

CRITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PERSPECTIVES OF PR PROFESSIONALS ON USING PR ACTIVISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The Middle East has a rising demand for public relations (PR) professionals to advance organizational goals, as many of the region's oil-producing countries implement strategies to develop non-oil sectors to safeguard future generations. Activism is a catalyst for growth and is linked to developments within the PR industry. This article discusses the role of PR activism in facilitating online organization-public relationships through social media in the Middle East. A quantitative research approach was implemented using a web-based survey which was distributed among PR professionals working in the Middle East and a sample of 233 respondents was obtained. An exploratory factor analysis highlighted prominent factors relating to PR activism, namely, power in persuasive dialogue, persuasion in activism, advocacy and cultural sensitivity. These factors are indicative of the perceptions that PR professionals have of critical PR activism in the region.

Keywords

Critical PR, PR Activism, Online Organization-Public Relationships, Social Media, Middle East

Introduction

Within the context of the Middle East¹, social media has increased the interaction between publics and organizations; it has been extensively used to support human rights campaigns which have presented an opportunity for public relations (PR) professionals to advocate for social issues (Minty 2019). However, most Middle Eastern governments do not tolerate criticism of their policies on human rights and freedom of speech, which are two distinct issues that are noticeably growing on social networks in the Middle East (Al-Shamsi 2015). Consequently, social media have 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).

According to Vanlentini, Romenti, and Kruckeberg (2016: 4056), there is a ‘central relevance of building relationships with publics and the rising usage of a range of social media by public relations professionals.’ Social media provide the PR industry with an online organization-public relationship (OPR) platform that can be leveraged to participate in or facilitate online discussions with the organization’s online public (Luo & Jiang 2012). Considering this, there is a need to explore how the very people representing the organization’s interests within social media, such as PR professionals, could advocate for social issues in facilitating their organization’s online OPRs, from a PR activism perspective (Holtzhausen 2016). In this context, PR can demonstrate its value by addressing and attempting to influence organizational policies to develop long-term, transformational programs that benefit society (Dolea 2017). This resonates with a critical PR perspective (the critique of an organization’s approaches to its PR practices) and aims to challenge PR’s organization-centric approaches, from asking how it can assist organizations to be more efficient to asking what its role is in society (Dolea 2017). This article will firstly identify the research problem, objectives, and questions. Second, the literature review will outline three main categories that provide insight into the research problem: online OPRs, PR activism as an element of critical PR and contemporary issues contributing to critical PR developments within the Middle

¹ List of Middle Eastern Countries by region: Gulf Cooperation Council Region (GCCR) consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; the Levant Region (LR) consists of Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey; and the Greater Middle Eastern Region (GMER) consists of Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Djibouti, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Yemen (Angrist 2013; Freitag and Stokes 2009).

East. Thirdly, the research design and methodology will be outlined. Finally, the article will report on the results from the web-based survey and conclude with reflections on the contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Research Problem

PR has been criticized as a hegemonic practice that benefits the dominant power structures (Gezgin 2019). Having a critical PR perspective helps to challenge organizational-centric PR approaches and moves the focus onto the public's interests rather than onto those of the organization to resolve societal issues. From this perspective, PR professionals have an opportunity to create a new role for themselves as organizational activists who use social media as a tool to sustain alliances with marginalized groups and to encourage debate, dialogue, and public input.

To extend research on PR activism in the Middle East, the research objective and research questions are as follows:

Research Objective

This article explores the role of critical PR, specifically PR activism, in facilitating organizations' online OPRs via social media in the Middle East to encourage interactive problem-solving debates to address societal issues.

Research Questions

This article aims to address the following research questions in answering the main research problem:

- **RQ1:** What PR approaches are prevalent in facilitating organizations' online OPRs on social media in the Middle East?
- **RQ2:** What are PR professionals' perceptions of public issues within the Middle East that contribute to PR activism?
- **RQ3:** What characteristics of PR activism are evident in PR professionals' facilitation of organizations' online OPRs on social media?

Literature Review

The following sections will be discussed in the literature review: online OPRs, PR activism as an element of critical PR, and contemporary issues contributing to critical PR developments within the Middle East. Empirical findings in these areas are presented in Table 1.

Online Organizational-Public Relationships

Building organizations' online OPRs is a multifaceted, complicated task, and sustaining these relationships requires continual examination of the public's expectations (Vanlentini et al. 2016). Therefore, an organization's approach to online OPRs is influenced by its principal focus; for example, identifying its online public is based on prioritizing contemporary topics, issues, or rhetoric (Vanlentini et al. 2016). This would ideally assist PR professionals in facilitating purposeful interactive online debates on behalf of the organization and encouraging public input (Bruning & Lambe 2008).

Social Media as an online OPR platform

Social media serves as a platform for negotiation, and previously silenced voices have joined discussions across continents (Douai & Nofal 2012; Helms 2009; Mantovani 2004). In addition, social media have transformed the way people represent their identities and communicate their political positions (Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb & Schossböck 2015). According to Hussain (2021), social media have empowered local communities to reaffirm their role in society and impact politics. Furthermore, it is a platform on which communities can have heated debates. On the contrary, social media are criticized for being a profitable arena for authoritarian capitalism, where surveillance is exploited to perpetuate power or struggles, instead of empowering marginalized people (Fuchs 2021). However, social media are one of the many communicative tools used to drive social movements to mobilize resources and develop an awareness of specific social issues (Kidd & McIntosh 2016).

Castells (2012) held a strong view that cultural expressions and political autonomy are key features evident in the use of social networks. However, Fuchs (2012) counterargued this position and insinuated that Castells placed too much emphasis on the role of the communicative abilities of social media and that there are other dimensions in society that have an equal or higher position.

Therefore, this article argues for an alternative perspective, where PR activism plays a role in addressing organization-centric PR practices and instead motivates a more critical social PR role for organizations to facilitate problem-solving solutions through their online OPRs.

The following section identifies three foundational areas to understand the challenges, antecedents, and strategies that PR professionals are faced with in facilitating online OPRs. These focus areas of online OPR extracted from the literature could be considered a starting point to measure PR professionals' perceptions.

Foundations to exploring OPRs in social media

Three foundational areas have been empirically explored (see Table 1): challenges, antecedents, and strategies. Regarding the challenges that hinder the practice of building online OPRs on social media, organizational management may perceive social media interactions as an invitation to open criticism (Tankosic, Ivetic & Vucurevic 2016). Therefore, the limitations and concerns of online OPRs include overcoming management's anxieties about and negative perceptions of social media (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011). It may 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). Second, antecedents are defined as the 'social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, needs for resources, perceptions of the uncertain environment and legal/voluntary necessity' (Broom, Casey & Ritchey 1997: 94). Antecedents need to be in place before online OPRs can be developed (Bruning & Lambe 2008). The antecedents of a relationship are the preconditions that organizations need to build and sustain their public relationships, which are generally established when the PR professional conducts environmental scanning and develops specific PR GG to communicate with the publics identified (Ki & Hon 2009). The most accepted antecedents of online OPRs were expectations, trustworthiness, interdependency, and cultural norms (Cheng 2016; Syafrizal & Ismail 2017; Seltzer & Zhang 2011; Yeh 2017). Lastly, relationship cultivation strategies are put in place to produce relationship quality outcomes (Ki & Hon 2009). Ultimately, relationship cultivation strategies are plans that build and sustain quality relationships (Ki & Hon 2009b). These 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, and allowing access and consent for employees to participate in social media inquiries about the organization or agency (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011; Stefanone, Lackaff & Rosen 2010).

The following section will discuss the role of PR activism from a critical PR perspective. This is necessary to develop an understanding of how certain PR activist characteristics could contribute to facilitating the online OPRs.

Critical PR Perspective

A critical PR perspective ‘challenges assumptions, alters boundaries, produces a paradigm shift, critiques policy or practice, and draws inspiration from the intellectual sociological project known as Critical Theory’ (L’Etang 2005: 521). This perspective is essentially the critique of organizational-centric approaches to PR practices (Ciszek 2015; Gezgin 2019; Hou, Zhu & Bromley 2013; Swart & Verwey 2003; Uwalaka 2019). Reber and Berger (2006), as well as Verwey, Benecke, and Muir (2017), further claimed that a critical PR perspective encourages the idea that an individual should interrogate issues such as power and dissent. According to Dolea (2017), a critical PR perspective convicts PR professionals to take on a more social role to advocate for social issues on behalf of the organization and society.

Exploring PR activism as an element of critical PR

According to Demetrious (2016), there is an opportunity for critical PR to confront the organization-centric approaches to PR and that PR activism has the potential to establish credibility within society as it challenges assumptions and critiques the dominant paradigm. In this regard, this section explores PR activism as an element of critical PR. Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015) explained that defining PR activism is challenging, as it is mainly concerned with an individual’s mindset and self-awareness towards organizations’ PR practices and the intention behind it. PR activism attempts to resist power structures that attempt to manipulate or control marginalized social groups with institutionalized cultural norms (L’Etang 2005). PR activism is an act of resistance that the PR professional may apply to oppose organizational malpractices (Kelly 2017). PR activism is a position that interrogates and resists dominant power structures and encourages debate (Verwey et al. 2017).

Coombs and Holladay (2012) consider that power, persuasion, and advocacy have a significant role in advancing the discussion of a critical perspective of PR activism and that these three concepts enable the PR professional to challenge organization-centric PR approaches.

The next subsection will discuss PR activism and define power, persuasion, and advocacy as key categories that represent characteristics that could contribute to empowering PR professionals to facilitate social problem-solving solutions through social media.

Characteristics of PR activism

Coombs and Holladay (2012) explained that persuasion (influencing publics' attitudes or behaviours) and power (creation of hegemonic domination) are necessary elements that a PR professional needs to consider when advocating as a PR activist. PR professionals who play PR activists' roles compel organizations to initiate dialogue and participate in the online debate about societal issues (McCown 2007). PR activists use persuasive strategies to alter perceptions to favor the cause (Perloff 2003). A PR activist's cause is most effective in making publics active when it includes power and persuasion (Werder 2015). The PR professional acting as the PR activist in the organization would use persuasive techniques to influence power structures' dominant leadership to participate in debating societal issues on social media (Dolea 2017). Social issues would potentially motivate the PR professional to facilitate debate, dialogue, and even dissent and encourage public input (Ngozi, Malachy, Christy, Ngozi & Prince 2016; Verwey et al. 2017). Persuasion can be understood as a tactic to change beliefs or values (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012). Trust is the precondition and aim of persuasion (Torp 2015). PR activists are motivated to inform and persuade individuals to have a specific perception (Tankosic et al. 2016). PR activists' immediate resolution influences power structures policy and impacts society's attitudes (Moloney, McQueen, Surowiec & Yaxley 2013). Therefore, PR activism is a process of persuasion that involves interactive communication (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012).

The characteristics of PR activism mentioned above could be considered a starting point to understanding how PR professionals within the Middle East could facilitate online OPRs to negotiate new meaning.

Contemporary issues contributing to critical PR developments within the Middle East

Middle Eastern publics are active on social media, which are regarded as platforms for raising societal issues and public debates (Tétreault, Meyer & Rizzo 2009). Middle Eastern publics have been standing up for critical social causes such as human rights, democracy, transparency, and gender equality (Haddad 2016). Civil, political, and social rights were significant factors in 2010 that led to mass social protests known as the Arab Spring across the Middle East (Gheytschi & Moghadam 2014). Publics in the Middle East use social media to bring situations and causes directly to international public attention and allow activists' voices to be heard and for events to be witnessed instantaneously (Alfoory 2014). PR professionals should attempt to ensure that all voices are heard, respected, and considered (Toledano 2016). They should use deconstructive discourse and form alliances with online publics that are subordinated or marginalized (Butler 2002). In the light of this, PR professionals need to take on a more social and critical role in advocating against the power struggles by facilitating online organization-public discussions (Freitag & Stokes 2009).

Table 1 represents the social issues explored among PR professionals in the Middle East; the issues identified are in the context of this article but are not limited to these. These social issues were empirically explored to gain a deeper perspective on which social problems PR professionals would advocate for and guide their organization to participate in problem-solving debates between their organization and its publics.

The role of PR activism in facilitating online OPRs in the Middle East

Benecke and Verwey (2020: 8) emphasized that PR activists' 'role enactment represents the best hope PR professionals have to do the right thing and to actualize the possibilities of the practice by serving the interests and voices of many.' Furthermore, a critical PR perspective has established itself as a legitimate tactic that enables professionals and scholars to contribute to the struggle for power (Motion & Weaver 2009). Edwards (2012) further contends that PR professionals who practice PR activism should reject organization-centric approaches to PR and instead demand a more active and progressive approach. For this research, it is argued that PR professionals in the Middle East who aim to create a different role for themselves, namely, as an organizational activist, could feel convicted to 'rise up and respond to consumer, labor, citizen, gender and environmental

conflicts instigated by the very corporation or government that they are supposed to promote’ (Gezgin 2019: 1). On the contrary, in practicing PR activism, the PR professionals could encourage publics to be content generators on social media, resulting in individuals’ speaking out against political reforms, which has emerged as a powerful force against government-controlled media and has enabled activism worldwide to act against specific causes (Al-Shamsi 2015). Therefore, the role of PR activism in facilitating online OPRs via social media in the Middle East would be to focus on empowering the human rights aspect of free speech (Jones 2013). Moreover, Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde (2017) argued that PR professionals need to lead organizations in uncharted public debate, where criticism and blame are abundant.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Methodology

The research was exploratory, and a quantitative research design was followed using a web-based, self-administered survey to overcome the geographical challenge of targeting PR professionals in the Middle Eastern region. It is worth mentioning that the web-based survey included two prequalifying questions that ensured that these respondents had experience in PR and communications and were responsible for managing their organization’s online OPRs. Therefore, it was presumed that these PR professionals played a vital role in facilitating the organizations’ online OPRs in the Middle Eastern region.

Table 1: Categories that were measured in the web-based survey

Questionnaire categories	Areas of exploration	
Online OPRs	Challenges	• Content and timing • Perceptions of social media • Restrictions on free speech • Training
	Antecedents	• Cultural norms • Expectations • Interdependency • Trust
	Strategies	• Access • Assurance • Encourage discourse • Networks • Openness

		• Organizational involvement
Social issues contributing to the development of PR activism in the Middle East	Commitment to national vision	• Benefit to society • Familiarity • Promote national vision
	Participation in online social problem-solving discussions	• Domestic workers • Empowering women • Jobs for the youth • Less privileged • Persons with disabilities • Refugees
Characteristics of PR activism to facilitate online OPRs	Power	• Barriers to posting content • Co-creation of solutions • Information sharing • Mutual understanding
	Persuasion	• Creating active groups • Debating social issues • Develop mutual understanding • Interactive communication • Positive coercion • Resolving conflict
	Advocacy	• Advice from professional associations • Advocate for a social cause • Ethical decision-making • Opportunity to be heard • Social responsibility • Social role

Table 1 above outlines various questionnaire categories in the web-based survey and provides areas of exploration that were measured and what response systems were used for each category. The online web-based survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and consisted of 41 closed-ended statement-based questions presented in English and Arabic. These statements are used to determine the respondent's perceptions of a specific issue being studied and allow the participants to judge the proposed concepts and rate or measure them on a five-point Likert scale (Vito, Tewksbury & Kunselman 2014).

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

A purposive and convenient non-probability sampling method was applied by identifying potential PR professionals through their LinkedIn profiles. They were identified based on whether they were working in a Middle Eastern country and their PR experience. A pilot study was conducted on a panel of eight PR experts located in the United Arab Emirates, Sultanate of Oman, and Saudi

Arabia who served as an expert panel to evaluate the viability of the web-based survey. For the actual survey, the PR professionals were sent an invitation through an email or direct message on social-media platforms that contained a link to the web-based survey. Those who accepted the invitation could click on the link that automatically opened their internet browser to the webpage where the survey was stored. The realized sample for the web-based survey was 233 PR professionals from the Middle East. To achieve the realized sample, the researcher conducted systematic follow-ups through emails, telephone calls, and direct messages.

Data Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to measure variables from the 41 web-based survey items. This method was selected because the measures were not standardized; therefore, exploratory factor analysis was used as a starting point. As soon as the factors are better defined, it could be an option to consider a structural equation modeling (SEM) for future research.

The following steps were implemented during the exploratory factor analysis: Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy criterion was used to select the number of factors to retain. 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. The Varimax rotation method was used to assist in interpreting the factor loadings. The reliability of the web-based survey was assessed based on the level to which the variables were measured consistently. A Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to measure internal consistency on factors that had three or more items. These scores ranged from 0.62–0.75, which was within an acceptable range (0.6–0.7) of reliability. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for linear correlations between two items within a factor. These 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.

Profile of the realized sample

Figure 1 depicts specific demographic elements that represent the profile of the respondents. The Middle East regionalization of the response groups for reporting and interpretation is categorized into three regions, mainly the Gulf Cooperation Council Region (GCCR), the Levant Region (LR), and the Greater Middle East Region (GMER). It is worth mentioning that the demographics in

Figure 1 do not include gender, as the researcher was mainly interested in the role that PR activism plays within PR professionals as a profession.

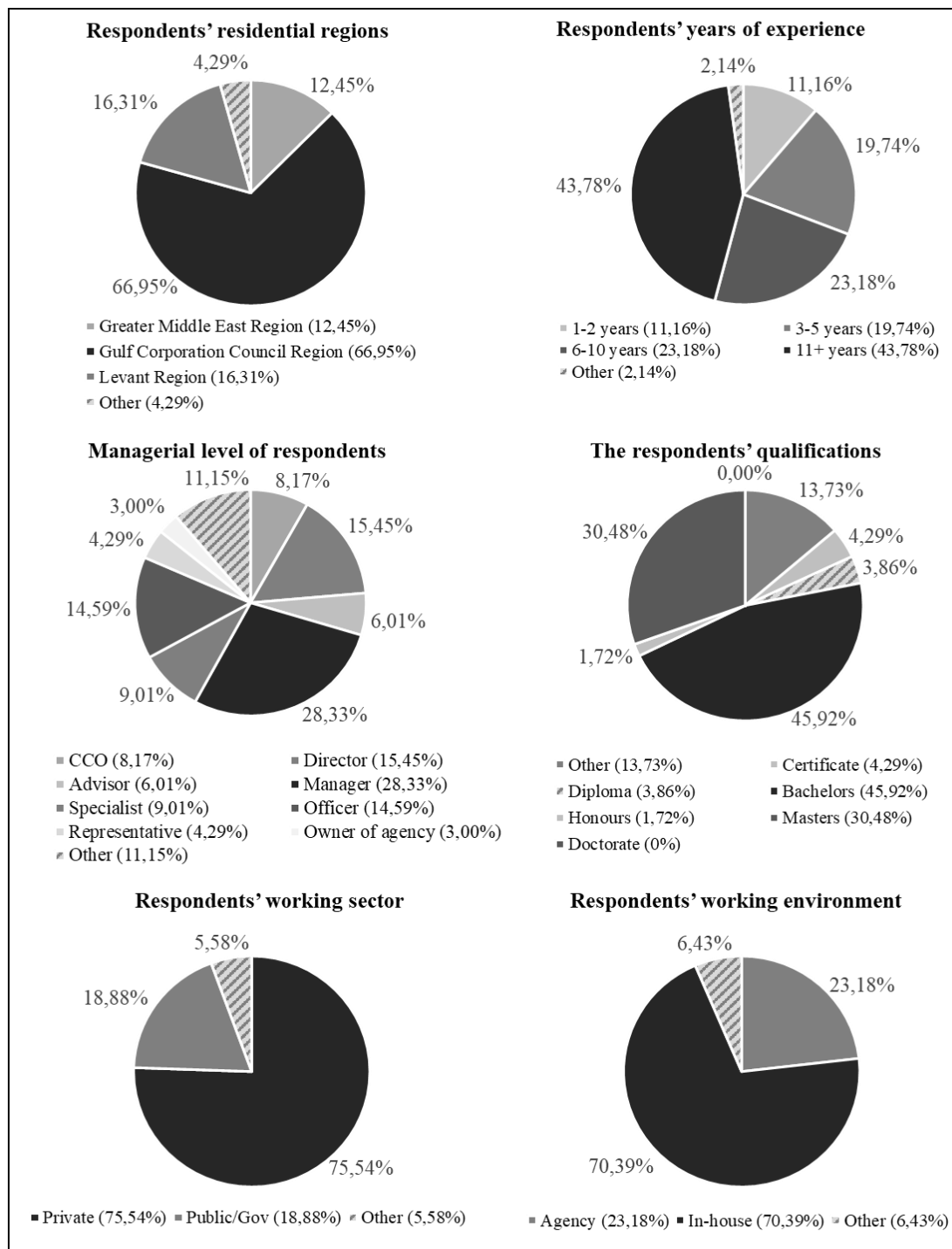


Figure 1: Demographic elements that represent the profile of the respondents (Researcher insight)

Based on Figure 1, it could be inferred that the majority (66.95%) of the respondents were from GCCR, who worked in-house within organizations within the private sector. The results indicate that 48.92% of the respondents worked in managerial roles and that 66.96% had more than six years of experience. Furthermore, 78.11% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, or higher, in PR or communications.

Results and Discussions

Reporting and Discussion of the Results

Responses will be reported according to the three research questions: (RQ1) what PR approaches are prevalent in facilitating organizations' online OPRs on social media in the Middle East? (RQ2) What PR professionals' perceptions of public issues within the Middle East contribute to PR activism? (RQ3) What characteristics of PR activism are evident in PR professionals' facilitation of organizations' online OPRs on social media?

Online OPRs via social media: RQ1

The exploratory factor analysis produced four factors in this category, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Measuring online OPRs via social media

Statement	Factor 1: Challenges in online OPRs	Factor 2: Antecedents for online OPRs	Factor 3: Strategies for online OPRs	Factor 4: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs
2.1. Perception of social media: The senior executive management within my organization perceives social media as a threat.	0.845	0.003	0.032	0.079
2.2. Restrictions on free speech: The restrictions on free speech (in terms of the organization policy) prevent employees from participating in online discussions about the organization.	0.695	0.011	0.192	0.105
2.3. Training: My organization/agency provides financing for me to pay attention to social media training courses.	0.597	0.086	0.230	0.037
2.4. Content and timing: I find it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media.	0.597	0.074	0.167	0.137
2.5. Expectations: I attempt to build trustworthiness through having public discussions on social media where anybody can participate in challenging any claim.	0.020	0.852	0.116	0.015

Statement	Factor 1: Challenges in online OPRs	Factor 2: Antecedents for online OPRs	Factor 3: Strategies for online OPRs	Factor 4: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs
2.6. Interdependency: I attempt to generate inspiring discussions with the public on social media.	0.019	0.754	0.025	0.175
2.7. Access: My organization/agency consents that its employees take on a key role in handling sporadic social media inquiries from the public.	0.008	0.056	0.781	0.012
2.8. Assurance: I use social media as a tool for the public to participate in the organization/agency's decision-making process.	0.051	0.238	0.695	0.253
2.9. Openness: My organization/agency practices transparency by making public statements on social media, admitting that it has made a mistake.	0.208	0.007	0.645	0.003
2.10. Networks: I build social networks with specific influencers on social media.	0.0814	0.012	0.277	0.784
2.11. Cultural norms: I attempt to be respectful towards the public on social media who have different cultural values.	0.109	0.146	0.213	0.659
2.12. Encourage discourse: I purposefully ask questions on social media to stimulate the public to discuss issues together.	0.086	0.572	0.229	0.411
2.13. Organizational involvement: I practice openness by contributing to conversations on social media about specific issues that attract the organization /agency's attention.	0.023	0.411	0.243	0.575
Mean*	3.11	2.04	2.56	1.59
Std dev	0.82	0.74	0.93	0.49

Notes: *Mean: Strongly Agree = 1; Agree = 2; Undecided = 3; Disagree = 4; Strongly Disagree = 5

Statements from Table 2 (2.12 and 2.13) were excluded from the analysis as they had weak factors and did not correlate with the other factors. The exploratory factor analysis was repeated, and the results were the same.

The exploratory factor analysis condensed the information into sets of new factors with nominal loss of information. All items used for the factor analysis were sufficiently correlated using Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA).

Table 3: Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy

Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy: Overall MSA = 0.7												
3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.8	3.9	3.10	3.11	3.12	3.13
0.67	0.73	0.79	0.65	0.80	0.83	0.72	0.67	0.68	0.59	0.57	0.57	0.67

Table 3 identifies an overall MSA of 0.7, which indicates a good intercorrelation between the statements. Furthermore, the individual MSAs of the statements were also mostly close to one, which highlights a good indication to conduct an exploratory factor analysis.

The following four factors represent the perspectives of respondents on facilitating online OPRs via social media:

Factor 1: Challenges in online OPRs. The results indicated that the respondents generally have a neutral position towards the perception of social media, restrictions on free speech, training, as well as content and timing within the challenges in online OPRs. It was found that slightly more than half (56.6%) of the respondents felt that their senior management team did not perceive social media as a threat. Addressing Jones's (2013) concern about the restrictions on free speech, which refer to the restrictions in terms of the organization's policy that prevent employees from participating in online discussions about the organization, 66.9% of respondents agree that the restrictions on free speech prevent employees from participating in online discussions relating to the organization. In accordance with Tankosic et al. (2016), 52.7% of respondents found it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media, which indicates that other deeper issues hinder respondents from participating in timely and issue-based discussions on social media.

Factor 2: Antecedents for online OPRs. 75.1% of the respondents agreed that there should be clear expectations between the organization and its publics before online OPRs can be built. 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), 78.1% of the respondents agreed that there should be interdependency between the organization and its publics to facilitate online OPRs. In this regard, the literature indicates that interdependency between the organization and its publics is exaggerated through each party's

behavior (Hung 2005). All respondents endorsed the claim that preconditions are necessary contributors to facilitating online OPRs.

Factor 3: *Strategies for online OPRs.* Although the GCCR and GMER leaned slightly toward accepting access, assurance, and openness as strategies for online OPRs, the LR group held a neutral position. The literature highlights that organizations cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to facilitate online OPRs on social media; it needs to adopt techniques that customize and personalize interactions (Bruning, Dials & Shirka 2008). However, considering the variety of strategies within the field of social media, it could be interpreted as a positive sign that GCCR and GMER felt the following strategies to facilitate online OPRs: giving access to employees to debate social issues; recognizing online public issues, and including them in the organization's decision-making process and being transparent about the organization's position on specific issues.

Factor 4: *Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs.* The reality that 97.8% of the respondents acknowledged distinct differences in cultural values in different publics suggests that the respondents identify with and, to a degree, understand their organization's cultural norms in facilitating online OPRs (in terms of being respectful towards different cultures within the public on social media). The organization's cultural norms play a significant role in determining its boundaries and limitations when practicing cultural sensitivity in online OPRs (Bruning & Galloway 2003). In addition, 84.9% of respondents acknowledged that practicing cultural sensitivity in online OPRs involves networking. This practice contributes to organizations and other participants within the online OPR network, as they gain more legitimacy when the network promotes aspects of the public culture.

Perceptions of societal issues in the Middle East contributing to PR activism: RQ2

Within this category, two subcategories were measured: the perceptions of the PR practitioner's commitment to their country's national vision and to what extent their organizations exert efforts to promote the country's agenda. Second, it identified which social issues professionals would advocate for, mainly which online discussions their organization would participate in on social media.

Of the respondents, 90.1% were familiar with their respective countries' national transformation programs, and 83.6% believed that these national transformation programs would benefit their

respective societies. In addition, 59.2% of the respondents indicated that they incorporate the national vision logo on their organization's adverts/publications.

Respondents generally demonstrated that they reinforced their country's transformational agendas and believed they would benefit their country's society. This contrasts with the literature, highlighting that PR professionals practicing critical PR would be skeptical of such governments' or monarchs' agendas in their ambitious national vision to support society. This indicates that critical PR was slow to be implemented within an organizational environment; although PR professionals would interrogate issues of power, senior leaders may have mandated them to comply with the direction.

The literature emphasized that PR professionals acting as PR activists would take on a more social role within the organization and facilitate the organization's participation in social problem-solving solutions through social media. The following results demonstrate which Middle Eastern issues the respondents were most likely to facilitate and advocate for. The results also indicate organizational tolerance for participating in these online social debates.

Of the respondents, 75.5% indicated that jobs for the youth were the most prominent social issue, which they would lead their organization to participate in online discussions. 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. Unemployment and poverty motivated the youth to emigrate (International Monetary Fund 2016). For 61.8% of the respondents, empowering females was an important topic to address when facilitating online OPRs. The literature underscores that females in the region have challenged governments' power and the masculinist hegemony (Sreberny 2015). The PR industry in the Middle East has been significantly influenced by the participation of female rights activists on social media. The less privileged was a critical social issue for 42.4% of respondents, while 37.3% rated persons with disabilities, 33.0% rated domestic workers, and 21.0% rated supporting refugees.

Characteristics of PR activism to facilitate online OPRs: RQ3

This category measured the PR professionals' perceptions of power, persuasion, and advocacy, particularly the degree to which these elements contributed to the practice of the PR activist.

Table 4: Characteristics of PR activism to facilitate online OPRs

Statements	Factor 5: Characteristics of power in persuasive dialogue	Factor 6: Characteristics of persuasion in activism	Factor 7: Characteristics of advocacy in activism
4.1. Information sharing: I share specific information on social media to improve the public's perception of the organization.	0.756	-0.084	-0.019
4.2. Trust: I use social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities.	0.679	0.149	0.058
4.3. Mutual understanding: I attempt to find common ground during an online debate between the organization and the public.	0.637	0.422	0.145
4.4. Co-creation of solutions: I attempt to facilitate internal discussions that address issues between the senior executive management and the young workforce.	0.621	0.104	0.201
4.5. Interactive communication: I provide relevant evidence in support of a specific discussion on social media between the public and the organization.	0.597	0.364	0.134
4.6. Debating societal issues: I challenge the employees within the organization/agency to be more involved in debating society's issues online.	0.035	0.717	0.116
4.7. Resolving conflict: I initiate online discussions on social media to resolve the conflict between the organization/agency and its publics.	0.195	0.676	0.057
4.8. Creating active groups: I attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public discussions.	0.191	0.647	0.2417
4.9. Positive coercion: I implement reward-driven social media campaigns.	0.202	0.576	-0.082
4.10. Social role: I pay close attention to societal issues developing in the country.	0.050	-0.004	0.765
4.11. Social responsibility: I collaborate with other organizations/agencies to encourage collaborative efforts to resolve social problems.	0.133	0.263	0.628
4.12. Advice from professional associations: I take guidance from professional associations, such as the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA).	-0.199	0.437	0.300
4.13. Opportunity to be heard: I believe that public debates on social media provide an opportunity for all the parties involved to share their stories.	0.430	0.077	0.474
4.14. Advocate for social cause: I encourage my organization to take a position on specific causes that affect society.	0.306	0.241	0.411
4.15. Barriers to posting content on social media: I find it challenging to distribute information to the public through social media.	-0.022	-0.094	-0.080

4.16. Ethical decision-making: I encourage ethical decision-making even when it causes resistance to the organization's executive management.	0.338	0.016	0.356
Mean*	1.76	2.37	1.69
Std dev	0.45	0.73	2.39

Notes: *Mean: Strongly Agree = 1; Agree = 2; Undecided = 3; Disagree = 4; Strongly Disagree = 5

The statements in Table 4 have been derived from the literature (Benecke & Verwey 2020; Coombs & Holladay 2012; Dolea 2017; Ngozi et al. 2016; Verwey et al. 2017). The results in Table 4 indicate that there were consistencies within each factor and that the items identified within power, persuasion, and advocacy correlate with the broader characteristics of PR activism, specifically within the practice of facilitating online OPRs. Therefore, statements from Table 4 (4.12–4.16) were double loaders and were removed from the analysis. It is worth mentioning that the exploratory factor analysis was repeated and produced the same results.

Table 5: Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)

Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy: Overall MSA = 0.787															
4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.9	4.10	4.11	4.12	4.13	4.14	4.15	4.16
0.74	0.68	0.78	0.85	0.78	0.75	0.75	0.76	0.75	0.80	0.83	0.80	0.80	0.79	0.86	0.45

Table 5 identifies an overall MSA of 0.787, which indicates a good intercorrelation between the statements. Furthermore, the individual MSAs of the statements were also close to one, which highlights a good indication to conduct an exploratory factor analysis.

Factor 5: Characteristics of power in persuasive dialogue. The results suggest that the respondents found the following characteristics relevant: information sharing; trust; mutual understanding; co-creation of solutions, and interactive communication. These results align with the literature, as the respondents' opinions imply that they were participating in persuasive dialogue as rhetoric to change attitudes, beliefs, or values (Torp 2015; Coombs & Holladay 2012). This is an important starting point to understand and is an essential characteristic that the PR practice takes on a more activist role. It is worth mentioning that 91.8% of the respondents used social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities. Similarly, 89.2% of the respondents shared specific information on social media to obtain a shared understanding between communicating parties. The fact that 81.1% of respondents intentionally attempted to find

common ground during an online debate between their organization and its public suggests that the communicating parties practice power in persuasive dialogue to obtain a shared understanding.

Factor 6: *Characteristics of persuasion in activism.* Generally, the respondents favored the following elements within the characteristics of persuasion in activism, debating societal issues, resolving conflict, creating active groups, and positive coercion. This suggests that it could be an emerging factor within the PR activism perspective observed in the Middle East. Even though it is increasingly difficult for governments to control information (Zayani 2008), the Middle East applies strict and sophisticated surveillance controls on its communities to identify and prevent any form of social disturbance; activism, in general, is not as easily practiced or tolerated. The results have indicated that the characteristics of persuasion in activism are observed with respondents who are more prominent in regions that have social unrest (LR and GMER) compared to regions that have economic prosperity and growth (GCCR; Stevens 2016). The Middle East suffers from significant power struggles between the public and the regimes; this can be observed by the severity and level of persecution of activists. As an activist, the essence of being a PR professional is using strategic communication for ethical purposes to empower marginalized social groups. This factor confirms the assumption that characteristics of persuasion in activism would notably help PR professionals facilitate online OPRs.

Factor 7: *Characteristics of advocacy in activism.* The results indicate that the respondents accepted two characteristics of advocacy and that acceptance was more prominent in regions, such as LR and GMER, that had more social unrest and political hostility than regions that had considerable economic development, such as the GCCR. First, 92.7% of respondents recognized societal issues as necessary for participating within their respective organizations. This aligns with the literature, which points out that respondents who practice PR activism were motivated to initiate and facilitate dialogue about social problem-solving solutions (McCown 2007). Second, 81.9% of the respondents encouraged social responsibility efforts in their organizations, which further describes the nature and desire of PR professionals acting as PR activists to resolve societal issues.

Discussions of the results

Reflecting on RQ1, the results indicated that respondents predominately were challenged by restrictions on free speech in the Middle East. Respondents also strongly agreed that expectations and interdependency were two preconditions necessary to facilitate online OPRs. The results also identified that access, assurance, and openness were familiar strategies that the participants implemented. A previous study by Dutta (2018) aligns with the results that cultural sensitivity played an essential role in developing networks through the facilitation of online OPRs. Therefore, PR professionals need to understand each public's cultural norms and values to build meaningful relationships with a shared understanding.

In addressing RQ2, it was found that respondents did advocate for specific societal issues and encouraged their respective organizations to participate in online OPR discussions. This notion aligns with the literature that suggests PR professionals act as the organization's consciousness and take on a more social role as organizational activists (Gezgin 2019; Holtzhausen & Voto 2009). In addition, the findings align with Verwey et al. (2017), as it asserts that PR activism is a position that interrogates and resists dominant power structures and encourages debate.

Considering RQ3, as per the literature review, it was discovered that specific characteristics of PR activism, namely, power, persuasion, and advocacy, could be regarded as a starting point to enable PR professionals to facilitate OPRs from a PR activist perspective. In alignment with Benecke and Verwey (2020), some of those that were significantly evident in the factor analysis include characteristics of advocacy, which was considered the strongest factor, which defined that the PR professional would take on a more social role and make collaborative efforts to resolve social problems through social responsibility. Congruent with the literature (Foucault 1980; Tankosic et al. 2016), power in persuasive dialogue was also a strong factor where respondents practiced information sharing, building trust, developing mutual understanding, supporting co-creation of solutions, and interactive communication. It was also discovered that persuasion in activism leans slightly more towards agreement than uncertainty. It was found that respondents did, to a certain degree, debate societal issues, resolve conflict, create active groups, and conduct positive coercion.

Contributions

These results extend the literature that argues PR activism could be regarded as a mainstream PR element that challenges organization-centric PR approaches and, instead, focuses its attention on the public's interests to resolve societal issues. This shift resonates with a critical PR perspective and reflects how PR professionals could play a more critical and ethical role in strategically mediating the power struggles to address transformation and reform in the Middle East. Therefore, this article contributes to the relevance and body of knowledge of critical PR, PR activism, online OPRs, and social media within a Middle Eastern context.

Limitations

Non-probability sampling was used, so the results could not be generalized. Activism is stigmatized in the Middle East, and in the majority of these countries, it is not tolerated. The quantitative web-based results had low, but still acceptable, Cronbach alphas and Pearson correlation coefficients, which indicates that the respondents may have misinterpreted some of the questions; however, it was still deemed reliable. Table 4 statements 4.12–4.16 were double-loaded items initially listed in the category, characteristics of PR activism to facilitate online OPRs. This may suggest that the respondents felt that those items may not have been relevant or may have had some difficulty interpreting the Arabic translation of these survey questions and this should be explored in future research. Furthermore, most Middle Eastern countries' official language is Arabic, so an Arabic translation of the web-based survey was done to improve the respondents' ability to interpret the questions. However, the language barrier could be considered a limitation as some of the terminology translated may not have captured the true representation of the meaning.

Recommendations

It is recommended that a qualitative exploration should be conducted to gain further insights into how PR professionals socially represent the characteristics of PR activism within their organizations. Further research is necessary to understand how stigmas around PR activism can be reconfigured. Scholars need to tell a different story that highlights an accurate depiction of the practice and how it can be considered a beneficial characteristic of the PR and communication industry rather than a threat to hegemonic power structures.

Conclusion

This article focused on exploring PR activism elements and their role in facilitating online OPRs via social media, which encourages interactive problem-solving debates, dialogue, and public input to address societal issues. As a starting point for future research, the article suggested characteristics of a PR activist, persuasive dialogue, and power in persuasion techniques as practices that would empower PR professionals to facilitate online OPRs through social media.

The research topic of this article is representative of PR's harsh realities in an undemocratic system and the challenges facing PR professionals who may attempt to create a different role for themselves, namely, as organizational PR activists. Furthermore, respondents were generally working in a hierarchical organization whose culture hinders the practice of PR activism.

The PR professional who practices PR activism on social media is in a continuous online war between the principle of empowering the human rights aspect of free speech and the overarching organizational intention to manipulate the public. PR professionals responsible for online OPRs are extremely challenged when attempting to facilitate the organization's online relationships. They are motivated to critically interrogate the organization's PR intentions while taking on an ethical role in promoting trust, openness, and transparency.

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