

Advocating social change online: Insights from PR Professionals situated in conservative contexts

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Abstract

In a conservative context such as the Middle East, this article provides evidence that public relations (PR) professionals in the Gulf region could, through the application of PR enablers guide organizations to partake in social media conversations to effect social change. In the Middle East, governmental policies on freedom of speech pose a major challenge that hinders online conversations, but social media strategies can encourage participation and respect cultural diversity. This shift aligns with a critical PR perspective, allowing PR professionals to mediate power struggles to address transformation and reform in the Middle East. A quantitative research approach was implemented using a web-based survey distributed among PR professionals working in the Middle East, and a realized sample of 233 respondents, who strongly represented the Gulf region, was obtained. An exploratory factor analysis highlighted prominent factors relating to critical PR enablers (power, persuasion, and advocacy) and considerations (challenges, antecedents, strategies, and cultural sensitivity) of participating in online conversations to build organization-public relationships (OPR) within a social media context. The study contributes to critical PR and OPR via social media in the Gulf Region of the Middle East, providing insights for PR professionals who find it challenging to advocate for specific social issues and to negotiate organizations' tolerance to participate in conversations on social media.

Keywords

critical PR, online organization-public relationships, social media, Middle East, Gulf region, social issues

1: Introduction

In the Middle East, where governments often restrict freedom of speech (Al-Shamsi, 2015), Public Relations (PR) professionals are uniquely positioned to advocate for social issues (Benecke & Verwey, 2020; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; McCown, 2007; Meintjes, Niemann-Struweg, & De Wet, 2012; Minty, 2019; Verwey, Benecke, & Muir, 2017). Although the practice of advocating for social issues is not a new role for PR professionals, it is a point of research interest where PR professionals in Middle Eastern countries are faced with a conservative culture where online conversations are monitored. Moghadam (2010) explains that Middle Eastern countries have been observed to promote its Islamic religious ideologies, closed-culture, authoritarian governments, and unceasing conflicts. These dominant power structures resort to silencing marginalized voices and do not tolerate public conversations on sensitive social issues or consent freedom of speech, which denies the basic right of

self-governance (Al-Shamsi, 2015). In this regard, Middle Eastern governments who apply strict Islamic laws, govern public expression of dissent and block users accounts and even arrest citizens if they speak out against the ruling monarchs or inspire any ideology that opposes the government's policy against certain social issues (Diwan, 2017; George & Leidner, 2018; Jones, 2013; Katzman, 2017).

Based on the above contextualization, PR professionals in the Middle Eastern region are challenged by volatile environments in which there are ongoing conflicts and wars. However, PR in the Middle East plays an indispensable role in guiding organizations to partake in conversations in this complex social climate. Information and communication technology such as social media has captured the attention of organizations in the Middle East, by contributing to the evolution of PR practices from monologue to dialogue and from control to engagement. Middle Eastern organizations are also considering PR to fulfil the role of social mediator and to use social networks to formally (associated with the organization) or informally (not associated with the organization) interact with its publics (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014). It is well known that social media facilitates communicative interactions between the organization and its publics which creates a public sphere that challenges prevailing discourses around social issues (Masip, Ruiz-Caballero, & Suau, 2019).

Organizations cannot exist without relational connections with their public (Mohammed, 2014; Shamsan & Otieno, 2015). Within the Middle Eastern context, organizations have become increasingly concerned and have in most cases become withheld in participating in online conversations that have been identified as a sensitive social issue by their respective government. Thus, when organizations do participate in online conversations about specific issues it contributes to the legitimization of the issue which empowers the publics with entitlement and moral inclusiveness (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Albishri, Proverbsa, Kiouisis, & Alahmarib, 2019).

Against this background, the article explores critical PR in the Middle East, as an example of a conservative context. Critical PR departs from functionalist PR approaches by, essentially, outlining organizations' role in society. Critical PR advocates that the PR professional act as the facilitator of debate, dialogue and even dissent, and to encourage organizations to participate in public conversations to develop long-term organizational-public relationships (OPR) that benefit society. It is within this context that this article explores critical PR enablers (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and considerations (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017; Storie, 2015) to building OPRs by PR professionals in the Middle East. Little research has been conducted to obtain insight as to how critical PR enablers could advance Middle Eastern PR professionals' abilities to advocate for social issues and to encourage organizations in conservative contexts to partake in online conversations regarding social issues (Al-Shamsi, 2015; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

The article discusses the results obtained from an exploratory factor analysis by means of a self-administrated web-based survey distributed among PR professionals working in the Middle East to

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measure the pragmatic relevance of selected PR enablers and considerations to facilitate online conversations regarding social issues. The results highlighted those respondents, with a dominant representation from the Gulf region, advocate for social issues relating to jobs for the youth and empowering females, which indicates that organizations not only tolerate but also participate in social media conversations about specific social issues. Furthermore, the results indicated that respondents do apply PR enablers such as power (information sharing, trust, mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions, interactive communication); persuasion (debating social issues, resolving conflict, creating active groups, positive coercion), and advocacy (social responsibility, social role). The results also confirmed challenges (perception of social media, restrictions on free-speech, training, content and timing), antecedents (expectations, interdependency), strategies (employees' participation, public participation in decision-making, transparency), and cultural sensitivity (building networks, cultural norms) as considerations when building online OPRs.

In essence, this article contributes to the body of knowledge on the relevance of critical PR in conservative contexts. In doing so, this article specifically showcases how social media could be used as a tool to legitimize social issues and build online relationships with marginalized social groups.

2: Literature Review

2.1. Social issues in the Middle East in the social media context

PR professionals in the Middle East are strategically positioned to bring social change especially in countries that are not traditionally tolerant of online debates or criticism. Middle Eastern governments are seemingly reluctant to accept critique related to their policies on human rights and freedom of speech (Al-Shamsi, 2015). Minty (2019) asserts social media has increasingly been used in the Middle East to facilitate debate and support for human rights campaigns which have presented an opportunity for PR professionals to advocate for social issues through social media. Consequently, social media has an unprecedented influence in developing human rights activist groups in the region, including prominent online activist movements that challenge power structures and inspire transformation (Gheytauchi & Moghadam, 2014). As social media is regarded as platforms for raising social issues and public debates (Tétreault, Meyer, & Rizzo, 2009), the Middle Eastern publics, who are active on social media, have been standing up for critical social causes such as human rights, democracy, transparency, and gender equality (Hajj, Haddad, & Karmouni, 2016). One such example was the civil, political, and social rights that were significant factors in 2010 that led to mass social protests known as the Arab Spring across the Middle East (Gheytauchi & Moghadam, 2014). Publics in the Middle East use social media to bring situations and causes directly to international public attention and allow marginalized groups voices to be heard and for events to be witnessed instantaneously (Alfoory, 2014).

Topal (2019) explains that the Islamic Wahabism ideology has strengthened local household rituals and norms that subjugate women. This has led to more women's organizations emerging that advocate for family law reform, equal nationality rights and laws against domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as economic and political participation (Moghadam, 2010). Young women have emerged and are leading movements of change, especially in Middle East countries like Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen (Satterfield, 2013).

The constant conflict and instability in the Middle East have been noted by Schwab and Sala-I-Martin (2016) to completely undermine its progress, as massive numbers of refugee's spill over into bordering countries and place considerable strain on their economies. This has created a disproportionately high level of unemployment among the younger generation (International Monetary Fund, 2016; Zuazua, Willen, Olivari, & Al-Yousef, 2014).

Curtis and Geagan (2016) emphasize that the refugees crisis in the Middle East poses significant problems for the humanitarian assistance sector, with a particular focus on addressing the multifaceted requirements of refugees with disabilities (whose population has seen a significant increase as a result of prolonged periods of armed conflict in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Sudan).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen have a significant number of registered migrants, with domestic workers comprising the majority. These domestic workers earn less than half of the average wages, face long and unpredictable working hours, and have limited protection under national labor legislations, making them one of the least safeguarded groups of workers (Briggs, 2014).

Based on this context, some of the observed social issues that are evident in social media conversations in the Middle East include advocating to empower women, supporting refugees and persons with disabilities, jobs for the youth, and protection domestic workers. In this context there is a specific focus on which social issues PR professionals in the Middle East would advocate for and what OPR approaches they would consider to guide their organization to participate in online conversations.

2.2. Critical PR professionals in opposition to cultural traditions in the Middle East

The literature verifies that critical theory and the socio-cultural turn have influenced the field of PR and that it encourages alternative ways of thinking, which challenges traditional mainstream PR practices (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Benecke & Verwey, 2020). The term 'Critical Theory' refers to a logical methodology that interrogates the discipline and practice of organization-centric PR practices (Tyma, 2008). In this regard, Tyma (2008:196) claims that "the driving focus of critical theory and those that practice it is to understand and change the same social institutions (whether they are grounded in business and commerce, government, entertainment, or education) that oppress one group

of people or class in favor of another”. The literature emphasizes that critical approaches to PR are practical for identifying and articulating the social and cultural issues in the PR profession; however, it does not provide solutions to these issues (Tyma, 2008). Therefore, a critical PR perspective promotes that PR professionals investigate how organizations practice PR to advance their hegemonic power and gain public consent to pursue their goals (Motion & Weaver, 2005). Reber and Berger (2006) as well as Verwey et al. (2017) claim that critical PR promotes the idea that an individual should critically interrogate issues such as power and dissent. Within a conservative and closed-cultural context PR professionals in the Middle East are observing and learning how Western societies are utilizing critical PR enablers to resist dominant power structures through online networks. This has inspired critical PR professionals to challenge assumptions, integrate paradigms, critique government policies or practices, and draw inspiration from the intellectual sociological endeavor referred to as Critical Theory (L’Etang, 2005). Hence, as stated by Gezgin (2019), the presence of PR professionals in the Middle East who engage in critical PR activities presents a challenge to prevailing power structures. These critical PR professionals are inclined to address conflicts arising from consumer, labor, citizen, gender, environmental, and social issues that are initiated by the very entities, be it organizations or governments, that PR are intended to safeguard, advocate for, and occasionally whitewash.

2.3. Critical PR enablers

Power, persuasion, and advocacy, according to Coombs and Holladay (2012), enable and advance conversations on social issues. They argue that these three elements, conceptualized in this article as ‘critical PR enablers’ assist PR professionals to challenge organization-centric (functionalist) PR approaches. These enablers could be considered a starting point to understanding how PR professionals within the Middle East could advocate for organizations to participate in legitimizing social issues as part of building online OPRs.

2.3.1. Power

PR has been criticized as a hegemonic practice that benefits dominant power structures (Gezgin, 2019). Critical PR professionals focus their conversations mainly on the power issues of various players in the public sphere, rather than the issues of a privileged individual (Dolea, 2017). Power relations are subjected to various methods of resistance (Foucault, 2000). Wherever resistance exists, there are mechanisms of power, which not only operate on a macro level but also on a variety of micro and local levels (Stoddart, 2007). Where organizations are observed to be using knowledge to dominate, resistance is formulated through disseminating critical knowledge that elevates truth, revealing the intention of domination (Rouse, 2005). A critical PR professional would therefore resist domination as it fundamentally overpowers people (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). It is observed that, when dominant structures of power disregard public issues, those publics will emerge as activists that formulate tactics

and strategies to force the dominant structure to engage in dialogue (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). It is worth noting that discourse can generate and reinforce power – but it can also expose and weaken the power, making it vulnerable and unstable (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Thus, critical PR indicates that PR professionals would define “power as the inner power of one to resist the subjugation from a more powerful party” and to resist the practice of empowering marginalized societies to join the dominant coalition (Cheng, 2016:92).

2.3.2. Persuasion

Persuasion (influencing publics’ attitudes or behaviors) and power (creation of hegemonic domination) are necessary elements that a PR professional needs to consider when advocating for social issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Critical PR professionals are motivated towards informing and persuading individuals to have a specific perception (Tankosic, Ivetic, & Vucurevic, 2016), which is essentially a message that carries a particular point of view or favored action that the receiver needs to accept voluntarily (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). The aim of communication in a relational perspective is to persuade others to work towards a unified objective (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Therefore, critical PR is a process of persuasion that involves interactive communication (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Critical PR professionals use persuasive strategies to alter perceptions to favor the cause (Perloff, 2003). Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) assert that one can assume that individuals respond to persuasion that offers to assist them in meeting their desires and needs. These authors add that it is essential for persuaders to integrate the persuadee’s needs – persuasion is then a situational transactive dependency.

2.3.3. Advocacy

PR professionals advocating for social issues compel organizations to initiate dialogue and debate issues within the public sphere (McCown, 2007). Critical PR reflects resistance to dominant power structures; therefore, critical PR professionals would advocate for the voices of the marginalized publics and promote dialogue to resolve conflict (McCown, 2007; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Invernizzi and Romenti (2015) propose that PR professionals need to be part of the top management to enhance their strategic position within the organization to advocate for social issues and to influence the decision-making process. This enables the PR professional to have access to the decision-makers to initiate debate and to negotiate with organizations to partake in online conversations regarding social issues on social media (Meintjes et al., 2012; Verwey et al., 2017). Critical PR professionals reject one-way communication (Holtzhausen, 2002) and act as the organization’s conscience (Verwey et al., 2017). They also drive the organization out of its comfort zone towards a dynamic state that is mediated through dialogue (Greeff, 2015). Critical PR professionals focus on power issues and legitimizing social issues in a public sphere (Auter, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2012), as well as strive for ethical decision-making

(Tyma, 2008). Furthermore, critical PR professionals ensure that all voices are heard, respected, and taken into consideration (Toledano, 2016). They also strategically use rhetoric and purposeful communication to build their coalition with marginalized public groups (Sommerfeldt, 2012). In this context, the critical PR professional will resist power structures in the organization, even though they are part of the dominant coalition (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002).

2.4. Considerations in participating in online OPRs through social media

Online conversations through social media have ushered in a powerful force that allows Middle East societies to acknowledge and energize systemic change (Sreberny, 2015). Social media serves as a platform for negotiation, and previously silenced voices have joined conversations across continents (Douai & Nofal, 2012). In addition, social media has transformed the way individuals represent their identities and communicate their socio-political positions (Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb & Schossböck, 2015). According to Hussain (2021), social media has empowered local communities to reaffirm their role in society and impact politics. Even though Middle Eastern countries do not tolerate freedom of speech, social media platforms provide community members with an opportunity to participate in conversations about specific social issues.

Therefore, this article proposes an alternate viewpoint that advocates for the inclusion of critical PR enablers as a means to address organization-centric PR practices. There has been a shift towards a more critical social PR role for organizations, which allows active engagement in legitimizing social issues. This is achieved by means of participating in social issue conversations on social media as part of their online OPR strategy.

Bashir and Aldaihani (2017) advocate that PR professionals face considerable challenges in developing effective social media strategies for organizations to participate in online conversations. Furthermore, Storie (2015) emphasizes that antecedents also play a key factor in developing online OPRs within the Middle East. Thus, as a starting point to understand the considerations of online OPRs, this article also attempts to outline the challenges, antecedents and strategies associated with OPR strategies within a Middle Eastern context.

2.4.1. Challenges

A key challenge that should be considered when devising OPR strategies, is that organizational decision-makers may perceive social media interactions as an invitation to open criticism (Tankosic et al., 2016). In this regard, a limitation and concern of building online OPRs in a Middle Eastern context is to overcome the decision-maker's anxieties relating to negative perceptions associated with conversations about social issues on social media (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011). It may also be challenging for PR professionals who spearhead the organization's online PR activities to contribute to

the evolving discourse with the right online groups and promote the right conversations at the right time (Tankosic et al., 2016).

2.4.2. Antecedents

Antecedents, in the context of OPRs, refer to a set of factors that include social and cultural norms, collective views and expectations, resource demands, perceptions of the unpredictable environment, and legal or voluntary requirements (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). The most accepted antecedents of OPRs are expectations, trustworthiness, interdependency, and cultural norms (Cheng, 2016; Syafrizal & Ismail, 2017; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Yeh, 2017).

2.4.3. Strategies

Relationship cultivation strategies are put in place to produce relationship quality outcomes, developed on plans that build and sustain quality relationships (Ki & Hon, 2009). OPR strategies should include assuring public participation in the organization's decision-making process, practicing openness, stimulating the public and organization to discuss issues together, building social networks, allowing access and consent for employees to participate in social media inquiries about the organization (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010).

3. Research questions

Based on the above contextualization, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Do PR professionals situated in the Middle East guide organizations on how to partake in online conversations regarding social issues on social media?

RQ2: What social issues seems to be accepted as topics of conversation on social media by Middle East organizations?

RQ3: Do PR professionals regard critical PR enablers as important when encouraging organizations to partake in online conversations regarding social issues?

RQ4: What challenges, antecedents, and strategies (as considerations to building OPRs) are considered by PR professionals in the Middle East in their OPR and social media strategies?

4. Research methodology

An exploratory, quantitative study was conducted using a web-based, self-administered survey. This method enabled the researcher to overcome the geographical challenge of targeting PR professionals in the Middle Eastern region. The unit of analysis was PR professionals in the Middle East, as the study aimed to explore their perceptions of critical PR enablers (power, persuasion, and

advocacy) and their considerations (challenges, antecedents, and strategies) to building OPRs through participating in conversations about social issues in the Middle East.

An online, web-based survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and consisted of three sections containing 41 closed-ended statement-based questions presented in both English and Arabic. The first section consisted of two prequalifying questions to determine if respondents had experience in PR and if they are mandated to manage their organization's OPRs through social media. All responses that did not meet these prequalifying criteria were excluded; this was determined by the respondents' answers that they gave in the prequalifying questions. The second category of the questionnaire consisted of biographical questions relating to geographical representation, working environment, qualification in PR and communication, years of experience and managerial level in organization. The third and fourth sections of the survey utilized a five-point Likert scale which consisted of closed-ended questions that were informed by the literature. The third section, aimed at exploring the perceptions of critical PR enablers such as power, persuasion, and advocacy. In alignment with the literature the last category explored the considerations to partake in online conversations regarding social issues with a particular focus on what challenges, antecedent and strategies were considered when developing OPRs for social media. In order to increase the reliability of the web-based survey the questionnaire was pilot tested (Donley, 2012; Ruane, 2016) with eight selected PR experts located in the United Arab Emirates, Sultanate of Oman, and Saudi Arabia who served as an expert panel to evaluate the questionnaire. The outcome of the pilot study was adequate with no changes to the language, terminology, or format. To improve the level of validity (Donley, 2012) a statistician evaluated the statistical correctness of the survey in order to facilitate the exploratory factor analysis.

A purposive and convenient non-probability sampling method was applied by identifying potential PR professionals situated in the Middle East through their online LinkedIn profiles. This was established by means of a keyword search on LinkedIn (PR, social media, and communication and the Middle East) to find individual profiles of PR professionals who manage OPRs. The identified PR professionals were only approached if he/she worked in one of 31 Middle Eastern countries and if the person had experience in PR (job titles and education) with a particular focus on social media management. Hence, a non-probability sampling method was adequate as the researcher's discretion was used to select individuals to be in the sample (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Once a sample of possible respondents were identified, a request to participate in the study was sent to these identified PR professionals via the LinkedIn messaging platform.

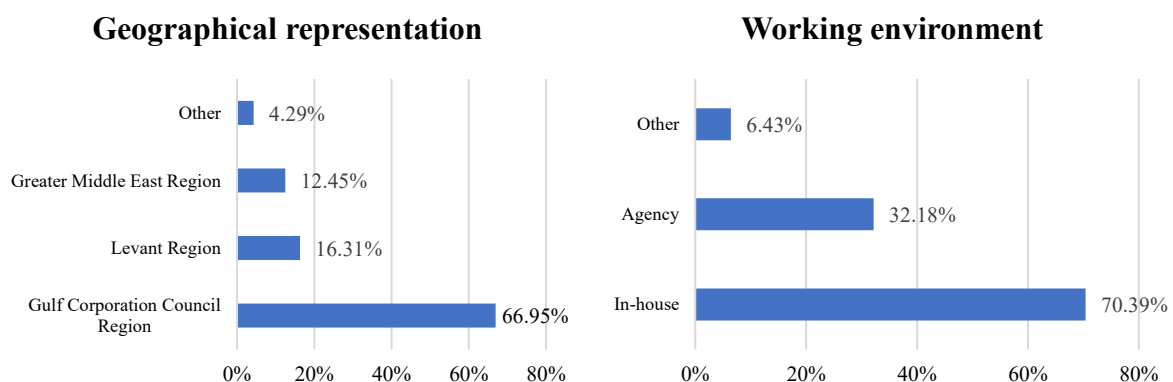
Data was collected over a period of six weeks. Several follow-ups had to be done over this period to ensure enough responses were collected. When new data was obtained for the last eight days and it did not provide significant changes to the existing responses collected, it was perceived that data

saturation was achieved. In total, 338 responses were collected. However, only 233 of these respondents completed the survey in full, which resulted in a final realised sample of 233 responses.

SAS, version 9.4 aided the data analysis process. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate the frequencies of the biographical data of the realized sample (Mi & Zhang, 2017). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to explore the interrelationships of the critical PR enablers and the considerations of online OPRs. This method was selected because the measures were not standardized; therefore, exploratory factor analysis was used as a starting point (Gatignon, 2014). The following steps were implemented during the exploratory factor analysis: Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) was used to select the number of factors to retain (Forina, Armanino, Lanteri, & Leardi, 2005). The Varimax rotation method was applied to assist in interpreting the factor loadings (Forina et al., 2005). Only factors with latent roots or eigenvalues greater than one were considered significant, and all factors with eigenvalues less than one were deemed insignificant and disregarded (Auerswald & Moshagen, 2019). A Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to measure internal consistency of the identified factors that comprised three or more items (Kashani, Nikravan, & Najafi, 2018). Pearson Correlation Coefficient were calculated for linear correlations between two items within a factor (Zhiyong, Hongdong, Ruili, Kewen, Qiang, & Yuhai, 2019). Pearson Correlation Coefficient scores ranged from 0.2–0.4, representing a weak (0.1–0.2) to moderate (0.3–0.5) correlation that is still within an acceptable range. As the study utilized a non-probability sampling technique the results cannot be generalized to all PR professionals within the Middle East.

4.1. Profile of the realized sample

Figure 1 depicts the biographical data that represent the profile of the respondents.



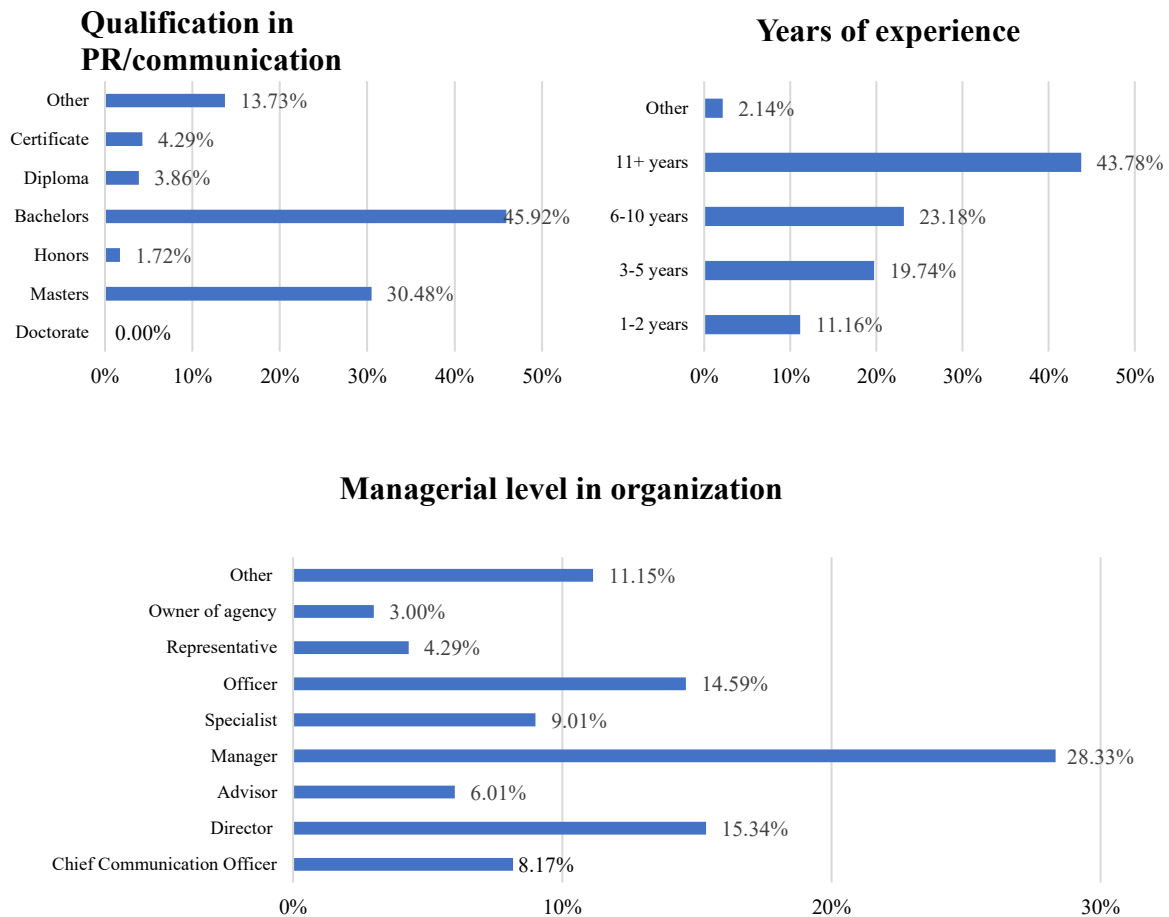


Figure 1: Biographical data of the realized sample (Source: Authors)

The Middle East regionalization of the response groups for reporting and interpretation is categorized into three regions, mainly the Gulf Cooperation Council Region (GCCR) which consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; the Levant Region (LR) consisting of Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey; and the Greater Middle East Region (GMER) comprising of Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Djibouti, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Yemen (Angrist, 2013; Freitag & Stokes, 2009). The biographical data in Figure 1 do not include gender, as the researcher was mainly interested in the perceptions of PR professionals as a profession.

Figure 1 depicts that majority of the respondents (66.95%) were geographically located within the GCCR which highlights a bias tendency towards the results comprising of two-thirds of the respondents. Although the intention was to obtain insight from PR professionals in the Middle East, this figure implies that the results of this study are predominantly representative of the Gulf region and does not provide a holistic perspective of PR professionals in the Middle East. The biographical data indicates that 60.85% of the respondents worked in a managerial role or higher which is consistent with

Invernizzi and Romenti (2015) recommendation that PR professionals should be part of the top management to enhance their influence to advocate for social issues and to influence the decision-making process. Figure 1 also depicts the respondents' qualifications in the disciplines of PR and communications and confirms that majority of the respondents (78,12%) held a bachelor's degree or higher which highlights their baseline and familiarity of the profession. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents (66,96%) had more than six years' experience in managing online OPRs within a social media context which indicates that majority of the respondents had the necessary knowledge, experience and expertise to contribute to the study.

5. Reporting of the results

Results of the online survey pertaining to the outlined research questions are as follows.

RQ1: Do PR professionals situated in the Middle East guide organizations on how to partake in online conversations regarding social issues on social media?

RQ2: What social issues seems to be accepted as topics of conversation on social media by Middle East organizations?

In the context of RQ1 and RQ2, the literature emphasized that PR professionals utilizing critical PR would take on more of a social role within the organization when advocating to decision-makers to partake in online conversations regarding social issues. The following results showcase the social issues on which respondents guide their organizations when partaking in conversations on social media. These results therefore outline which social issues are tolerated. Therefore, this is also indicative in which social issues Middle Eastern organizations participate publicly on social media within a Middle Eastern context.

75.54% indicated that jobs for the youth was the most prominent social issue, which they would lead their organization to participate in online conversations as part of their online OPR strategy disseminated on social media. This is in line with the literature, which indicates that the Middle East youth expressed genuine anxiety about their lack of opportunities or jobs and that there has been a mass emigration by Middle East youth. For 61.80% of the respondents, empowering females was an important topic to participate as part of their OPR strategy. This is also in line with the literature that indicates that females in the Middle East have garnered a great deal of public interest as they have publicly challenged governments' power and the masculinist hegemony (Sreberny, 2015). Results of other social issues that participants guided their organizations in (which was also asked in the questionnaire), include the less privileged represented 42.49% of respondents, while 37.34% rated persons with disabilities, 33.05% rated domestic workers, and 21.03% rated supporting refugees. There was also an 'Other' option integrated in the survey where respondents could provide alternative social

issues, and these included social and environmental responsibility, human rights, and diversity in the workplace.

Results of the exploratory factor analysis pertaining to RQ3 are provided next.

RQ3: Do PR professionals regard critical PR enablers as important when encouraging organizations to partake in online conversations regarding social issues on social issues?

The results indicate that specific critical PR enablers, namely, power, persuasion, and advocacy, could be regarded as a starting point to assist PR professionals in advocating for social issues within their respective organizations. The critical PR enablers, and statements that measured these enablers within the context of social media as outlined by the literature, in accordance with the labels that were created in the analysis, are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Critical PR (CPR) enablers

Label	Item*	Enablers
CPR1	I find it challenging to distribute information to the public through social media.	Power
CPR2	I attempt to facilitate internal conversations that address issues between the senior executive management and the young workforce.	
CPR3	I share specific information on social media to improve the public's perception of the organization.	
CPR4	I attempt to find common ground during an online debate between the organization and the public.	
CPR5	I attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public conversations.	Persuasion
CPR6	I challenge the employees within the organization/agency to be more involved in debating society's issues online.	
CPR7	I provide relevant evidence in support of a specific conversation on social media between the public and the organization.	
CPR8	I implement reward-driven social media campaigns.	
CPR9	I initiate online conversations on social media to resolve the conflict between the organization/agency and its publics.	Advocacy
CPR10	I use social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities.	
CPR11	I take guidance from professional associations, such as the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA).	
CPR12	I encourage my organization to take a position on specific causes that affect society.	
CPR13	I encourage ethical decision-making even when it causes resistance to the organization's executive management.	
CPR14	I believe that public debates on social media provide an opportunity for all the parties involved to share their stories.	
CPR15	I collaborate with other organizations/agencies to encourage collaborative efforts to resolve social issues.	
CPR16	I pay close attention to social issues developing in the country.	

*Alfoory, 2014; Antoniadis, 2008; Auter, 2016; Brinol, Tormala, & Petty, 2013; Daldal, 2014; Diwan, 2017; Dolea, 2017; Foucault, 1980; Freitag & Stokes, 2009; Friis, 2013; Grunig, 2009; Hallahan et al., 2007; Himelboim et al., 2014; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Kim, Kim, Tam, & Kim, 2015; Macagno & Walton, 2008; McCown, 2007; McLeod, 2014; Meyer, Meyer, & Rizzo, 2009; Moloney, McQueen, Surowiec, & Yaxley, 2013; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2004; Perloff, 2003; Prasad, 2011; Shalaby, 2015; Sommerfeldt, 2012; Tankosic et al., 2016; Titifanue, Kant, Finau, & Tarai, 2017; Torp, 2015; Tyma, 2008; Werder, 2015; Wiggill, 2011; Woodcraft, 2006; Zuazua et al., 2014.

The results in Table 2 showcase that there were consistencies within two factors and that the items identified within power and persuasion correlate with the broader description of critical PR enablers, specifically within the practice of encouraging organizations to participate in public conversations regarding specific social issues. Statements from Table 1 (CPR1,11,12,13,14) were double loaders and

were removed from the final factor analysis outlined in Table 2. It is worth mentioning that the exploratory factor analysis was repeated and produced the same results.

Table 2: Final factor solution: Critical PR (CPR) enablers

Rotated Factor Pattern				Variance Explained by Each Factor							
Label	Factor CPR 1	Factor CPR 2	CPR 3	Factor 1		Factor 2			CPR 3		
CPR3	0.75641	-0.08448	-0.01953	2.754		2.410			1.764		
CPR10	0.67920	0.14912	0.05858	Final Commuality Estimates: Total = 8.188593							
CPR4	0.63743	0.42289	0.14582	CPR1	CPR2	CPR3	CPR4	CPR5	CPR6	CPR7	CPR8
CPR2	0.62191	0.10435	0.20126	0.591	0.477	0.591	0.617	0.538	0.574	0.511	0.385
CPR7	0.59780	0.36464	0.13482	CPR9	CPR10	CPR11	CPR12	CPR13	CPR14	CPR15	CPR16
CPR6	0.03535	0.71789	0.11691	0.514	0.497	0.328	0.442	0.466	0.549	0.502	0.510
CPR9	0.19539	0.67633	0.05759	Cronbach Coefficient Alpha				Pearson Correlation Coefficients			
CPR5	0.19177	0.64700	0.24107	Factor 1		Factor 2			CPR 3		
CPR8	0.20256	0.57659	-0.08269	0.756		0.667			0.269		
CPR16	0.05014	-0.00476	0.76569								
CPR15	0.13308	0.26362	0.62807								

An overall MSA of 0.787 for the items listed in Table 2, which indicates a good intercorrelation between the statements. The individual MSAs of the statements were also close to 1, which highlights a good indication to conduct an exploratory factor analysis. Table 2 also outlines Cronbach Alpha scores of 0.75 and 0.66 for Factors 1 and 2, which indicates an acceptable range of reliability. In addition, Table 2 indicates that the Pearson Correlation Coefficient score of CPR 3 was 0.26, which is within an acceptable range.

Factor CPR 1 represents an acceptance for the power enabler. This aligns with the literature, as the respondent's opinions imply that they were utilizing power to change attitudes, beliefs, or values of the organizational decision-makers (Torp, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). This resonates with the majority of the respondents who worked in a managerial role and higher, as they had access to their organization's decision-makers. This, therefore, confirms that PR professionals use power within the organization to advocate for marginalized groups.

Factor CPR 2 displays support for the persuasion PR enabler. Even though it is increasingly difficult for governments to control information (Zayani, 2008) respondents were able to negotiate with their respective organizational decision-makers and to encourage organizational participation in online conversations regarding social issues on social media. The results indicated that persuasion as a critical PR enabler is observed with respondents who are more prominent in regions that have social unrest (LR and GMER) compared to regions that have prosperity and growth (GCCR) (Stevens, 2016). The Middle East suffers from significant power struggles between its public and its hegemonic regimes. This can be observed by the severity and level of persecution to social media users who speak against their policies relating to specific social issues. The essence of being a critical PR professional is to utilize their capabilities to persuade ethical decision-making in order to empower marginalized social groups.

This Factor 2 confirms that respondents may consider their position and status as leverage to negotiate with organizational decision-makers to partake in online conversations regarding social issues.

CPR 3 represented advocacy as critical enabler. The results did not provide enough support for advocacy as an enabler. Many of the statements that measured this category in the questionnaire had to be removed from the final factor analysis as it were double loaders. The final factor solution thus only indicates that that the respondents supported two items that reinforced their ability to advocate for organizational decision-makers to participate in social issue conversations, namely, taking more of a social role within the organization and aligning the organization's corporate social responsibility strategy when advocating for social issues. It is worth mentioning that prominent regions such as LR and GMER had more social unrest and political hostility than regions that had considerable development and growth, such as the GCCR. This therefore aligns with literature, which points out that respondents who practice advocacy as a critical PR enabler were more motivated to initiate dialogue with organizational decision-makers to negotiate the tolerance level of participating in public social issue conversations via social media (McCown, 2007). Since it was only a two-factor solution, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient had to be calculated as an alternative to the Cronbach Alpha measure.

Results of the exploratory factor analysis pertaining to RQ4 are provided next.

RQ4: What challenges, antecedents, and strategies (as considerations of OPRs) are considered by PR professionals in the Middle East in their OPR and social media strategies?

The results indicate that specific considerations of online OPRs through social media could be regarded as a starting point to understand what PR professionals consider as challenges, antecedents and strategies when developing OPR strategies in a Middle East context. The items, as informed by the literature to measure the proposed considerations of OPRs via social media and the associated labels used in the analysis are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Considerations of Online OPRs via social media

Label	Item*	Determinant
OPR1	I find it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media.	Challenges
OPR2	The senior executive management within my organization perceives social media as a threat.	
OPR3	The restrictions on free speech (in terms of the organization policy) prevent employees from participating in online conversations about the organization.	
OPR4	My organization provides financing for me to pay attention to social media training courses.	
OPR5	I attempt to be respectful towards the public on social media who have different cultural values.	Antecedents
OPR6	I attempt to build trustworthiness through having public conversations on social media where anybody can participate in challenging any claim.	
OPR7	I attempt to generate inspiring conversations with the public on social media.	
OPR8	My organization practices transparency by making public statements on social media, admitting that it has made a mistake.	

OPR9	My organization consents that its employees take on a key role in handling sporadic social media inquiries from the public.	Strategies
OPR10	I use social media as a tool for the public to participate in the organization's decision-making process.	
OPR11	I purposefully ask questions on social media to stimulate the public to discuss issues together.	
OPR12	I build social networks with specific influencers on social media.	
OPR13	I practice openness by contributing to conversations on social media about specific issues that attract the organization's attention.	

* Bowen & Stacks, 2014; Cheng, 2016; Dahlberg, 2001; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung & Chen, 2007; Hung, 2005; Jones, 2013; Ki & Hon, 2009; Luo & Jiang, 2012; Mylrea, 2015; Ngozi, Malachy, Christy, Ngozi, & Prince, 2016; Ni & Wang, 2011; Prasad, 2011; Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011; Seltzer & Zhang 2011; Shaw, 2014; Sohail, 2012; Stefanone et al, 2010; Tankosic et al., 2016; Tian & Chao, 2012; Yeh, 2017.

Concerning the fourth research question, results indicate that respondents were faced with certain challenges in developing online OPRs through social media. Which could be considered as a starting point to understand PR professional's context in which they develop online OPRs. These approaches are presented in Table 4. Statements from Table 4 (OPR11,13) were double loaders and were removed from the analysis. It is worth mentioning that the final factor solution, presented in Table 4, was repeated, and produced the same results.

Table 4: Final factor solution: Online OPR considerations

Rotated Factor Pattern					Variance Explained by Each Factor						
Label	Factor OPR1	OPR2	Factor OPR3	OPR4	Factor 1		OPR 2		Factor 3		OPR 4
OPR2	0.84598	-0.00394	0.03235	0.07903	1.986		1.888		1.878		1.683
OPR3	0.69557	0.01149	0.19212	-0.10515	Final Communalities Estimates: Total = 7.437512						
OPR4	0.59734	0.08695	0.23076	-0.03758	OPR1	OPR2	OPR3	OPR4	OPR5	OPR6	OPR7
OPR1	0.59727	-0.07421	-0.16793	0.13768	0.409	0.722	0.531	0.419	0.513	0.740	0.601
OPR6	-0.02057	0.85228	0.11647	-0.01592	OPR8	OPR9	OPR10	OPR11	OPR12	OPR13	
OPR7	-0.01992	0.75454	-0.02545	0.17504	0.460	0.613	0.607	0.557	0.699	0.560	
OPR9	-0.00881	0.05620	0.78137	0.01220	Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha			Pearson's Correlation Coefficients			
OPR10	0.05107	0.23895	0.69517	0.25320	Factor 1		Factor 3		OPR 2		OPR 4
OPR8	0.20846	0.00753	0.64543	0.00382	0.640		0.622		0.409		0.229
OPR12	-0.08184	0.01208	0.27771	0.78431							
OPR5	0.10998	0.14636	-0.21392	0.65915							

An overall MSA of 0.7 for the items listed in Table 4, which indicates a good intercorrelation between the statements. The individual MSAs of the statements were also mostly close to 1, which highlights a good indication to conduct an exploratory factor analysis. Table 4 also outlines Cronbach Alpha scores of 0.64 and 0.62 for Factors 1 and 3, which indicates an acceptable range of reliability. In addition, Table 4 presents the Pearson Correlation Coefficient score of 0.4 and 0.22 for OPR 2 and OPR 4, which is within an acceptable range.

Factor OPR 1, embodied the challenges in building online OPRs. These findings address Al-Shamsi's (2015) concern about the restrictions on free speech and Sedereviciute and Valentini's (2011) concern relating to the possibility of negative perceptions that could arise from participating in certain social

issue conversations on social media. Coupled with this is the challenge of posting effective responses at the right time during online conversations (Tankosic et al., 2016). This indicates that other deeper issues hinder respondents from participating in timely and issue-based conversations on social media.

OPR 2, only embodies support for two items related to the consideration of antecedents to participate in online OPRs. In essence, this denotes that there should be clear expectations between the organization and its publics before joining any online conversations. Therefore, future research needs to be conducted to identify specific online publics with identifiable expectations and symbiotic relationships with the organization. In accord with Seltzer and Zhang (2011) there should be interdependency between the organization and its publics. In this regard, the literature indicates that interdependency between the organization and its publics is exaggerated through each party's behavior (Hung, 2009). This consideration should be reviewed in future research.

Factor OPR 3, encapsulates the strategies for building online OPRs. The LR group held a neutral position and the GCCR and GMER leaned slightly toward accepting transparency, consenting that employees participate in online conversations on behalf the organization, and using social media as a tool for publics to participate in the organization's decision-making process. The literature highlights that organizations cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach when developing social media strategies to participate in conversations about social issues; it needs to adopt techniques that customize and personalize interactions (Bruning & Lambe, 2008).

OPR 4, was an unexpected grouping that represents the need to demonstrate cultural sensitivity. This indicates that there are distinct differences in cultural values in different publics, which highlight the need to understand the organization's cultural norms (in terms of being respectful towards different cultures opinions on social media conversations). The organization's cultural norms play a significant role in determining its boundaries and limitations when practicing cultural sensitivity (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Hence, practicing cultural sensitivity involves networking. This practice contributes to organizations and other participants within the online network, as they gain more legitimacy when the network promotes specific social issues. Since this consideration only includes two items, it necessitates exploration in future research.

6. Discussion

This study identified that the majority of the respondents included social issues such as creating jobs for the youth (75.54%) and empowering females (61.80%) as part of their online OPR strategy. This indicates that organizations do partake in online conversations regarding social issues on social media.

The study also confirmed that critical PR enablers of power and persuasion are useful to PR professionals when attempting to negotiate the organizations tolerance towards participating in certain

social issue conversations on social media. This is especially relevant in the context of the Middle East, where governmental authorities often impose limitations on the freedom of expression. As well as facing the various obstacles of a traditionalist or conservative society that exercises surveillance over online conversations.

Furthermore, the study confirmed PR professional's strategic role in influencing the organizations decision-makers' opinions on participating in online conversations regarding social issues. The study indicated that the governmental policies on freedom of speech were a significant barrier to online conversations and that it hindered organizations to partake in legitimizing certain social issues. Nevertheless, social media strategies that emerged from the study demonstrate the willingness for employees and publics to participate in the organizations decision-making process which would, essentially, contribute to establishing the proposed antecedents of interdependency and expectations.

7. Conclusion

A limitation of the study is that the results are not generalizable, and that the sample is not representative of PR practitioners in the Middle East, as 67% were from the Gulf Cooperation Council Region. Moreover, some items in the exploratory factor analysis were found exhibiting double loading, which warrants further investigation in future studies.

These results extend the literature that argues that critical PR enablers challenge functional or mainstream organization-centric PR approaches and, instead, focuses its attention on the public's social issues. This shift resonates with a critical theory perspective and reflects how PR professionals could play a more critical, social, and ethical role in strategically mediating the power struggles to address transformation and reform in the Middle East.

This article contributes to the relevance and body of knowledge of critical PR, online OPR, and social media within the Gulf region as an example from the Middle East context. The results of this article provide insights for PR professionals to utilize critical PR enablers to advocate that organizations participate in social issue conversations on social media. It also provides valuable guidance in understanding the challenges, antecedents, strategies, and cultural norms when using social media as a tool to sustain alliances with marginalized groups and to encourage organizational participation in contexts such as those found in the Middle East.

The PR professional needs to lead the organization through the cultural complexities and attempt to extend the organization's tolerance to participate in online debates which empower the voices of marginalized groups and legitimize their social issues.

8. References

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