PUBLIC RELATIONS ROLE AND MEDIA DATA STRATEGIES ISSUED BY SAUDI GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS

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Introduction

Public Relations and media communications in Saudi governmental organizations play a significant role in the fight against COVID-19. An extensive study conducted by Worldwide's Analytical Research Division revealed a change in the attitudes of the Public Relations and communications market in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the year 2020. However, there has been a gap in the effectiveness of the strategies of using social media as a tool of public communication. The gap pertains to the most effective tools and the impacts they have on the general public. The researcher will be answering the question of "how" effective social media can be as a communication strategy. This study paper discusses the practices and roles of Public Relations and Media communications strategies issued by the Saudi governmental organizations in the Arab World during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The topic of Public Relations role and media data strategies issued by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is an up-to-date kind of research that deals with the current global state. The research fits the World today and even Public Relations scientific in academic perspectives. The study contributes to the advancement of knowledge for Public Relations professionals and communications leaders in both governmental and non-governmental organizations, which also because this study helps rate the effectiveness of using social media as a communication tool during the era of COVID-19. In the present-day digital World, social media constitutes an effective channel of communication through which organizations can build connections with the public.

There seem to be many organizations that are essentially using social media as a one-way channel for running promotions, rather than as a two-way channel. This has made it difficult for organizations to effectively use social media, despite the potential they bear (Distaso and McCorkindale 2012). Through interviews conducted online, Distaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) established that the four most common challenge faced by Public Relations professionals who were yet to adopt social media was accepting control loss and the inability to predict what the public might do or say. It is for this reason that social media provides avenues for communication between the organization and its public, as well as between the public and its organization, which translates to two-way communication in the social media sphere.

Objectives of this study

This research aims at developing a study on the uses of social media by the Public Relations industry in Saudi governmental organizations. The study investigates the extent to which social media has changed in terms of dealing with information in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study checks the usage of social media and takes Twitter as an example of social media platform to help reach the following objectives.

1. Investigate how Saudi governmental organizations are using social media, especially Twitter, to communicate with the public during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.
2. To explore Public Relations roles and tactics throughout social media by Saudi governmental organizations in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.
3. To examine and assess Public Relations practitioners' perceptions of using social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Saudi governmental organizations.
4. To identify the effectiveness of communication strategies using social media by the Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

5. To observe the effective opportunities of using social media by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

This study's scope is limited to qualitative inquiry. Clark and Creswell (2014) hold that the scope of any study expounds on the limits of any research where the specific parameters form the core business of the study. In other words, the scope is the means through which the study defines the content covered within a review. In this regard, the study primarily focuses on the Public Relations role and media data strategies issued by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic series; these two parameters are the core of this research. Anything discussed in this research revolves around refining the two variables – the Public Relations and media strategies and the Saudi governmental organizations during the pandemic. Other scopes that assisted in the formulation of the research question include the following: social media engagement, the current state of the World in the management of the coronavirus through the media, and its impact so far. Lastly, the study setting is for Saudi Arabia governmental organizations, and it is the origin where the study participants are based. The participants are government officials, Public Relations leaders at the Saudi Ministry of Health as an example of Saudi governmental organizations, and Twitter posts from the Saudi Ministry of Health's official social media account on the Twitter platform.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The critical analysis of the role of Public Relations to strategically curb the pandemic effects has been futile for ages. The cultural value has dramatically influenced the orientations of Public Relations (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2011; Al-Shohaib et al., 2009). The strategy issued by the Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly examined and integrated. The government has tried to cause an impact through social media communications and news release distribution efficiently. The strategies can come about when there is a change in Public Relations in the country. The expected improvement is ensuring a strategic communication

flow within the public domain. Many Public Relations practitioners and professionals continue to struggle with the impact of new media, particularly the Internet. Despite the general perception that corporate websites, email response facilities to citizens, distribution of news releases, and chat rooms are now standard Public Relations practice aspects (Galloway 2005).

Public Relations and Strategic communication are imperative because it helps in passing information from one party to another. The literature review will focus on Public Relations roles, strategic communication, and how the Saudi Arabia government has used it to communicate COVID-19. The literature review will also analyze theories and models of communication, where the theoretical framework will also inform the methodology. This analysis of the existing theories will help understand how they can be used to examine the research problem. Through the literature review, the researcher will investigate and analyze studies related to the research topic and questions that aim to find out the Public Relations role and media data strategies used by Saudi Arabia governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Furthermore, the literature review and the overall research process revolve around theories and models in order to describe phenomena. Using theories and models helps us to develop a better understanding of the research problem. The theories and models are as stated below, which are also explained in more detail in the study. (Stakeholder, Gatekeeping, Persuasion, Key Opinion, Two-step flow theories, and Grunig's four models).

Crisis communication has been greatly transformed due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Saudi Arabia (Hassounah, M., Raheel, H., & Alhefzi, M. (2020). Governmental organizations have implemented creative and innovative solutions to engage external stakeholders such as public members in knowledge and information sharing. Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020) argue that social media provides an opportunity for government officials to generate ideas about public engagement within corporate communication. Therefore, the utilization of social media can help government officials to communicate about any crisis that may face a nation.

According to Hinson (2012), practitioners in Public Relations should manage strategic decision-making and organizational behavior processes that align with public informational needs and should do it from a strategic management point of view. There has been a redefinition of strategic management during the era COVID-19 pandemic to accommodate the utilization of social media. Changes have taken place as far as communicating with the public is concerned. The inclusion of the public in decision-making to promote a balanced dialogue between governmental organizations and public members has been widely fostered.

Park (2021) states that crisis management is one of the most important things when a nation or the World is going through calamities. Crisis management is the process of putting measures in place and employing strategies that will help to reduce negative events. However, there are challenges when it comes to managing crises if there are no effective communication tools. Social media has become an important tool in managing crises across the World. The Saudi Ministry of Health is one of the governmental organizations that have created a dedicated team of social media strategists who have helped create messages that meet public informational needs. When Saudi Arabia started implementing COVID-19 safety guidelines, it was important for the government to explain to the public members why it was doing so and why it was necessary (Alahdal et al., 2020). Through Public Relations, the government of Saudi Arabia explained the importance of citizens adhering to the rules and regulations which were put in place.

Methodology

The methodology conducted for this research study is a content analysis and a semi-structured interview in a qualitative approach. The question overall for the research is to look at the role of Public Relations and the way in which media data strategies have evolved, with particular reference to the COVID-19 pandemic within Saudi governmental organizations. Four key research questions have been identified as relevant in order to gain an overall perception of how governmental organizations used Public Relations

in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 crisis. For the first method, a content analysis, the researcher collected the data in this study from social media platforms, specifically Twitter posts, and requires no permissions because posts were publicly available. However, in the content analysis, the researcher defined the variables for each tweet as follows; messages type, Tweet type, and media type, as well as the level of engagements for each tweet, such as number of likes, number of retweets, and number of replies. The time horizon for this study will be cross-sectional: The first seven months of the pandemic when the World Health Organization announced that it is a global pandemic, and it occurred in Saudi Arabia, which started on the 5th of March to the 5th of October 2020. The researcher chose this period because it includes special events such as the first and second lockdowns. They extended it to contain the Ramadan and pilgrimage (Hajj) months. For the second method, the researcher also conducted a semi-structured interview as a second method to support the first result of the content analysis. The participants are some Public Relations and communications specialists and professionals from the Saudi Ministry of Health as an example of Saudi governmental organizations. Overall, the researcher will analyze the case study to show the need for strong Public Relations and the value of active social media strategies management within governmental institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The case is handling a strong communications plan and media data strategies by Public Relations professionals in Saudi Governmental organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis in 2020. However, it is essential to examine the Saudi governmental organizations' roles and communications strategies issued during the crisis of COVID-19 to control the risk and crisis communications management.

Expected results and conclusion

This study is now in progress, which means that it is under the researcher's work. Where the researcher is now working on analyzing the data that has been collected to draw conclusions for the purpose of this study and to find answers to the research questions being raised. However, the

researcher will be giving assessments and explorations on the way that the Public Relations role and media data strategies were used by the Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis as well as offering recommendations for the field of Public Relations and social media communication strategies. The limitations so far are the way of collecting and analyzing the data is time-consuming because it requires preparation, permissions, and learning some software for analysis.

Keywords: Public Relations roles; Media communications strategies; Social media; Twitter; Saudi organizations; Covid-19 pandemic; Risk and crisis communications

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