



Evolution, Growth and Prospects of PR Practice in the Middle East

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Abstract

Public relations literature provides many examples of ancient PR practice in the Arab world. This has extended from times as old as a thousand years ago. However, modern practice in Arab countries has had a vague approach and there is an absence of relevant literature due to low academic research (Almutairi & Kruckeberg, 2019). A pressing need therefore exists to study the background and evolution of PR in the region and identify contemporary practices and future direction.

The objectives of this study are: a) to trace the origin and historical development of public relations in the region, b) to examine the current status, challenges, and factors influencing public relations practice in the region and, c) to derive insights on the future direction and growth factors for PR practice in the region.

The study addresses the following research questions:

R1: What were the key transforming points in the history of public relations in the region?

R2: What are the current PR practices in the region?

R3: What are the key factors that influence PR practice?

R4: What are the current challenges that impact the PR?

R5: What are the trends that can influence the growth of PR in the region?

Primary research using in-depth interviews is used to seek answers to the above questions. Arab world comprises of large group of countries, each unique in terms of their socio-cultural and economic development. There is also a vast heterogeneity in the PR and media landscape. It is not possible to capture insights of all the regions, hence this research studies the PR industry in two major Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC) Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). These countries not only share geographical similarities (surrounded by the Persian Gulf) but also share similar language, culture, history and economic background. These are also the countries where PR sector has seen the maximum growth.

The findings present unique insights about the PR practice of the region as well as individual countries that are studied. Technical expertise and press agency dominate the PR practice in Qatar. The development of PR practice in the UAE paralleled the country's transformation. It today has a flourishing PR sector with a mix of local and international agencies offering strategic communications services.

This research presents a comprehensive overview of contemporary PR practice in UAE and Qatar and adds new insights and perspectives on its growth. The study will benefit both scholars as well as PR practitioners.

Keywords: public relations, PR, middle east, gulf cooperation council countries (GCC), strategic communication.

Introduction

Middle East is a region steeped in history and tradition. From inventing the world's first system of writing to being the birthplace of three world religions and possessing a substantial share of oil, there is a lot to the region's credit and not to miss the significant and transformative economic growth that has been witnessed, especially in the GCC (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025c). Many international corporations have either established themselves in the region or aspire to do so. There are also growing national enterprises like the Emirates and international events like FIFA World Cup Qatar or COP28 UN Climate Change Conference in UAE, all of which have boosted demand for PR in the region. The PR industry in the region is now worth \$1Billion and is predicted to double by 2030. Though the origins of public relations in the Arab World can be traced a thousand years ago

(Broom & Sha, 2013), its academic study is mainly associated with the twentieth-century United States of America (G.S. Dhanesh & G.P. Duthler, 2019). The research in the area has also been very lopsided and the focus of theory building has been confined predominately to the US and a few western countries (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2019). Environmental variables like political system, culture, and economic and social development play an important role in defining and influencing PR practice in any region (Singh et al., 2021). Hence, the PR practices and theories applied in the Western World cannot be applied in the Middle East. There is also a scarcity of empirical evidence about the practice of PR practice in this region (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025b).

This study aims to fill this gap and present a contextual understanding of public relations in the Middle East with a focus on Qatar and UAE.

Aims and Objectives

- To trace the origin and historical development of public relations in the region
- To examine the current status, challenges and factors influencing public relations practice in the region
- To derive insights on the future direction and growth factors for PR practice in the region.

Theoretical Foundation

The following theories have been used to study the research variables. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations that describe the field's various management and organizational practices. They are press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical model. Figure 1.1 describes each of them. These models have been used in the study to understand the functioning of PR practices. They help to understand how PR programs are created and strategies and tactics used (Aarzoo & Lal, 2025a).

Sriramesh and Vercic in 2019, introduced a Global Public Relations Framework to identify the impact of environmental variables on public relations practice (Aarzoo & Lal, 2026c). Five variables were identified that can be used by PR researchers to study cross-cultural communication and design public relations strategies specific to a country (Saika et al., 2021). These five variables are: political ideology, economic system, degree of activism, culture, and

media system. This framework has been used in the study to contextualize various factors, trends, and challenges influencing PR.

Related Work

Public Relations is defined as a strategic function that manages and builds mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its various stakeholders, intending to forward the organizational agenda and its image (Gandy, 1992; Hodges & McGrath, 2011). As Al-Enad in his work points out most of the concepts of PR, including its definition have been imported from the Western societies. Inherent in the theories of PR are assumptions about the nature of organizations, the nature of capitalist societies, and democracies within which PR is assumed to be practiced (Dutta, 2011). This approach cannot be translated to understand or define the PR in the Arab World where conditions be it political, societal, cultural, or economic are unique (Almutairi & Kruckeberg, 2019). The absence of literature on PR in the Middle East has further led to vagueness in the region's academic community. As research points the word “public” does not even exist in Arabic PR textbooks (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026c). Scholars point this could either be a result of political sensitivity to the word or a result of unintentional mistranslation in the past (Al-Enad, 1990) further pointing to the pressing need for studies in the area (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026a).

PR has been a tool for governments in the Middle East to publicize their affairs (Kirat, 2005) and has been historically linked to government affairs and publicity. Political messages by the Government have effectively influenced both media and public opinion (Albishri, Tarasevich, Proverbs, & Kiouis 2019). Propaganda and military public diplomacy have been actively used by governments during times of war and conflict, for example in Iran, Iraq, and Israel (Magen & Lapid, 2016). Iranian propagandists used audience segmentation and targeting techniques to differentiate between domestic and international audiences (Sweester and Brown, 2010). Research also examines how US propaganda framed the war in Iraq and also led to domestic public support (Hiebert 2003; Jo, Shim & Jung, 2008). In the absence of pluralistic opinions these narratives thrived and influenced public opinion and support (Lal & Aarzoo, 2026b).

Influence of social and cultural variables on the PR practice in the Middle East has been studied by many scholars (Lal & Sharma, 2021). In Bahrain PR practice is shaped by Islamic values and ethics like being honest, serving society, building relationships with others etc. (Alsaqer & Al Hashimi, 2019). Cultural Economic Model of Public Relations has been used to identify

cultural factors that influence Arab culture and how they in turn can affect PR in a particular region (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2011). Personal Influence Model of Public Relations has been recommended by scholars for the Middle East (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2014).

Another variable that has been explored by scholars is the role of women in society in Middle East (Sarkar & Lal, 2023). PR has been studied as a sub-variable. Alsaqer's work examines women's role in PR industry in Bahrain over a timeframe, first in 2008 and later in 2019. He concludes how in 2008 several challenges that were faced by women in PR like cultural marginalization, social dominance, relationships with colleagues etc (Singh et al., 2022). have improved, while the effects of female stereotypes and gender roles persist but things have started to change (Aarzo & Lal, 2026b).

Research has also examined the role of organizational culture in the Middle East and its influence on the PR practice. Research points predominance of one-way and asymmetrical models of PR across many Gulf countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and UAE (Almutairi & Dashti, 2019 ; Kirat ,2005). This has been accredited to the Arab managerial and organizational styles described as patriarchal and authoritarian (Aarzo & Lal, 2026a). Factors like PR function not still recognized as a core function, focus on tactics versus strategy in PR, lack of formal research and less emphasis on PR education hinder the growth of strategic public relations in the region (Almutairi, Galander, Al-Balushi, & Al Balushi 2019; Kirat 2005).

Media is a critical variable that cannot be ignored while exploring the PR practices of any region. The Middle East demonstrates a variety of media systems ranging from *free* (such as in Israel) to *partly free* (as in Lebanon) and *not free* (as in Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Northwestern University Qatar's conducted a study on media in the Middle East, and found that the majority of the population still gets their news from television (78%), but it is closely followed by the smart phone (67%). Media just like anywhere else in the world remains an important bridge of communication between different stakeholders, even in the Middle East. The nexus between Media and PR in the region has been examined and it was found that models of Public Relations like agenda-building, press agency, one-way, asymmetrical, and public information models serve as a foundation defining how PR is practiced (Al-Kindi, 2019; Kirat, 2015; Zayani,2008). Consistent with the use of these models, media relations has been regarded as an important function (Rahman et al., 2022). Several studies point in the direction that media has been used by

organizations as a channel to uplift their image in the public. In Oman media communication is categorized as an important of PR (AL-Kindi, 2019). Al Jazeera, the media organization, lays a lot of emphasis on employing an effective spokesperson for the media and focussing on publicity and media relations as the core functions of its PR team (Zyani, 2008). Kirat in 2015 studied the CSR practices of major oil and gas companies in Qatar and found that most of the companies did CSR to generate images of responsibility in the media and enhance their company's image. One-way model of persuasion was used not only by the local companies but also by external organizations present in Middle East. The US government used one-way model in their public diplomacy efforts in the region. Scholars suggest the use of culture-centered models that can be very effective in the region to create a more two-way communication approach (Lal, 2023). Using the existing participatory forums like majlis in UAE, Wali office in Oman etc. (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). However, this area still lacks empirical research. Further The Middle East population is most of its countries is divided into the locals and expats. In countries like Qatar expats constitute a greater share of the population than the locals. As most of the participatory organizations like Majlis can only be accessed by locals and men this approach of PR might miss out on the huge chunk of expat population (Kumar & Lal, 2023). Research has also examined the impact of information subsidies through Press releases, press conferences on agenda-building (Rahman et al., 2024) PR messages from Saudi Arabia and US government during the Donald Trump visit to Middle East in 2017 significantly influenced media coverage and thereby public opinion (Albishri et al., 2019).

The effects of growth in communication technologies and rise of social media has also been a subject of research. Research has examined how PR practice in the region has leveraged on social media to foster dialogue and create a more engaging two-way dialogue with stakeholders online (Aarzo & Lal, 2025). Curtin and Gaither in 2004 examined how Middle Eastern government and presidential web sites utilized the web's capacity to use personal relations model that takes advantage of the lack of a media gatekeeper to build dialogue with English-language media and publics (Jain et al., 2023). Research in Kwait however contradicts the findings and researchers found that despite the potential of social media to facilitate building two-way models of public relations in Kuwait the organizations continue to use Twitter and Instagram mostly for promotion and one-way information dissemination (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017). In an interesting research, the role of paid disclosure in building relationship between social media influencer and followers in the UAE was examined by Dhanesh and Duthler in 2019, and found that awareness

of paid endorsement was positively related to follower-influencer relationships. Avidar in 2013 examined smartphones as a relationship building tool with young audiences in the region of Israel and found that organizations do not utilize the potential of the smartphone to engage, create dialogue or to build relationships with young publics (Mane & Lal, 2021). Another area of focus in research has been the examination of doubtful ethical practices on social media (Lahav, 2016 ; Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016; Toledano & Avidar, 2016). Research studied the public relations practitioners' attitudes to ethical issues such as payment to bloggers, use of disclaimers, and paying for negative messages etc across two socio-culturally different environments – New Zealand and Israel – and found that public relations ethics is linked to the culture and social environments in which practitioners function. Israeli public relations practitioners engaged in promotion of paid digital content without full disclosure or transparency (Lahav & Zimand-Sheiner, 2016).

Sriramesh and Vercicin, in their work in 2009 and 2019 emphasize the importance of a comprehensive body of knowledge of global public relations. There is a dire need to extend the analyses of public relations in different regions by going beyond a couple of conceptual or theoretical underpinnings and exploring the influence of contextual variables external to the organization like culture, political system, media system and economic system on PR activities and practice.

Research Gap

There is enough data based on industry and expert insights that supports the growth potential of PR practice in the Middle East. The industry in several GCC countries is already slated for a double-digit growth in the coming years. However, this is not matched by growing academic interest and empirical research in the area and there is a lack of relevant academic literature.

A comprehensive overview supported by primary research is missing and this is required to gain understanding on the practices, challenges and areas of future growth in PR. Further, a country specific perspective is also required to gain deeper insights into the functioning of PR industry within a country. The research is concentrated towards only a few nations like Israel and UAE. Middle East is marked by an interesting stakeholder divide between the locals or citizens and the expats or the Non-national residents. Both are marked by unique communication needs and challenges. There are no studies that study this. PR is influenced by several environmental

factors like political, cultural, and societal while there are studies that have analyzed these variables in isolation there is a lack of research that analyses these variables from the context of their effect on the PR practice. Arab World's distinctive political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts play a pivotal role in shaping PR and this requires further inquiry.

This work addresses the above-mentioned research gaps by exploring the following research questions:

R1: What were the key transforming points in the history of public relations in the region?

R2: What are the current PR practices in the region?

R3: What are the key factors that influence PR practice?

R4: What are the current challenges that impact the PR?

R5: What are the trends that can influence the growth of PR in the region?

Research Methodology

In-depth interviews have been used . Arab world comprises of large group of countries, each unique in terms of their socio-cultural and economic development. There is also a vast heterogeneity in the PR and media landscape. It is not possible to capture insights of all the regions, hence the research studies the PR industry in 2 Gulf Cooperation Council Countries(GCC) only which are Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). These countries not only share geographical similarities (surrounded by the Persian Gulf) but also share similar language, culture, history and economic background. These are also the countries where PR sector has seen the maximum growth.

Interviewees have been chosen from each of these countries using a purposive sampling technique. Chosen participants have been of the rank of Senior Managers or above and have spent at least 6 years working in the PR sector in the country either as a part of a PR agency, a government corporation or Private Corporation. A total of 30 professionals were selected 15 from Qatar and 15 from UAE. Out of them, 20 were involved in the in-depth interviews. The remaining 10 couldn't be included due to lack of availability from their end. The determination of the sample size was based on keeping in mind the limited time, resources and availability of participants.

However, care was taken to ensure that thorough insights are obtained. Using open-ended interview questions, the researcher was able to go deeply into the subject matter and get extensive information regarding the perspectives of the participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The interviews in Qatar were conducted face-to-face in interviewees office. The interviews from UAE were conducted online over Google Meet and Zoom. The time frame of the interview ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Language used for interviews was English.

Findings and Analysis

The data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software for content analysis via a thematic analysis technique. The transcribed interviews underwent a coding process wherein the participants narratives were recorded relating to respective contexts and perspectives based on the research questions (Sutton & Austin, 2015). A unified conceptual framework was used within which the findings were analysed. This included understanding the origin and development of PR in the region, the current practice of PR in the region and identifying various environmental factors and challenges that influence the practice. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations and The Global Public Relations Framework by Sriramesh and Vercic have been used as the overarching theoretical framework that helps in analysis.

Country-wise findings and analysis:

Qatar

Origin, Evolution, and Current PR Landscape

There wasn't a clear indication or clarity from any of the interviewees as to when PR first started being practiced in the region. One of the respondents pointed it could have started when Saudi Aramco (a Saudi Oil major with collaboration from America) introduced personnel-oriented programs way back in 1930s which was the starting point of PR in the entire Gulf region. He stated: "*It can be inferred that the era of oil exploration in Qatar also must have brought PR to the attention of companies. The region actively sought Nationals from different parts of the world*

to constitute the workforce of oil majors. This also created a need for communication, especially with the diverse employees. So internal communication could have been a starting point”.

3 of the respondents credited Qatar's economic boom as the cradle of PR practices. *“The economic growth attracted many international businesses to Qatar. They brought with them the corporate culture and that’s how PR started getting recognized”.*

An interviewee who is also a National of Qatar and has been associated with the industry for more than a decade mentioned how all government ministries have a department for PR. He mentioned how some government organizations like Qatar Airways, Qatar Foundation, Qatar Gas and Qatar National Bank have PR units comparable to those in international organizations.

A respondent interestingly stated that it was not until FIFA 2022 that PR took off in Qatar. *“FIFA presented itself with a big opportunity for communication professionals. We worked alongside professionals from almost all parts of the world. Responsible communication keeping in mind the Government guidelines was the key. Delivering a positive message was critical as this was the first time a Gulf nation was hosting such a big tournament”.*

Presently, several major international PR companies like Ogilvy, and Burson, have established offices in Doha. Media houses have also proliferated rapidly, there are currently 7 newspapers in circulation in Qatar with 3 published in English. As far as the broadcast media is concerned there are two prominent channels, one being Aljazeera Network which stands today as the most significant organization in the Arab world (Almutairi et al., 2019). Qatar Broadcasting Service (QBS) runs the radio services and Qatar News Agency (QNA) is a newswire that receives and diffuses local news throughout the world (Almutairi et al., 2019).

The analysis of interviewee data points more towards the technical rather than strategic nature of PR in Qatar. Quoting an interviewee *“Though PR as an industry is evolving, it still has a long way to go. PR as a profession is still undervalued. Most of the work of PR professions involves coordinating and managing routine tasks like social media updates, handling events, internal communication.”*

The value of PR involvement in decision-making by the management or the positive involvement of PR in strategic decisions was not mentioned by any participant. The analysis of interviews shows that the PR model presently being practiced in Qatar resonates with the Press

agency or publicity model of Grunig and Hunt. Staging of events, passing information to media, organizing tours and even receiving guests were some of the most mentioned points by interviewees followed by preparing press materials and managing the department budget. Gaining publicity for the company was described as the purpose of PR by respondents. Only one respondent working with a PR agency mentioned research and writing regular blogs on industry trends as his important KPI (Key Performance Area).

Another interesting point to note was that out of 10 interviewees, only 4 had a degree or professional qualification in PR. Further, 7 out of 10 interviewees reiterated that they favoured experience over academic background.

In addition to the above, Corporate Social Responsibility was highlighted as a new area designated between PR and marketing verticals. This was mentioned as an important role that is still evolving in the country. A respondent working for local company based and headquartered out of Doha emphasized how his organization is fostering partnerships, embedding sustainability and making a positive impact. When asked how the PR department contributes to CSR he stated *“Most of the strategic planning, which initiatives to choose is taken by the management, PR or communication department ensures that these CSR efforts are highlighted and communicated to the stakeholders as CSR helps in building organizations trust and image”*. It can be inferred from the statement that like other PR functions, CSR is also in the nascent stage and still not a strategic concept in Qatar.

Environmental factors

Four factors prominently emerge after a thematic analysis of interview recordings. These factors have been identified to play an important role in influencing the PR practices in the region:

Qatar National Vision 2030:

The Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 encapsulates the nation's developmental aspirations for its citizens by focusing on four interconnected pillars: Human Development, Social Development, Economic Development and Environmental Development. The 2030 vision has led to a shift in the socio-economic landscape and new business and development initiatives have spurred the growth for PR professionals. As reiterated by one of the respondents *“In line with the Vision 2030, Qatar is today beaming with opportunities, so many local and international*

businesses are thriving and all this leading to an increased demand for industries like PR, Social Media Marketing. In May this year, Qatar is also hosting the MEPRA (Middle East Public Relations Association) conference on the Outlook for PR in the Middle East”.

Education :

Respondents stated how in the past few years Qatar has made significant strides forward in the realm of PR training and education. Several institutes like the Al Jazeera Training Institute, Qatar University offer long-term degree courses and short-term training courses. Recently in 2020 , International Public Relations Association(IPRA) started the Qatar chapter to enhance its activities in the field of public relations. Dar Al Sharq, a leading institution in providing distinguished services in the field of media, advertising and PR signed a cooperation agreement with IPRA to provide certain services and outreach to public relations personnel in Qatar to enhance awareness of, and excellence in, the field. The organization is also presently working on a website focussed on PR in the Arab World.

Qatar’s shift to be the World Sports Capital

This emerged as a very important theme which was pointed out by all respondents. To quote an interviewee “ *Qatar by hosting FIFA has changed its positioning globally. It has affirmed its status as a global sports leader. Last year alone the country hosted over 100 international, continental and regional sports events*”. He further pointed out that “ *Qatar is the only country that has a day dedicated to sports day every year. It’s called Qatar Sports Day and is an annual event. On this day residents are encouraged to participate in various sports activities that are organized throughout the city. It’s a holiday for all so that the full day can be used for sports*”.

“Qatar’s success in sports events achieves three main goals for the nation, it fosters a well-being within the country, it enhances international diplomatic ties and also helps position itself as a prominent global power for sports.”

Environment to support growth and innovation

Qatar’s economy has always thrived through self-sufficiency. Despite the economic blockade of 2017 and the Covid 19 pandemic, its economy remained unscathed. The country has built a diversified economy driven by both local and foreign private sector initiatives. As pointed

out by an interviewee working for a start-up “ *Last year the Government announced a substantial QR 9 billion investment in technology, innovation, and artificial intelligence (AI). This investment was announced to create an environment where startups can flourish, leveraging cutting-edge technologies to drive growth and innovation*”.

This investment in technology and AI reflects the country’s initiative to support businesses and startups financially. “ *The government has designed the regulatory framework to ease the process of starting and running a business, streamline business regulations, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and ensure a transparent and efficient regulatory environment*”.

Challenges

Two broad themes emerged from the analysis:

PR is not recognized as a strategic function

The PR industry is still at a very early stage and is not recognized as a core organizational function. There is a need to educate leaders of the organization and the industry has not yet moved beyond technical expertise and press agency. Only one out of the 10 interviewees attended a PR conference in the last 5 years and is a member of a public relations institutional body.

Lack of integrated marketing communication Campaigns

The lack of integration between different marketing verticals makes it challenging to conceptualize and execute impactful PR and marketing campaigns. While digital media has grown in the region, often digital PR is handled by the social media team with little or no coordination between those handling PR.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Both expats and locals constitute the key stakeholders for a PR professional. But the diversity in terms of language, culture and mindset makes it challenging for the professionals to effectively communicate to them. Arabic is one of the main languages and is often a pre-requisite for those willing to join the PR sector.

Future Directions

There is a noticeable trend among younger generations of Qataris to learn PR and the art of persuasion. This has led to an increase in demand for PR related courses. Qatar is hosting many events like the recently concluded Qatar Web Summit, Qatar Grand Prix F1 Race , FIFA all this has increased the demand for PR professionals. As more events are expected in the coming years it is predicted that the industry will grow.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Origin, Evolution and Current PR Landscape

From the interview analysis , some important points on the evolution of PR in UAE were identified that are discussed further. PR in UAE just like the country has undergone a significant transformation. As understood from the interviews PR can be divided into two phase one after the western influence on PR brought by oil majors in Dubai around 1970 and one before that.

In the pre-westernization phase,two interesting insights can be drawn from the interviews. First, PR was associated with the hospitality industry. It was viewed as the domain of good-looking people who received visitors, arranged protocol, procured visas and arranged transportation. As pointed by one of the interviewees “ *PR officers were also responsible to secure contracts for domestic maids from Asian countries to work in UAE and also helped with secretarial services like typing documents.*” And second was the role of socio-cultural factors- Poetry and majlis (Arabic word for council) that influenced the evolution of PR before modern PR evolved. A senior PR professional working for the government stated “*Poetry was a model for PR in traditional times. It represented a distinct literary voice for the people. Poems were also published in Arabic dailies and were used to spread awareness on nations cultural heritage*”. In the old days “majlis” was considered a very important forum where citizens interacted with rulers and community. It was an informal participatory process, reflecting a two-way communication. It was used as a channel for dissemination of information as well as understanding any concerns. It was also a social venue in which Emiratis showed their hospitality and welcomed guests. In words of a respondent “ *Majlis are very popular among the locals even today but after the advent of modern PR they are now only a social venue ; there is a huge potential however that they hold. A smart majlis can be setup to continue receiving ideas and comments and this can be open to everyone. This will help strengthen the position of Dubai in various sectors.*”

Today, modern PR thrives in the UAE in various degrees in the three largest cities of UAE i.e., Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. This is supported by a transformed public sector, booming private sector, mix of local and multinational PR agencies, professional associations and PR education. Since the advent of Western Public Relations, the PR industry has evolved and grown. Today global firms have established a presence in the UAE, some with an equity relationship with their local partners, and some as fully owned branches of global agencies based out of Europe and USA. UAE also launched Middle East Public Relations Association(MEPRA) in 2001 to make the industry more professional and increase awareness and level of professionalism. One of its objectives is to create educational forums in the region for young nationals to consider PR as a career opportunity

The media landscape in UAE is mixed with both National and International media. The Media Free Zones have contributed extensively in the growth of media. UAE has a high literacy rate and is also one of the most tech-savvy societies. In terms of infrastructure, each of the emirates has its own distinct media set up and content. The content in Abu Dhabi focusses on strong news and sports program, Dubai's focus is on business, entertainment, sports and promoting Dubai as a tourist destination. Sharjah's public media emphasizes on Islamic culture, historical and children's program.

From a theoretical standpoint the research found evidence for a symmetrical model of PR in the country based on two-way communication. Active use of digital media and social media helped facilitate this communication. Another model of relevance that prevails as was inferred from the interviews is the personal influence model of PR. Interviewees mentioned they use interpersonal communication with strategic individuals like media persons, build rapport with them and this helps them to achieve PR objectives.

Environmental factors

Two factors prominently emerge

Culture

UAE's culture has diverged from that of the other countries in the Gulf region. It is today at the crossroads of modernization. Higher education is greatly valued, women are being looked at as potential leaders. The country is already one of the fastest growing as far as digitalization is

concerned. All this has directly led to increase in business both public and private and subsequently also influenced PR . The perception of PR industry has also changed over the years and cultural changes play an important role in shaping new modern image of PR inspired by the Western concepts.

Media

The media scene in UAE has seen significant changes in the last decade, led by Abu Dhabi and Dubai's efforts to modernize, expand and create new media enterprises. Some of the developments include an increase in new media outlets, increase in trade media, reforms and modernization of older media and the creation of Media free zones like Dubai Media City. Another important aspect is the freedom that is given to media “ *Control definitely exist on the media but they are still relatively free especially when compared with other gulf states. Media has been asked to criticize freely although journalists have established boundaries themselves and they censor themselves on sensitive subjects like ruling families, national security, religion or Islam*”. An Interviewee states. Media reach and accessibility is very high and this is another distinct feature of the UAE media landscape. As media is one of the most important stakeholders for PR professionals , the growth , changes and functioning of media plays a direct impact on the PR industry. As ascertained by more than half of the respondents the growth and changes in the media landscape have positively impacted PR . Professionals are already using media effectively to communicate messages.

Challenges

Industry Skill Sets

Respondents emphasized that skill ability based hiring should be the most important criterion while looking for recruits. There are times when policies don't support this and it affects the competence. Some examples drawn from the interviews were the placement of women or minorities in the leadership team to bring diversity inclusion or Emiratisation in the public relations private sector.

Ethical transgression by media and PR professionals

Some PR agencies and organizations follow the practice of luring the media with gifts and offers to cover their events and conferences. This practice affects and challenges the entire industry and the responsibility lies with both PR practitioners and media to follow ethical practices.

Future Directions

As the PR industry in UAE continues to build on the strategic PR functions, it has been marked that there is a growing specialization among PR agencies in sector-specific areas like aviation, technology and others. Professional associations, awards, and PR education and training are helping the PR sector in UAE grow and mature. Social media in UAE is thriving, with one of the most digitally connected populations in the world, and is expected to grow even further. The country's strategic location in the Middle East and a youthful and tech-savvy demographic have propelled social media to the forefront of communication. PR professionals are also using this channel to enhance communication and drive engagement. Influencer marketing using Instagram has been a popular tool with PR professionals and will continue to remain so.

Conclusion:

The research contributes to understanding the practice of Public Relations in the GCC countries of Qatar and UAE. The findings present unique insights into the PR practice of the region and will benefit both academicians and industry practitioners. The research also opens new avenues for future research and inquiry. Scholars can use the framework of the study to probe into PR practices of other Gulf regions like Saudi Arabia, Oman and others.

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