the significance of context in operationalizing learning. This strengthened their strategic planning abilities. Yaw illustrated how theoretical models informed tactical decisions in practice. He drew explicitly on communication theory to guide message delivery:

“We applied theories like the Two-Step Flow Theory. Instead of pushing our messages straight to the people, we decided to use trusted figures and personalities in the community to deliver them.”

Yaw’s reflection demonstrates how theory became a strategic tool, shaping decisions in real-world implementation rather than remaining abstract. Across participants, a shared pattern emerged: theoretical ideas gained meaning through active engagement and accountability. The requirement to defend research choices, message strategies, and stakeholder selections before instructors, peers, and community collaborators reinforced this integration. The course thus facilitated learning that extended beyond cognitive understanding to the practical ability to operationalize theoretical principles effectively in authentic professional contexts.

4.4 Superordinate Theme 2: Leadership, Organization, and Team Dynamics

This superordinate theme captures how participants made sense of their experience, reflecting on how leadership structures, organisational processes, and interpersonal dynamics shaped their experience of the service-learning project. Across the accounts, participants repeatedly emphasised that teamwork was both a source of motivation and a site of tension. The clusters, Leadership Dynamics, Collaboration and Peer Learning, Workload and Role Strain, and Conflicts and Choices are connected by students' shared struggles to balance expectations, distribute tasks fairly, and maintain cohesion in the face of uneven participation. Together, these sub-themes show how the project functioned not only as an academic exercise but as a real-world test of group coordination and collective responsibility.

Collectively, participants expressed mixed but insightful sentiments about their team experiences. While many valued the opportunity to learn from peers and develop professional collaborative skills, they also voiced frustration about unclear leadership roles, communication gaps, and disparities in effort. Students' reflections suggest that team dynamics had a direct influence on their sense of progress, stress levels, and overall satisfaction with the project.

This theme underscores that leadership and organisation were central in shaping how students navigated the emotional, cognitive, and practical demands of the service-learning environment.

4.4.1 Leadership Dynamics

Participants expressed significant concerns regarding the leadership structure and distribution of responsibilities within the project team. The data suggest that perceptions of inequity in leadership

selection and workload allocation shaped students' overall experience of the service-learning project. These concerns highlight the importance of transparent leadership processes and equitable task distribution in collaborative learning environments. Yaw reported that:

“The executive committee selection was not fair; some members didn't do much but were still part of the team.”

His comment suggests dissatisfaction with the selection criteria and implies that the process may have lacked objectivity or clarity. This perception of unfairness indicates that students evaluated the leadership structure not only in terms of outcomes but also in terms of procedural justice. Such concerns have implications for group cohesion and motivation, as unclear or inequitable leadership arrangements can undermine trust and engagement. Kojo similarly highlighted issues with workload distribution, stating:

“The workload always fell on just a few committed people, which was exhausting.”

His reflection suggests a pattern of disproportionate task allocation in which committed members bore the majority of the responsibilities. This experience reflects common challenges in group-based learning contexts, where uneven participation can lead to frustration, burnout, and perceptions of inefficiency. Taken together, these accounts indicate that concerns about leadership fairness and workload imbalance shaped participants' interpretation of the group dynamics within the service-learning project. The emergent theme suggests that while the project offered valuable experiential learning opportunities, structural and organizational challenges within the student leadership framework affected the quality of collaboration. Consistent with findings in teamwork and experiential learning literature, participants' narratives highlights the importance of

establishing clear leadership roles, transparent selection processes, and equitable task-sharing mechanisms to support effective team performance.

4.4.2 Collaboration and Peer Learning

Participants described collaboration as a central component of their learning experience, emphasizing the value of working with peers who brought diverse perspectives and strengths to the project. Their reflections indicate that group-based engagement enriched understanding, fostered dialogue, and created opportunities for shared problem-solving.

This aligns with experiential learning theories that highlight collaboration as a catalyst for deeper cognitive processing and skill development. Kwaku explained that:

“Working with different groups made the learning richer; we could share ideas and challenge each other.”

His account suggests that the diversity within the groups, whether in viewpoints, experiences, or skills enhanced the quality of learning. The phrase “challenge each other” highlights a dynamic of constructive peer critique, which appears to have supported critical thinking and broadened his interpretive lens. Kwaku’s emphasis on idea-sharing reflects an appreciation for the dialogic nature of collaborative environments. Similarly, Yaw stated that:

“It was a space where everyone contributed something, even if at different levels.”

His reflection underscores the inclusive nature of the collaborative process, suggesting that varied levels of participation still added value to the collective effort. This indicates that students did not

view contribution as uniform but rather as complementary, with each member offering unique input. Yaw's insight reflects an understanding of teamwork that recognizes diversity in strengths, capacities, and engagement styles. Together, these narratives illustrate that collaboration played a pivotal role in enhancing students' learning experiences during the service-learning project.

The participants interpreted their interactions with peers as supportive, productive, and intellectually stimulating. The emergent theme suggests that working in diverse groups facilitated peer learning, promoted multiple viewpoints, and encouraged active engagement, which are recognized as central to effective experiential education.

4.4.3 Workload and Role Strain

Participants described fatigue due to multiple responsibilities. Kojo and Emerald described feeling overwhelmed by tight deadlines and simultaneous coursework. Participants described experiencing considerable strain in managing the workload associated with the service-learning project alongside other academic responsibilities. Their reflections suggest that the intensity of the project, combined with personal expectations and competing course demands, contributed to feelings of pressure, fatigue, and reduced emotional capacity. This cluster highlights the cognitive and emotional challenges students face when navigating complex experiential tasks within already demanding academic schedules. Kojo noted that:

“Being part of two executive committees and having perfectionist tendencies made me drained.”

His statement reflects a combination of structural and personal factors shaping his experience. Holding multiple leadership roles appears to have increased his workload significantly, while his

self-described perfectionism may have heightened internal expectations regarding performance quality. The resulting emotional exhaustion suggests that even highly motivated students may encounter burnout when responsibilities accumulate beyond manageable limits. Similarly, Emerald shared that:

“I felt overwhelmed by timelines, especially when juggling other courses simultaneously.”

Her account underscores the temporal pressures associated with the project and highlights the challenge of balancing service-learning tasks with broader academic obligations. The sense of being “overwhelmed” indicates a perceived misalignment between workload expectations and available time, which can disrupt students’ ability to fully engage with experiential learning opportunities. Together, these narratives point to an emergent theme related to workload imbalance and academic strain. While the service-learning project provided valuable real-world experience, participants’ interpretations suggest that the intensity of the workload sometimes compromised their wellbeing and sense of control. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the need for structured support, clear timelines, and realistic workload expectations in experiential learning environments to prevent student overload and promote sustainable engagement.

4.4.4 Conflict and Choices

Participants described moments of disagreement and uncertainty within the project, highlighting how these experiences fostered growth in collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. Their reflections suggest that navigating conflict became an important part of the learning process, enabling students to develop interpersonal competencies, negotiation skills, and an appreciation

for shared decision-making structures. This aligns with IPA's emphasis on how individuals make sense of challenges encountered in social and relational contexts. As Yaw put it:

“Disagreements arose when the data didn't match our expectations, and we had to negotiate how to proceed.”

His account illustrates that conflict often emerged at points of analytical ambiguity, particularly when outcomes diverged from the group's assumptions. The need to negotiate indicates that students engaged in deliberative processes that required listening, adjusting expectations, and collectively determining the next steps. This reflects a movement from individual interpretation toward collaborative meaning-making, a key dimension of effective teamwork. Similarly, Abena explained that:

“We learned to consult each other and find compromises, which taught me about team decision-making.”

Her statement highlights the constructive nature of these interactions. Consultation and compromise appear to have served as mechanisms for resolving tensions and maintaining group cohesion. Abena's reflection also suggests that navigating differences enhanced her understanding of how democratic decision-making unfolds in practice, emphasizing the importance of communication and mutual respect. Meanwhile, Elikem reflected that:

“If people don't motivate themselves, the project suffers.”

His statement highlights the importance of intrinsic responsibility for shared outcomes. Together, these accounts reveal that conflict within the project was not purely disruptive but functioned as a

catalyst for learning. Participants interpreted these challenges as opportunities to strengthen teamwork, develop negotiation skills, and practice inclusive decision-making.

The emergent theme highlights that service-learning environments may naturally generate disagreements, but when managed constructively, such moments can deepen students' collaborative competencies and prepare them for real-world professional settings.

4.5 Superordinate Theme 3: Understanding Community Relations Practice

This superordinate theme captures how participants interpreted their participation in the service-learning project deepened their understanding of community relations and public relations practice beyond classroom theory. Across their accounts, participants described a shift from viewing PR as purely message-driven to recognizing its complexity, relational nature, and ethical dimensions. The emergent clusters: Complexity of PR Work, Strengthening External Collaboration, Ethics and Context in Practice, and Strategic Communication and Planning are unified by students' reflections on the multifaceted and context-sensitive demands of real-world communication. Together, these sub-themes illustrate how hands-on engagement enabled students to appreciate the strategic thinking, adaptability, and interpersonal sensitivity required for effective community relations work. Building on these clusters, students expressed increased awareness and professional maturity. Many acknowledged that the project revealed layers of PR practice they had not previously considered, particularly in negotiating with stakeholders, making ethical decisions, and tailoring messages to community needs. Their reflections, captured in interview narratives, suggest that the project acted as a bridge between academic concepts and the lived realities of practicing communicators. By navigating real community dynamics, students gained grounded, practical

insight into what it means to plan strategically, communicate responsibly, and build meaningful relationships with diverse publics.

4.5.1 Complexity of PR Work

Participants' reflections revealed a growing awareness of the nuanced and multidimensional nature of public relations practice. As they engaged more deeply with the service-learning project, students recognized gaps between their initial assumptions and the actual complexity of PR planning, strategy, and problem analysis. This emergent understanding reflects a cognitive shift in which participants re-evaluated preconceived notions about the field and developed a more sophisticated grasp of professional standards. As Abena put it:

“I learned a campaign doesn't need to have all three objectives: awareness, attitude and behavior change as I thought earlier.”

Her statement highlights a correction in her conceptual understanding of campaign design. Initially assuming a rigid structure, Emerald came to appreciate the strategic flexibility required in tailoring campaign objectives to specific contexts. This demonstrates a move from linear thinking toward a more context-driven, analytical approach, which is central to effective PR practice. Similarly, Kojo reflected that:

“A problem statement must be specific and backed by data; I previously thought it was a simple explanation.”

His comment points to an emerging recognition of evidence-based practice in PR work. The realization that problem identification requires precision and data support indicates a deeper

understanding of how research informs strategic decisions. Kojo's experience reflects the transition from surface-level explanations to more rigorous analytical reasoning.

Together, these narratives reveal that the service-learning project exposed participants to the sophisticated thought processes underlying PR work, such as strategic decision-making, evidence-based planning, and contextual analysis. The emergent theme suggests that experiential engagement challenged students' earlier misconceptions and replaced them with more accurate and professional interpretations. This aligns with existing research showing that practical exposure plays a critical role in helping students understand the complexity and intellectual demands of applied communication fields.

4.5.2 Strengthening External Collaboration

Participants emphasized the critical role of stakeholder engagement and external partnerships in shaping the outcomes and learning experience of the service-learning project. Their reflections indicate that direct interaction with organizations provided insight into the practical challenges of collaboration, negotiation, and relationship management which are core competencies in professional public relations practice. This theme reflects how experiential engagement exposes students to the dynamics and complexities of working with diverse stakeholders. As Elikem put it:

“Reaching out to real organization gave a real-world experience of stakeholder engagement.”

His account highlights the authenticity of the learning experience and suggests that practical interaction with external partners allowed him to apply classroom knowledge in a tangible context. By engaging directly with a stakeholder, Kwaku gained insight into the communication,

coordination, and responsiveness required to establish and maintain professional relationships. On the other hand, Kwaku noted that:

“Some organizations didn’t understand our project, making collaboration tricky.”

His reflection points to challenges in aligning expectations and communicating project goals effectively. This demonstrates that stakeholder engagement is not always straightforward and often requires adaptive communication strategies, patience, and negotiation skills. Kwaku’s account emphasizes the importance of clarity, persistence, and flexibility in managing partnerships, even when initial understanding is limited. Together, these narratives reveal that stakeholder engagement provided students with experiential opportunities to navigate real-world communication complexities. Participants interpreted these interactions as both instructive and challenging, reinforcing the significance of relationship management, adaptability, and professional communication skills. The emergent theme underscores that effective PR practice requires not only planning and strategy but also the ability to work collaboratively with diverse external partners in dynamic environments.

4.5.3 Ethics and Context in Practice

Participants highlighted the importance of ethical considerations and contextually appropriate strategies in their communication efforts during the service-learning project. Their reflections suggest that navigating ethical constraints and adapting communication methods to specific settings were central to the development of professional judgment and responsible practice in public relations. Yaw reflected that:

“Before going to the community, we sought permission from gatekeepers, that is the local leaders and representatives who oversee activities in the area.”

This statement illustrates an awareness of the hierarchical and social protocols that govern community participation. By consulting local authorities before initiating activities, students demonstrated ethical responsibility and respect for community norms, which are fundamental principles in professional public relations and community-based work. Similarly, Emerald emphasized that:

“We had to ensure our communication was ethical and appropriate”

Her reflection highlights an awareness of ethical responsibility in designing and delivering messages, recognizing that professional communication must respect organizational norms, audience sensitivities, and moral standards. This demonstrates that students were actively integrating ethical reasoning into their decision-making processes, a key component of responsible PR practice. Together, these narratives indicate that ethical awareness and context-driven strategies shaped participants’ understanding of professional communication. The emergent theme highlights how experiential learning fosters critical consideration of audience needs, situational appropriateness, and ethical obligations, reinforcing the idea that effective PR work requires not only technical skill but also moral and contextual discernment.

4.5.4 Strategic Communication and Planning

Participants highlighted the importance of deliberate planning and strategic thinking in designing effective communication campaigns. Their reflections suggest that developing messages and

campaign materials required careful consideration of audience perception, clarity, and overall coherence. This emergent theme illustrates how experiential learning exposes students to the structured, analytical processes involved in professional public relations work.

Kwaku noted that:

“Designing the messaging and campaign visuals forced me to think strategically about how the audience will perceive the information.”

His statement underscores the cognitive shift from producing content to considering its interpretive impact. The focus on audience perception reflects an understanding that effective communication extends beyond the message itself to include the way it is received and interpreted by target groups. This aligns with core principles of strategic communication and message framing in PR practice. Similarly, Kojo reflected that:

“Every step, from research to flyers, taught me the importance of precision and planning.”

His account demonstrates that the process of campaign development is iterative and detail-oriented, requiring attention to both content accuracy and execution. Kojo’s reflection highlights the integration of research, design, and delivery, emphasizing that precision and foresight are essential for achieving campaign objectives. Together, these narratives reveal that participants recognized the significance of strategic planning and careful message development in professional communication. The emergent theme suggests that experiential learning facilitated the development of critical skills such as audience analysis, message tailoring, and operational planning, all of which are vital for effective public relations practice.

4.6 Superordinate Theme 4: Project Constraints and Adaptive Problem-Solving

This superordinate theme captures how participants made sense of the structural, logistical, and institutional barriers influencing students' experiences in implementing the service-learning project. The clusters: Time Pressure, Navigating Data Challenges, Working with Limited Resources, and Balancing Multiple Demands, are linked by participants' shared perception that external conditions significantly restricted what they could accomplish. Participants' interview narratives consistently highlighted how compressed timelines, limited access to participants, scarce materials, and the dual demands of academic work and community engagement created persistent obstacles. These challenges illustrate how practical realities can influence not only the quality of project outcomes but also students' emotional and cognitive engagement with the learning process. Participants expressed a mix of frustration and resilience. While many acknowledged that constraints reduced the depth of their work and added stress, they also recognized that navigating these limitations offered important real-world lessons about adaptability, time management, and resourcefulness in professional settings. The general sentiment captured is that, although constraints were discouraging, they pushed students to think creatively, prioritize strategically, and negotiate the boundaries between academic requirements and community needs. This theme underscores the ways in which project limitations both shaped and, in some cases, strengthened their experiential learning journey.

4.6.1 Time Pressure

Participants reflected on the temporal constraints of the service-learning project, highlighting how limited time affected the scope and depth of their engagement. Their accounts suggest that while the project provided valuable experiential learning, the compressed timelines restricted full implementation of campaign activities and constrained students' ability to explore complex tasks thoroughly. This theme underscores the importance of balancing project objectives with realistic scheduling in experiential learning contexts. Elikem noted that:

“A real campaign would take six months to a year; we only pitched the idea without full implementation.”

His reflection indicates an awareness of the temporal demands of professional public relations work and suggests that the project timeline limited the opportunity for hands-on execution. The comment demonstrates that participants recognized the difference between theoretical planning and sustained practical engagement. Similarly, Abena stated that:

“Timelines clashed with other coursework, so executing everything fully was impossible.”

Her account highlights the challenge of managing multiple academic responsibilities simultaneously, which compounded the limitations imposed by the project's duration. The clash of deadlines constrained students' capacity to engage comprehensively with the experiential learning process. Collectively, these narratives reveal that time constraints shaped participants' interpretation of the project's outcomes.

While the experience offered insights into campaign planning and execution, students perceived that more extended timelines would have enabled deeper learning and fuller application of professional skills. The emergent theme suggests that careful scheduling and realistic time allocation are essential for maximizing the educational benefits of service-learning projects.

4.6.2 Navigating Data Challenges

Participants described challenges related to data collection, noting how discrepancies between primary and secondary data created confusion and required careful management. Their reflections suggest that encountering unexpected or conflicting information was a critical learning experience, emphasizing the importance of analytical rigor, adaptability, and problem-solving in professional public relations and research practice. Kwaku stated that:

“The data didn’t align, and resolving it took a lot of effort.”

His comment highlights the difficulties inherent in reconciling different sources of information, as well as the uncertainty that can arise when empirical evidence contradicts expectations. This experience illustrates the complex and sometimes messy nature of applied research, where students must interpret and synthesize data under guidance and scrutiny. Similarly, Yaw noted that:

“This caused a mini-crisis that required careful management.”

His account underscores the need for strategic problem-solving and composure when facing challenges in real-world contexts. The use of the term “mini-crisis” reflects the intensity of the situation and emphasizes the development of practical skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, and conflict resolution within the research process.

Together, these narratives indicate that data collection difficulties served as valuable experiential learning opportunities. Participants interpreted the challenges as occasions to refine their analytical skills, navigate ambiguity, and practice professional judgment. The emergent theme suggests that exposure to data inconsistencies and associated problem-solving scenarios enhances students' preparedness for the complexities of professional practice in public relations and related fields.

4.6.3 Working with Limited Resources

Participants reflected on the practical challenges posed by limited resources, emphasizing how shortages in materials, organizational support, and partner capacity affected the execution of the service-learning project. Their accounts suggest that these constraints required students to exercise flexibility, problem-solving, and initiative, highlighting the real-world conditions under which public relations professionals often operate. Emerald noted that:

“We lacked adequate materials and support from the organization.”

This statement illustrates how insufficient internal resources can hinder planning and implementation, compelling students to identify alternative approaches to meet project objectives. The experience fostered resilience and the ability to adapt strategies in response to logistical limitations. Similarly, Elikem observed that:

“Some partners didn't have PR departments, making coordination difficult at times.”

His reflection highlights challenges stemming from external factors, including organizational capacity and structural limitations. These circumstances required students to assume additional responsibility for coordination and communication, simulating real-world scenarios in which PR

practitioners must navigate partners with varying levels of expertise and resources. Collectively, these narratives indicate that resource limitations functioned as both a constraint and a learning opportunity. Participants interpreted these challenges as a context for developing practical skills such as improvisation, strategic planning, and collaborative problem-solving. The emergent theme underscores that exposure to resource-constrained environments prepares students for professional practice where adaptability and creative problem-solving are essential.

4.6.4 Balancing Multiple Demands

Participants reflected on the challenges of managing academic responsibilities alongside the demands of the service-learning project. Their narratives suggest that navigating multiple obligations and operating within resource or institutional constraints required the development of time management, problem-solving, and innovative thinking. This theme highlights how experiential learning exposes students to the realities of professional practice while simultaneously reinforcing essential academic skills. As Kojo noted:

“Balancing the project with other coursework and responsibilities was stressful, but taught me time management.”

His reflection indicates that the simultaneous demands of academic and project-related tasks created pressure, yet also offered an opportunity for growth in organizational and prioritization skills. The experience demonstrates how experiential learning environments can enhance students’ capacity to manage complex workloads effectively. Similarly, Abena observed that:

“Limited institutional resources pushed us to innovate within constraints.”

Her statement emphasizes that resource scarcity required creative problem-solving and adaptive strategies, highlighting the interplay between external limitations and student initiative. This aligns with real-world professional contexts in which practitioners must navigate organizational constraints while maintaining project effectiveness. Together, these narratives indicate that participants interpreted academic and professional constraints as both a challenge and a learning opportunity. The emergent theme underscores that engagement with such constraints fosters practical skills, time management, creativity, and strategic adaptability that are critical for success in professional public relations and other applied fields.

4.7 Superordinate Theme 5: Vision for Course Improvement and Future Adaptations

This superordinate theme reflects students' forward-looking perspectives on how the service-learning course could be strengthened to maximize its academic and professional impact. The clusters: Expanding Learning Time, Building Professional Partnerships, and Increasing Program Recognition are unified by participants' desire for a more robust, sustained, and institutionally supported learning experience. Across their accounts, students emphasized that while the course was valuable, its potential could be significantly expanded through longer project timelines, more stable community collaborations, and stronger visibility within and beyond the university. These sub-themes collectively illustrate how students were not only reflecting on their immediate experience but also imagining ways the course could evolve to better meet the needs of future cohorts. Sentiments expressed within this theme were largely constructive and aspirational. Participants communicated appreciation for the course's objectives alongside a clear recognition of structural improvements that could deepen learning outcomes and professional exposure.

Many felt that strengthening institutional partnerships and extending project duration would create richer opportunities for community impact and skill development. Students also highlighted the importance of enhancing the program's visibility to position it as a credible, recognized component of their professional training. Overall, this theme captures a future-oriented mindset, revealing students' investment in ensuring that the course continues to grow in relevance, reach, and effectiveness.

4.7.1 Expanding Learning Time

Participants reflected on the benefits of extending the duration of the service-learning project, emphasizing how longer timelines could enhance learning outcomes by allowing for comprehensive engagement in all phases of campaign development. Their accounts suggest that additional time would provide students with a more holistic understanding of professional public relations work, fostering deeper skill acquisition and practical competence. As Kwaku put it:

“If we had more time, we could actually implement the project, not just pitch it. The first semester for research and pitching, the second for implementation, would provide a 360-degree experience.”

His statement highlights the value of structuring the course to allow sequential engagement, enabling students to plan, execute, and evaluate campaigns thoroughly. The concept of a 360-degree experience indicates that students perceive a longer course duration as essential for achieving a complete understanding of the PR process. Similarly, Abena noted that:

“Longer duration ensures students experience the full campaign lifecycle.”

Her reflection reinforces the idea that time constraints in shorter courses may limit experiential learning, preventing students from engaging with critical stages such as implementation and evaluation. Extending the course would provide an opportunity for sustained practice, reflection, and iterative learning. Collectively, these narratives suggest that participants interpreted extended timelines as a means of enhancing the depth and quality of learning. The emergent theme emphasizes that sufficient time allocation is critical for enabling students to engage meaningfully with all components of a campaign, thereby fostering professional readiness and competence in public relations practice.

4.7.2 Building Professional Partnerships

Participants highlighted the value of building stronger connections between students and external organizations, emphasizing how partnerships with real-world agencies enhance the authenticity and practical relevance of the service-learning experience. Their reflections suggest that engagement with professional partners provides students with exposure to industry standards, operational processes, and applied skills that complement classroom learning. Elikem stated that:

“Linking students to agencies like Ghana Enterprise Agency would bridge the gap between classroom learning and actual PR practice.”

His comment highlights the perception that experiential partnerships serve as a critical conduit between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By working alongside professional agencies, students can observe and participate in authentic public relations processes, gaining insights that are difficult to replicate in classroom settings alone. Similarly, Emerald noted that:

“More collaboration with real-world organizations makes the course more authentic.”

Her reflection reinforces the importance of practical engagement in creating meaningful learning experiences. Collaboration with external partners not only exposes students to professional practices but also fosters skills in communication, negotiation, and stakeholder management within real-world contexts. Together, these narratives indicate that participants interpreted strengthened partnerships as essential for bridging theory and practice. The emergent theme suggests that incorporating sustained collaboration with industry partners can enhance course authenticity, deepen learning outcomes, and better prepare students for professional practice in public relations.

4.7.3 Increasing Program Recognition

Participants emphasized the importance of increasing the visibility and recognition of the service-learning project, noting that formal acknowledgment of student efforts can motivate engagement, foster a sense of accomplishment, and demonstrate the value of community-based initiatives.

Their reflections suggest that recognition mechanisms contribute to both individual motivation and the broader legitimacy of the program within academic and professional contexts. Yaw observed that:

“A trophy system for best-performing groups would motivate students and showcase community relations work.”

His statement highlights the potential of tangible rewards to incentivize high performance while simultaneously raising awareness of the project’s impact. The focus on showcasing work suggests that recognition can serve both educational and public relations purposes, reinforcing the relevance of students’ contributions to the wider community. Similarly, Kojo noted that:

“When alumni and industry professionals take part in award ceremonies, it can inspire new students.”

His reflection underscores the value of involving external stakeholders in celebrating student achievements, creating role models, and fostering networks that connect current students with the professional field. This approach enhances program visibility and reinforces its practical significance. Collectively, these narratives indicate that participants interpreted visibility and recognition as critical for motivating students, promoting professional standards, and strengthening the program’s reputation. The emergent theme suggests that structured recognition strategies, including awards and stakeholder engagement, can enhance the educational and community impact of service-learning initiatives.

4.8 Chapter Summary

Overall, the findings demonstrate that participation in the service-learning project significantly shaped students’ professional development, critical thinking, and understanding of community relations practice. Participants reported that the experience enhanced their career clarity, enabling some to identify preferred professional pathways, while others discovered latent skills, such as graphic design, campaign coordination, and multitasking, that they had not previously recognized. The project also provided opportunities for applying classroom knowledge in authentic, real-world contexts, fostering experiential learning that deepened comprehension, strengthened skill retention, and promoted reflective practice.

While participants highlighted substantial transformative benefits, they also noted challenges related to time constraints, resource limitations, and structural or institutional barriers, which occasionally restricted the scope and depth of their engagement. Participants offered constructive recommendations for strengthening the course, including extending project timelines, building stronger professional partnerships, and enhancing program visibility. These insights underscore the value of structured support, adequate resources, equitable leadership, and practical feedback in maximizing the educational and professional benefits of service-learning initiatives.

Collectively, the findings illustrate that service-learning in public relations education provides a rich, multifaceted learning environment that cultivates professional competence, reflective thinking, and career readiness, while also offering opportunities for continuous program improvement. These insights provide the foundation for the discussion in Chapter Five, which situates the findings within existing literature and considers practical implications for PR education.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of public relations students participating in a service-learning course at a public university in Ghana, with a focus on how they interpreted and made meaning of these experiences. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the study's findings, highlighting patterns and insights emerging from participants' reflections. In addition to summarizing the key findings, this chapter situates the results within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, linking students' experiences to broader issues in public relations education, experiential learning, and professional development. The discussion draws conclusions that address the study's research objectives and questions, providing implications for enhancing service-learning pedagogy and supporting the professional growth of PR students.

5.2 Overview of key findings

The findings of this study reveal how public relations students experienced and made meaning of their participation in the service-learning project, highlighting the interplay between academic learning, practical engagement, and personal development. These findings directly address the study's three research questions, showing how experiential work shaped students' understanding of PR theory and practice, their skill development, and emerging professional identities. Five superordinate themes emerged from the analysis, capturing the developmental and interpretative processes through which students navigated the project.

The first theme, Service-Learning as Transformational, addresses research question one by demonstrating how students interpreted hands-on engagement as both affirming and challenging. Participants described a shift from initial uncertainty toward growing confidence as they applied course concepts, interacted with stakeholders, and confronted real professional expectations. The experiential learning enabled them to internalize theory, develop practical skills, and appreciate the relevance of classroom knowledge in authentic professional contexts. The second theme, Leadership, Organization, and Team Dynamics also linked to research question one, this theme highlights students' experiences of collaboration, shared decision-making, and leadership within the project. Participants described leadership as negotiated and fluid, shaped by peer interactions and group pressures. Navigating team dynamics helped them understand organizational behaviour, interpersonal negotiation, and the collaborative nature of professional PR work. The third theme, Understanding Community Relations Practice, addressing research question two, and illustrates how students connected theoretical knowledge with the realities of community-based public relations practice. Participants reflected on stakeholder engagement, ethical and context-sensitive communication, strategic planning, and message development. The theme demonstrates how experiential learning enabled students to interpret PR theory through authentic practice, fostering professional judgment and applied competence. The fourth theme, Project Constraints and Adaptive Problem-Solving addresses research questions one and two, capturing how structural and logistical challenges such as limited time, resource scarcity, and academic obligations shaped participants' experiences. Students described developing resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills as they negotiated these constraints.

The theme highlights how confronting real-world limitations contributed to professional readiness and reflective practice. The fifth theme, Vision for Course Improvement and Future Adaptations, corresponds to research question three. This theme captures participants' forward-thinking perspectives on ways to enhance the service-learning course. Students proposed measures such as extending the project timeline, fostering stronger partnerships with professional organizations, and increasing the program's visibility to optimize learning outcomes and professional development. Their accounts suggest that students are beginning to clarify their career paths, acknowledge their own capabilities, and demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the course remains meaningful and impactful for future cohorts. Together, these five themes show that participation in the service-learning project fostered transformative learning, professional skill development, and emerging career identities. Students' experiences illustrate that experiential engagement not only reinforced theoretical understanding but also nurtured confidence, adaptability, and reflective insight, bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world professional practice.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the key findings in relation to the study's purpose, which was to explore how public relations students at a Ghanaian public university experience and make meaning of a service-learning course, and to address gaps identified in the problem statement, including limited experiential learning, theory-practice disconnect, and lack of student-driven insights into course design.

5.3.1 Service- Learning as Transformational

The first major finding shows that students experienced the service-learning project as profoundly transformational, directly addressing the study's purpose of understanding students' meaning-making processes. Through learning by doing, discovery of hidden competencies, shaping career direction, and theory meets practice, participants reported growth not only in skills but also in confidence, professional identity, and career orientation. This process of shifting perceptions echoes the findings of Chan et al. (2021), who observed that students' attitudes toward service-learning evolve positively after participation. However, unlike Chan et al. (2021) study's focus on attitudinal change, the present study goes further to reveal how these transformations occur through deep reflection, meaning-making, and re-evaluation of assumptions. Within Mezirow's framework, transformation arises when learners engage in critical reflection and dialogue that challenge prior beliefs. The current study supports this view, as students reported that engaging with real clients prompted them to reconsider preconceived notions about professional communication and to reframe their understanding of public relations practice as ethically and socially grounded. This finding diverges from Huang (2024), whose quasi-experimental study quantified short-term gains in public service motivation but found those effects unsustainable over time. In contrast, this qualitative inquiry captures enduring internal shifts in identity and mindset, highlighting that transformation is not merely behavioural but deeply cognitive and affective, hence an outcome observable only through reflective exploration. The findings also reinforce experiential learning theory by illustrating how students moved through Kolb's four learning stages: concrete experience (working with real clients), reflective observation (journaling and class discussions), abstract conceptualization (connecting practice to theory), and active experimentation (adapting strategies for future projects).

The cyclical nature of this process demonstrates that reflection is not a one-off activity but a continual interpretive loop. Similar to Muturi et al. (2013), who found that students' motivations and conceptual understanding shape engagement, the present study shows that reflection transforms not only motivation but also shape professional identity, thereby bridging personal meaning with academic and career development. Thus, Superordinate Theme 1 validates that experiential, community-based PR education can produce developmental outcomes beyond technical skills to shaping professional identity, self-efficacy, and long-term career development.

5.3.2 Leadership, Organization, and Team Dynamics

The second theme highlights the complexity of collaborative work in a service-learning context. including leadership structure, collaboration, role strain, workload pressure, and conflict resolution illustrate the social and organizational dimensions of experiential learning. Under Kolb's model, these processes form part of reflective observation, where students evaluate group dynamics and their roles. Some also engaged in active experimentation by adjusting collaboration strategies, and redistributing tasks. From the transformative perspective, students' experiences prompted reassessment of assumptions about leadership, fairness, accountability, and group work. This aligns with Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection and potentially transformative shifts (Mezirow, 1991). By documenting not only successful collaboration but also the tensions and emotional labour of teamwork, this theme addresses a gap in PR service-learning literature as most prior research focuses on skill acquisition or civic outcomes (Farmer et al., 2016; Place, 2018), with limited attention to how students experience and negotiate group dynamics in real settings. Thus, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal and organizational challenges inherent in collaborative PR projects.

5.3.3 Understanding Community Relations Practice

The third theme underscores students' evolving conceptualization of public relations as theory-driven, message-focused activity to a complex, contextual, and ethically grounded field of community relations. Participants recognized PR work as involving stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, ethical decision-making, adaptation to community norms, and relational maintenance. This progression reflects Kolb's abstract conceptualisation (rethinking what PR means) and moves toward active experimentation (designing and executing context-sensitive campaigns). From the transformative lens, participants reported changed perspectives and came to appreciate ethics, authenticity, and the social responsibilities of PR demonstrating perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). While earlier work by Shea et al. (2023) and Huda et al. (2018) highlights civic and ethical outcomes, few explore student reflections and meaning-making around professional competencies in PR practice. This result thus sheds information on how PR students interpret community relations work in real contexts, which directly addresses a gap in literature.

5.3.4 Project Constraints and Adaptive Problem-Solving

Theme four brings attention to structural, logistical, and institutional limitations. The theme highlights limited time, data collection difficulties, resource shortages, and conflicting academic responsibilities. Participants described how these constraints affected scope, quality, emotional well-being, and learning depth. From the ELT perspective, these constraints forced students into adaptive active experimentation, by improvising solutions, prioritizing tasks, and navigating constraints while maintaining project integrity. From a transformative perspective, some students reframed such constraints as realistic aspects of professional practice, thereby expanding their understanding of the field's demands and cultivating resilience.

By foregrounding these realities, this theme fills another important gap in PR service-learning literature. While many studies emphasise benefits, few interrogate the challenges and constraints that shape learning outcomes, especially in developing-economy contexts, where institutional and resource constraints may be more acute (Thompson, 2018; Muturi et al., 2013).

5.3.5 Vision for Course Improvement and Future Adaptations

Finally, the fifth theme captures students' forward-looking, reflective suggestions about how the service-learning course could be improved and institutionalized. Participants reflected that extended duration, stronger community partnerships, recognition, and enhanced visibility would help ensure the course's sustainability and increase its educational and social impact. This reflects a level of critical reflection central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), where learners evaluate not only their personal growth but also the structure and effectiveness of the educational system itself. The students' recommendations offer practical insight for program design, addressing a gap noted by Akpabio (2012) and Thompson (2018) concerning the absence of student-driven suggestions for course improvement and sustainability.

5.4 Implications of the Study

The findings of this study hold significant implications for public relations education, students, the PR industry, and institutional policy, and provide several practical recommendations for enhancing service-learning initiatives.

1. Implications for Public Relations Education

The study demonstrates the critical value of integrating service-learning into PR curricula as a structured pedagogical strategy.

By engaging students in real-world projects, educators can cultivate professional competencies, reflective thinking, and ethical awareness. Systematically embedding experiential learning across courses can better prepare students for industry demands and strengthen the application of theoretical knowledge in practical contexts.

2. Implications for Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

Service-learning provides opportunities for students to develop teamwork, leadership, and stakeholder engagement skills while reflecting critically on their experiences. The curriculum should explicitly integrate reflective exercises and self-assessment to foster personal and professional growth, enhance problem-solving abilities, and encourage critical examination of assumptions.

3. Implications for Students

For students, the findings show that service-learning supports career clarity, the discovery of latent skills, and confidence-building in professional contexts. Participation in community projects allows students to understand the social and ethical dimensions of public relations practice, enhancing their adaptability, self-awareness, and readiness for future workplace challenges.

4. Implications for Industry and Community Partnerships

The study underscores the reciprocal benefits of service-learning for both students and community partners. Organizations gain valuable contributions from student involvement, while students acquire hands-on experience in real-world problem-solving. Sustained collaboration between universities and external partners is essential to maintain meaningful and mutually beneficial outcomes.

5. Implications for Policy and Institutional Support

Adequate logistical, administrative, and financial support is crucial for the success of service-learning programs. Institutional leaders and policymakers should prioritize resource allocation, formalize partnerships with community stakeholders, and recognize contributions from both students and partners to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these initiatives.

5.5 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and implications, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the design and implementation of service-learning within PR education:

1. Embed Experiential Learning Across the Curriculum

Service-learning should be positioned as an essential, recurring component of PR programs, allowing students to progressively develop technical skills, confidence, and professional identity through real client engagement at multiple stages of their education.

2. Enhance Pedagogical Support for Teamwork and Project Management

Universities should provide clear guidance on leadership roles, equitable distribution of responsibilities, and conflict management strategies to help students navigate team dynamics and reduce emotional strain during collaborative projects.

3. Integrate Ethics and Community Engagement Across Courses

Ethics, stakeholder engagement, and community relations should be consistently reinforced across both theoretical and practical coursework to prepare students for the relational and moral complexities of PR practice.

4. Strengthen Logistical and Administrative Support

Adequate time allocation, reliable resources, and sustained community partnerships are essential to ensure service-learning projects are pedagogically meaningful and socially impactful.

5. Establish Mechanisms for Student Feedback and Reflection

Formal channels for reflection, feedback, and recognition should be incorporated into service-learning programs to facilitate continuous improvement, enhance relevance, and maintain program sustainability.

6. Encourage Longitudinal and Comparative Research

Future studies should explore service-learning across multiple institutions and track students over time to assess long-term impacts on professional development, ethical practice, and career preparedness. Investigating the perspectives of community partners and exploring hybrid or digital service-learning models are also recommended to expand the understanding and applicability of experiential learning in PR education.

5.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research are proposed. First, subsequent studies could examine service-learning initiatives across multiple institutions to identify common patterns, institutional differences, and contextual factors that influence learning outcomes. Comparative analyses would provide insights into how program design, community partnerships, and institutional culture shape students' experiences and professional development. Second, longitudinal research tracking students into internships or early career positions could offer a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of service-learning on skills acquisition, ethical reasoning, professional identity, and career readiness.

Such studies would illuminate how competencies developed through service-learning translate into practical workplace performance over time.

Third, exploring the perspectives of community partners and other stakeholders would enrich the understanding of service-learning outcomes. Investigating the experiences, expectations, and contributions of community organizations can provide a more holistic view of reciprocity, program impact, and partnership sustainability. Finally, future research could examine digital or hybrid models of service-learning, particularly in contexts where physical engagement is limited. These studies could identify innovative approaches that maintain the relational and experiential benefits of service-learning while adapting to evolving educational and technological landscapes. Collectively, these research directions would enhance the understanding of service-learning as a pedagogical strategy in public relations education and inform the design of more effective, sustainable, and impactful programs.

5.7 Conclusion

This study explored and interpreted the lived experiences of public relations students who participated in a community-based service-learning project. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research illuminated how students made meaning of their engagement and how the experience shaped their learning, professional identity, and understanding of PR practice. Findings demonstrate that service-learning facilitates a powerful shift from passive, classroom-based learning to active participation in real community contexts. Students applied theoretical concepts, developed confidence and self-awareness, and gained a deeper appreciation for the relational and ethical dimensions of PR work. Learning by doing emerged as central to students' growth, enabling the discovery of previously unrecognized

strengths and competencies. Teamwork provided both opportunities and challenges, highlighting the need for structured collaboration, supportive learning environments, and targeted skill development. Ethical considerations, stakeholder engagement, and community partnerships proved to be critical arenas for experiential learning, where students encountered the practical realities of PR practice. Students' suggestions for improving institutional support, extending contact hours, and sustaining partnerships further underscore the importance of creating conditions that enhance the quality and visibility of service-learning initiatives. Overall, this research demonstrates that service-learning is more than an instructional technique; it is a transformative educational process. By engaging students in authentic community contexts, service-learning promotes the integration of theory and practice, nurtures professional identity, and prepares emerging PR practitioners for the complex and dynamic demands of the profession. These insights contribute to both the academic literature and the practical design of service-learning programs, highlighting pathways for enhancing student learning, professional preparedness, and community impact.

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APPENDIXES

A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title: The Experiential Bridge: Exploring Students' Reflections On Service-Learning In Public Relations Education in Ghana.

Phenomenon of Interest: The Subjective Experience of Public Relations Students In A Full-Term Service-Learning Course.

Medium of Interview: Online (Google Meet)

[Warm-Up Question] As we begin, Can you describe the service-learning experience (Community Relations Course) you participated in?

(a) Could you describe the role you played in your team?

RQ 1. How do public relations students reflect on and make meaning of their participation in a service-learning project?

a. What were students' initial views about service-learning,

b. How has your view of service-learning changed after completing the community relations course?

c. How will you perceive the value of the service-learning experience (community relations course)

d. What are the benefits and positive outcomes you gained from participating in this service-learning project?

e. What were the challenges, difficulties, or obstacles you faced during the service-learning project?

f. If you could redesign any aspect of the program to make it better, what would it be and why?

RQ2: In what ways do students interpret and apply public relations theories in real-world contexts through service-learning?

- a. What were your expectation about participating in the service-learning component?
- b. How do you think those specific skills will be relevant to your future career or industry?
- c. How has the service-learning experience help you better understand and apply the concepts you learned in the classroom?

RQ3. How does reflective participation in a service-learning project contribute to students' professional competence and readiness for public relations practice?

- a. Were there any specific theoretical concepts that became clearer after applying them in the service setting?
- b. What practical skills did you develop or improve during the service-learning activity?

Please be assured that your confidentiality is guaranteed, as your answers would be anonymous and will only be used for research purposes. For more information contact;

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Appendix B: Summary of Themes, Clusters, and Interpretative Insights

Superordinate Theme	Cluster / Sub-theme	Interpretative Insight
Experiential Learning as Transformational	Learning by Doing	Hands-on engagement facilitated integration of theory and practice, improved comprehension and retention, and fostered ownership of learning.
	Discovery of Hidden Competencies	Participation enabled students to uncover previously unrecognized skills and talents, increasing self-confidence and career awareness.
	Shaping Career Direction	Direct involvement in PR tasks helped students clarify interests, identify preferred specialization areas, and develop professional identity.
	Theory Meets Practice	Applying theoretical models to real-world campaigns strengthened strategic thinking, operational understanding, and actionable knowledge.
Leadership, Organization, and Team Dynamics	Leadership Dynamics	Students experienced challenges with unclear roles and inequitable workload, emphasizing the importance of transparent structures in collaborative learning.
	Collaboration and Peer Learning	Peer interactions enhanced knowledge sharing, idea generation, and constructive critique, contributing to deeper learning.
	Workload and Role Strain	Balancing multiple responsibilities caused stress and fatigue, highlighting the need for structured support and time management.
	Conflict and Choices	Navigating disagreements fostered negotiation skills, collective problem-solving, and appreciation for inclusive decision-making.
Understanding Community Relations Practice	Complexity of PR Work	Students recognized PR as multidimensional, requiring evidence-based planning, contextual analysis, and strategic flexibility.
	Strengthening External Collaboration	Interaction with stakeholders developed practical relationship management and adaptive communication skills.
	Ethics and Context in Practice	Ethical considerations and situational appropriateness were central to professional judgment and responsible practice.
	Strategic Communication and Planning	Developing campaign strategies emphasized audience analysis, message framing, and operational precision.
Project Constraints and Adaptive Problem-Solving	Time Pressure	Short project timelines limited the scope of engagement, reinforcing the importance of realistic scheduling.
	Navigating Data Challenges	Conflicting data required analytical rigor, adaptability, and problem-solving skills.
	Working with Limited Resources	Scarcity of materials and institutional support encouraged innovation, improvisation, and resourceful decision-making.

	Balancing Multiple Demands	Managing academic and project responsibilities enhanced time management, prioritization, and strategic thinking.
Vision for Course Improvement and Future Adaptations	Expanding Learning Time	Longer project duration would allow sequential engagement, full implementation, and deeper skill development.
	Building Professional Partnerships	Collaboration with real-world organizations enhances authenticity, professional exposure, and career readiness.
	Increasing Program Recognition	Structured recognition promotes motivation, program legitimacy, and community impact visibility.

APPENDIX C

Double Hermeneutic Process Model

Recurrence of Participants Contributing to Superordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Participants Contributing	Number of Participants	Proportion (%)
Service- Learning as Transformational	Kojo, Emerald, Abena, Yaw, Elikem, Kwaku	6	100%
Leadership, Organization, and Team Dynamics	Yaw, Kojo, Abena, Emerald, Kwaku, Elikem	6	100%
Understanding Community Relations Practice	Abena, Kojo, Emerald, Kwaku, Yaw, Elikem	6	100%
Project Constraints and Adaptive Problem-Solving	Kojo, Abena, Elikem, Emerald, Kwaku, Yaw	6	100%
Vision for Course Improvement and Future Adaptations	Kwaku, Abena, Elikem, Yaw, Kojo, Emerald	6	100%