

ETHICS AND SOCIETY

CHALLENGES IN ORGANISATIONAL & PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

EVANDRO OLIVEIRA
GISELA GONÇALVES
[EDS]



LABCOM
COMUNICAÇÃO
& ARTES



GOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES: THE SAUDI PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

Mutaz Alotaibi

/King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia & Cardiff University, UK.

Susan Kinnear

/Cardiff University, UK

Introduction

In the digital age, strategic communication has emerged as a pivotal force in shaping public perception and government policies, especially during crises. This paper explores the governmental Public Relations Strategies and Public Communication during the Pandemic Crisis. It focuses on the role and efficacy of strategic communication by the Saudi Arabian government during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly using social media platforms. This research addresses the critical intersection of public relations, crisis communication, and digital media. It provides insights into the effective strategies of governmental organizations in times of global health pandemic crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges and required innovative public communication strategies. The Saudi Arabian government's response, which relies on social media to disseminate information and engage with citizens, offers a rich context for analysing the nature of public relations and strategic communication (Aldarhami et al., 2020). In this paper, a theoretical framework is developed to frame public communication

actions by the Saudi governmental organization. This framework is developed using various communication theories and models, such as stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models. It also includes Grunig's four models, the key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory. By applying these theoretical lenses, it is possible to understand how information was managed and presented during the crisis.

This paper also explores the strategic role of public relations and social media communication by Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The purpose of the study is to examine the public relations strategies implemented by the Saudi governmental organizations and their effectiveness in managing the crisis through social media as a public communication tool. By analysing existing theories and models of public relations and communication, the literature review offers a comprehensive understanding of how strategic communication helped to disseminate vital information during the pandemic. This review paper uses a thematic review methodology. This approach involves identifying, analysing, discussing, and explaining themes within the literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic of social media communication of Saudi governmental Public Relations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Despite extensive research on the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021), there remains a significant gap concerning the effectiveness of these strategies. By investigating the effectiveness of these tools, the research seeks to answer pivotal questions about the evolution of media data strategies and the role of public relations in crisis situations. The primary research question focuses on the role of public relations and the evolution of media strategies within Saudi governmental organizations during the COVID-19 crisis. This is further broken down into specific queries that investigate the use of social media platforms such as Twitter/X.

Theoretical Framework

Strategic communication is imperative because it helps in passing information from one party to another. The literature review will focus on strategic communication and how the Saudi Arabia government has used it to communicate COVID-19. The literature review will also analyse 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 analyse studies related to the research topic and questions that aim to find out the public relations role and media data strategies used by the Saudi Arabia governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The government of Saudi Arabia has done a lot as well as other governments (Alahdal, Basingab, & Alotaibi, 2020).

The literature review and research revolve around theories and models. The theories and models help us to develop a better understanding of the research problem. This paper examines various communication theories and models, such as the stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models, alongside Grunig's four models, the key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory, to frame the government's actions within a theoretical context. These theoretical lenses help in understanding the processes through which information was managed and presented to the public during the crisis. The theories are as stated and explained below.

Stakeholder, gatekeeping, and persuasion models

According to stakeholder theory, leaders must understand and account for all stakeholders (Nie, Ibrahim, Mustapha & Mokhtar, 2019). Stakeholders are important in any nation or organization because of their important contributions. In the case of a country, citizens are the major stakeholders. They play an essential role in impacting decision-making. On the other hand, they are paying taxes that impact the revenue of a nation. The theory applies to the literature review because the literature review has focused

on communications between the government and the citizens (Nie et al., 2019). Moreover, the government should understand and account for citizens because it must inform them of the health risks that face them. As far as strategic communication is concerned, the essentiality of stakeholders cannot be ignored. The government must employ communication strategies that are aligned with the needs of the citizens across the nation.

In communication, gatekeeping is the process of selecting and prioritizing information based on relevance and importance (Kyprianos, Sifaki & Bantimaroudis, 2020). In the busy modern world, there is a lot of information from events and occasions. It would be impossible for media houses, institutions, and leaders to share every piece of information with their audiences (Kyprianos et al., 2020). Gatekeeping helps to select the information that will be more useful and important to audiences. The gatekeeping theory is important to the literature review. In strategic communication, analysing information is one of the most important steps (Kyprianos et al., 2020). Analysing information helps to know the most important information and information that can be dropped or communicated later. Apart from focusing on strategic communication, the literature review also focuses on COVID-19 (Kyprianos et al., 2020). The application of gatekeeping theory in the literature review helps to understand the importance of prioritizing COVID-19 information.

Persuasion theory is a mass communication theory that deals with messages with the main aim of changing the behaviours and attitudes of receivers (Geers et al., 2018). In this case, it is important to know and understand that there are different reasons why communication takes place. In some cases, communication is aimed at informing receivers, while in other cases, it is aimed to persuade receivers to change in one way or another (Geers et al., 2018). The theory is relevant to the literature review because it touches on one of the main goals of implementing strategic communication (Geers et al., 2018). The literature review focuses on the application of strategic communication in persuading people to change their behaviours to frustrate the spread of COVID-19. With the help of the theory, it will be easy to know if

the strategies employed by the government are persuading or the government needs to employ more effective strategies (Geers et al., 2018).

Research by Mohammed & Ferraris (2021) argues that social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have been a significant source of information during COVID-19. People who are active on social media can easily be affected by the information shared on social media because they are exposed to it most of the time. According to Mudrick, Miller, & Atkin (2016), social media has the power to affect the behaviours of social media users. Even though Mudrick et al. (2016) focus on the influence of social media from a marketing point of view, their work shows that social media is one of the tools that can influence consumers' behaviours.

Grunig's four models

Grunig and Hunt models are associated with public relations. The models are arranged from basic to sophisticated models. The first model is the press agency model. In this model, an organization or government gains the public's attention (Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). Press agency uses one-way communication to communicate to the target audiences, and it is hard to evaluate this model's impact on audiences. The second model is the public information model. In the public information model, the goal is to share truthful information with the recipients ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The major characteristic of the public information model is that it is one-way communication. However, trustworthiness and accuracy of the information are major emphases. The third model is the two-way asymmetrical model ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The model advocates for two-way communication. The use of persuasive communication is common, and its aim is to influence the stakeholders' actions, behaviours, and attitudes. The fourth model is a two-way symmetrical model ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The fourth model promotes and sustains two-way beneficial relationships where back and forth discussions are promoted to ensure that all parties are involved ((Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Ni, 2021). The two-way symmetrical model offers an ethical advantage because it considers stakeholders by making them part and parcel of the communication

model. When there is accountability and transparency, citizens trust the government, promoting a good relationship between the government and its citizens.

The Grunig and Hunt 4 models of public relations are helpful in examining the government's COVID-19 communication strategies because they offer a framework to categorize and evaluate the effectiveness of various communication approaches (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021). The models present basic and sophisticated models in public relations. With an understanding of how the government of Saudi Arabia was communicating about COVID-19, it will be easier to identify the models that the government used. The four different models have varying levels of effectiveness (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021). The application of the models will help to know why communication worked or why it did not. For example, the first two models are one-way communication, while the third and fourth models are two-way communication. Investigating the approaches the government used to communicate will help to know if the government employed the first, second, third, fourth, or several models.

Key opinion theory

Key Opinion Theory is mainly used in marketing and especially social media marketing. The theory focuses on the aspect of using social media platforms to influence members of society (Wang, Bai, Li & Wang, 2020). There is a direct link between the theory and the research and literature review. The research has focused on how the government of Saudi Arabia has been using social media platforms to influence the Saudis. Through social media platforms, the government (MOH) has managed to increase knowledge of COVID-19 among Saudis (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, the use of the theory in the research is appropriate because the theory is concerned with how to use social media to influence public opinion, which is in line directly with the research focus. This review examines how Saudi governmental organizations, specifically the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH), use social media platforms to influence public behaviours and increase awareness of COVID-19. By applying Key Opinion Theory, the research connects

theoretical knowledge with practical implications, explaining how social media an effective tool for public health communication during a crisis can be.

Two-step floww theory

The Two-Step Flow Theory states that information goes through two steps before it reaches the targeted audience (Soffer, 2019). For example, gatekeepers or opinion leaders convey information to their audiences. The theory concludes that most people form opinions based on the opinions of their leaders (Soffer, 2019). The theory is applicable in this research because it has touched on the essentiality of using media to form the opinions of public members. The aspect of leadership is evident in this case because leaders are responsible for making decisions (Soffer, 2019). In Saudi governmental organizations, leaders play a crucial role in decision-making and disseminating information. This is evident as Saudis have gained significant knowledge about COVID-19 and effective ways to handle the pandemic, which is primarily due to their leaders' influence and communication efforts (Soffer, 2019). As a result, the theory emphasizes the significance of leadership and media in public communication during a global health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public Relations, Social Media, and COVID-19

Public relations, social media, and COVID-19 are three terms that have been used in the literature, and they are related as far as strategic communication is concerned. In the next section, the literature review will focus on public relations strategies and the utilization of social media to communicate about COVID-19. The government of Saudi Arabia uses social media to communicate to its citizens, and it is important to investigate if social media tools helped in the promotion of public relations roles. This section will also focus on the social media platforms that the government employs.

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 behaviour 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 the public members has been widely fostered. The reason behind it is that the use of social media has presented a platform where members of the public can contribute. The feedback of members of the public influences the government in making decisions. Traditional public relations activities, such as media relations and information sharing, have changed public relations practices during this time of COVID-19. The government and organizations have been using digital platforms more than ever before. As opposed to the pre-social media era when the governments relied heavily on mass media, the government has incorporated social media as a tool for promoting public practices, promoting a shift within public relations departments.

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. Moreover, it is limited in nations with a small percentage

of people connected to social media. The ability of social media platforms to promote instant communication makes them suitable channels for communication but only for audiences that have embraced the use of digital tools of communication.

Park (2021), along with Tambo, Djuikoue, Tazemda, Fotsing & Zhou (2021), argue that there is a direct need to use effective communication tools when managing risks. There is a connection between risk managing and crisis communication. When the government communicates about a certain crisis, some citizens might respond with panic, which exposes them to risks such as stress and depression (Park, 2021). Given that social media promotes immediate communication, the government can use social media to reduce the risk of panic among members of society. For example, when people are panicking because of a new outbreak, the government can use social media to reassure them that they can protect their lives, thus reducing stress (Tambo et al., 2021). Even though the risk of misinformation is an issue of concern, some strategies can be used to reduce the risk. Governments using social media can employ social media managers who ensure that there are no accounts that imitate the country's name. The best way to implement this is to have laws in place that criminalise the use of fake accounts. The government can also employ social media personnel who explore the internet to ensure that there are no fake accounts imitating government's accounts.

The increased use of social media during COVID-19 is similarly reflected in Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Andijan, Fazio, and Azhar (2020) reported that containment measures against COVID-19 such as lockdowns, closure of learning institutions, and banning all forms of social gatherings required the proactive implementation of communication strategies by governmental officials in many of the GCC countries. In this regard, media data strategies proved pivotal in controlling the spread of COVID-19. For instance, Andijan, Fazio, and Azhar (2020, p.842) reported that "Multiple awareness campaigns in different languages are in progress through various forms of media to increase public awareness about COVID-19 infection". Other efforts include providing timely information on the rate of

infection, death, and recovery. Other public relations programs include educating the public about curfew hours and following government directives. However, government officials reported lockdown curfew violations and special cases during the holy month of Ramadan (Orfali et al., 2021). In this case, it was evident that despite the government's initiatives, some GCC citizens failed to heed the government's advice.

In their research, Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi (2020) focus on the variety of voices on social media discussing COVID-19 with specific reference to WhatsApp and Twitter platforms which are widely used in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Even though most scholars have focused on the positive side of using social media as a platform to communicate, the current study focuses on both the negative and positive sides. It is important to note that the social media platforms used for good and beneficial purposes are the same platforms used to spread false information and cause chaos (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Different levels of the government of Saudi Arabia, organizations, and public members have been utilizing social media platforms. Social media platforms bring together people from different backgrounds and classes (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020). Governments are changing to align their service delivery with the interests and needs of the citizens (Al-Ghamdi & Albawardi, 2020).

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. For instance, selecting a dedicated team of public relations experts to address people's concerns about the spread of the virus and mitigation measures. The adoption of digital media varies across nations. Likewise, the Jordanian MOH has implemented social media strategies during the pandemic to inform the public about containment measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, and handwashing via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. (Al-Dmour et al., 2020).

During the era of COVID-19, the government has worked hard to implement strategic communication. The first area pertains to the use of social media, where the government is the source of information. In this regard, social media has been seen as a tool that the government can use to convey information about an issue that is urgent (Aljameel et al., 2021; Du Plessis, 2018). COVID-19 updates were urgent, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic. There was no information about the pandemic because it was new to people (Alfaro, 2020). However, using social media, it was possible and easy to reach many people. In this case, proximity principles apply. The principle of closeness states that publics tend to form relationships with people who are closer to them (Ittefaq, 2019). From a communication point of view, proximity principles apply when the communicator avails the information to the targeted audience (Ittefaq, 2019). In this case, the communicator ensures that information is directed and channelled to the relevant beneficiary or recipient. The second area that Aldarhami et al. (2020), Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020), Wang and Wang (2020), and Du Plessis (2018) have agreed with Aljameel et al. (2021) is about the use of social media where the government is not the source of information. The WHO used its online platforms to communicate about the pandemic when there was an outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Technology has made it possible for people worldwide to connect (Aldarhami et al., 2020). Saudi Arabia has opened to the global community, and therefore, the people of Saudi Arabia could access information about COVID-19 through online platforms (Wang and Wang, 2020).

The best way a government can protect its citizens is by having constant communication about the prevailing issues (Aldarhami et al., 2020). Understanding the citizens is paramount because it avoids unnecessary conflicts with the government (Alahdal et al., 2020). 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.

Critical Examination of Reviewed Studies

Raising awareness and providing access to adequate information during a public health crisis is vital for government organizations. Aldarhami et al. (2020) argue that social media use in public information related to COVID-19 is instrumental to the government of Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has provided citizens with information concerning social distancing from regular handwashing to stay-at-home directives. Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that 78% of Saudi Arabia citizens relied on the MOH for information related to COVID-19 as a reliable source in 2020. Similar findings by Huynh et al. (2020) reveal a similar pattern in Vietnam, where 86% of citizens believed the government for COVID-19 information. Similarly, Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that high levels of public awareness create opportunities for governmental organizations to implement containment measures during a public health crisis. Aldarhami et al. (2020) report that “high levels of awareness among the Saudi population, demonstrated in the early stages of the pandemic, indicate the existence of established plans by the government to educate the nation about coronavirus” (p. 682). It is therefore arguable that the Saudi MOH has established communication strategies to disseminate information and create public awareness about COVID-19. Public awareness campaigns conducted by the MOH included critical information related to coronavirus and prevention strategies such as Stay-at-home, Meter-and-half, We-cooperate-we-do-not-indulgence, Coming-back-with-caution, and Without-your-right-hand. These are some of the public awareness media campaigns that the Saudi MOH conducted. The analysis by Aldarhami et al. (2020) clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the use of social media in communicating about COVID-19 by the Saudi MOH because the information shared by the government was helpful to citizens.

Even though Alhassan & AlDossary (2021) have paid more attention to social media as the fastest way to communicate with the public, they have also focused on social media as a tool that promotes engagements between the government and citizens. During the outbreak of COVID-19, the world was in a state of shock, and not every person managed to handle the news of the pandemic without becoming stressed or anxious (Alhassan & AlDossary, 2021). The deployment of social media played a useful role in measuring public response as well as levels of stress and anxiety. One of the advantages of using social media as a communication tool to engage the public is an immediate response (Alhassan & AlDossary, 2021). After posting, people can reply and air their views. If they do not understand the message that has been passed across, they can immediately state so. Social media presented the Ministry of Health with an opportunity to communicate and engage members of the public (Alhassan & AlDossary, 2021). Through citizens' responses, the government could assess if its strategies were working or not. This can be explained using the Shannon and Weaver communication model.

According to the Shannon and Weaver communication model, human communication can be broken down into seven concepts (Kubota, 2019). The concepts are sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, receiver, and feedback. With social media, the government utilized the seven concepts (Kubota, 2019). The information starts from the source and ends with the public members giving feedback about the communication. In this case, the World Health Organization is the source of information. The reason behind it is that the WHO has been informing respective nations about COVID-19 and the best ways to deal with the virus. The encoder is the government of Saudi Arabia. The government of Saudi Arabia is responsible for converting the information from the WHO into details that can be shared with the members of the public. The channel of information can be associated with social media platforms. The literature review focuses on the use of social media, and this means that it is the primary channel. Regarding the concept of noise, this may only happen if there is an error when sending a message. It

affects the process of passing the message to the intended consumer. The fifth concept is the decoder (Kubota, 2019). In this case, the information that the government of Saudi Arabia shares is converted into data that members of the public can consume. The sixth concept is the destination (Kubota, 2019). In this concept, the information gets to members of the public. The last concept is feedback, which is associated with the response of the recipients (Kubota, 2019). In the case of Saudi Arabia, this entails the response of citizens after consuming the information.

Aljameel et al. (2021) conducted a study to investigate five regions within Saudi Arabia and the levels of awareness in each of the regions. The main aim was to know the effectiveness of the methods of awareness that were used in every region. The social media platform associated with the study was Twitter (Aljameel et al., 2021). The government of Saudi Arabia used Twitter to make some of the most important communications about COVID-19. According to the findings, the levels of awareness among the five regions differed.

The study by Aljameel et al. (2021) also focused on public sentiments and their effects on creating awareness among the people of Saudi Arabia. When the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was a pandemic, information started circulating on social media platforms (Aljameel et al., 2021). Even though not every piece of information was accurate, much information circulated was factual and from the WHO. As a result, people were aware of COVID-19 but had little knowledge of how to deal with the pandemic. According to Alomari, Katib, Albeshri, & Mehmood (2021), the modern world is connected to a level never seen before. Technology has fostered innovations and technological means of bringing global citizens together. Social media platforms are used for fun and entertainment and are also used to communicate important information with members of society.

The first revelation, as presented by Alomari et al. (2021), pertains to the government. After analysing the tweets that were collected, there were fifteen measures of COVID-19. The measures are the strategies that the

government has put in place for citizens to follow to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The role of social media in public relations has been depicted as crucial in this case. The second revelation pertains to the significance of social media in creating a platform where the government communicates and gets the chance to interact with the citizens or get information from the citizens (Alomari et al., 2021). Social media platforms promote engagements, and that is evident in the tweets that were collected. After the government communicated about the measures that should be put in place, there were responses and concerns from the public members (Alomari et al., 2021). In this regard, it is important to investigate the goals of public relations in any government. The main goal is to communicate with the citizens and ensure that there is clarity. When there is immediate feedback from the public, the government can assess if the message was received by the public members positively or not. In this case, the application of McNamara's pyramid of outputs and outcomes would be essential. The three steps of McNamara's pyramid model are inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Inputs refer to the material and strategic components of communication programs. Outputs refer to the physical materials and activities to produce writing and designs of communication. Outcomes refer to the results that are attained after implementing specific communication strategies. The theory applies to the primary goal of government using social media to communicate with citizens. In this case, the main goal of communication is to produce positive outcomes, and that is to inform members of the public. The government can use the model to design an effective communication channel. The model brings together all essential aspects of communication. In addressing the aspect of outputs, the government can come up with a strategy that is most likely to be effective. After identifying the strategy, the selection of materials becomes pertinent. In this case, the use of technological devices becomes essential. The activities that are involved are posting and sharing information. After coming up with a strategic communication plan and identifying activities and materials to use, the government can

attain the outcomes that it desires. Attaining positive outcomes is a likely scenario when the government employs the best materials and approaches to communication.

Desvars-Larrive et al. (2020) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic affected many nations across the world. Both developed and third-world nations did not anticipate the pandemic, and therefore, the impact was severe because all nations were caught unaware. However, one aspect was crucial: communicating the problem to the public members (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). When there is a health concern, pharmaceutical concerns are put in place. However, this was not the case in COVID-19. The outbreak of COVID-19 came at a time when there was no medicine to control it. The healthcare sector did not have enough information about the best pharmaceutical interventions to employ (Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). However, non-pharmaceutical interventions played an integral role in controlling the spread of COVID-19.

The utilization of social media gives citizens a platform to be heard and contribute to matters of the nation (Joos, 2019). Citizens can utilize social media to consult with the government as well as seek advice and guidance. Based on the research by Zhao and Zhang (2017) social media makes it easy for users to access public forums. As a result, they can produce and share information on issues of public importance. At the same time, public relations play an essential role in enabling organizations to gain better knowledge on stakeholder management. According to Ji, North, and Liu (2017), experts in the field of public relations must consider the significance of research in meeting the interests of stakeholders. They should include public participation and engagement through available online forums. There has been a realization of the significance of social media strategies and public relations. This realization has been during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is worldwide. The utilization of social media stands out as a strategy that produces positive fruits and thus influencing governments to utilize a strategic management approach that guides social media as a highly effective strategy in dealing with COVID-19. Some governments, such as the United

States and the United Kingdom, have been using social media before, and they have proven that it can be effective in communicating. For this reason, some of the nations across the world have opted for social media with the main aim of promoting effective communication and reaching a significant number of people within a short time. Also, a proactive approach to stakeholder management is essential in addressing key stakeholder concerns. According to stakeholder management theory, there is a dire need for an organization to create value for all stakeholders (Pedrini & Ferri, 2019). From the government's perspective, the theory puts more emphasis on the need for the government to create value for citizens. The government can do so by ensuring that it meets the needs of the citizens. For instance, it is important to note that misinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic have been rampant. Social media platforms such as Twitter have been used as tools of misinformation asserted by Grazed and Maia (2020). Conspiracy theories about the virus's origin have also been spreading at an alarming rate (Grazed & Maia, 2020). Conspiracy theory is defined as the attempt to explain tragic events. However, it does not dwell on the truth but associates' people and countries with tragic events (Douglas et al., 2019). For this reason, stakeholder management favours the governmental organizations by providing them with the best approaches to disseminate information concerning the COVID-19.

Without fear of doubt, social media platforms have played host to conspiracy theories and that has affected most of the vulnerable people who do not know more about COVID-19 (Prasad, 2021). The sophistication of such campaigns requires that public health officials implement public relations programs that are robust and will help maintain public confidence during the era of COVID-19. Consequently, the government opened unique social media accounts and utilized them for communicating with the citizens. When there is a high level of awareness among citizens on the availability of legit social media accounts that belong to the government, citizens are likely to prioritize the information that such platforms share.

The outbreak of COVID-19 redefined how some governments use social media platforms to communicate with their citizens as well as engage them on matters about COVID-19. Many researchers have invested in extensive research to examine how government organizations utilize social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Muniz-Rodriguez et al. 2020). Additionally, the essential role of social media in intergovernmental information sharing and strategic planning has also been researched, e.g., by Gil-Garcia et al., 2019. The researchers conclude that governments, through their respective social media platforms, can share information. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) found that the use of social media by local governments to enhance community engagement and participation revealed the role of social media and public relations in promoting transparency and accountability.

According to Islm et al. (2021), specific factors motivate citizens to engage governments on social media platforms during COVID-19. Citizens do not engage the government more often when there are no crises. If they are interested in accessing information from the government, they use other ways of communicating with the government than social media (Islm et al., 2021). For example, there are government offices that provide information about the initiatives and services of the government. People not connected to social media opt for such methods of communication. COVID-19 has changed the interests of citizens because information about COVID-19 has become important, thus increasing the interest of citizens in knowing more about the virus (Islm et al., 2021). After the WHO announced COVID-19 and its seriousness, governments were responsible for devising measures and guidelines to help save their citizens. The population and environment of a nation affect the spread of COVID-19. For this reason, the WHO has advised nations to come up with interventions and implement them. Even though the WHO is not a legislative body, it has been given the authority to give directives on health measures that specific nations should take by countries under the United Nations. The government is the supreme authority in any

respective nation, giving it the authority to come up with health and safety guidelines. It becomes important for citizens to enquire from the government if they are interested in factual data or accurate information.

Discussion

Public awareness campaigns by government organizations have helped to manage communication during COVID-19. According to Al-Hanawi et al. (2020), the Saudi Ministry of Health undertook a comprehensive public awareness campaign through Facebook and Twitter in response to the pandemic. Through Twitter and Facebook, the government communicated about COVID-19 and what people should do to reduce the spread of the virus. Communications via social media and government websites have proven instrumental so far in providing COVID-19-related information. Of note, demographic factors - age and gender - have been studied to see their influence on social media use. For example, Asaad et al. (2020) indicated that middle-income and highly educated female respondents have more information concerning emerging infectious diseases than other segments of Saudi society. Asaad also concluded that, as expected, younger and educated individuals are more aware of digital and social media (e.g., Twitter) than the older generation. Also, improving public relations and exploring media data strategies provides essential input into reducing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public relations focus on the best ways to communicate, while media data helps in conveying the specific message that an organization or government wants to pass. Identifying the best methods of communication and conveying the right information helps to reduce COVID-19 because people get to know what they need to do to deal with COVID-19. Hence, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play a critical role in disseminating awareness-raising interventions.

During the pandemic, the government took action to frustrate the spread of COVID-19 (Alahdal et al., 2020). The two strategies that the Ministry of Health opted for were curfews and quarantine. However, the two strategies were aimed at protecting the citizens from contracting COVID-19. It is

important to note that COVID-19 is a new illness, so people do not know as much about it as other diseases (Alahdal et al., 2020). Members of the public are likely to have little to no knowledge of a new illness. Communications from the government become an important aspect of public relations roles in ensuring that public members understand the current health situation with accurate information about the pandemic.

Similar studies on the role of public relations practices in communicating with the public by other governments have been conducted to establish the importance of digital communications during national emergencies. For example, Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, and Alfaro (2020) argue that digital communications played a significant role in providing access to information and creating awareness for the public in Spain during the pandemic. The study revealed that access to information among the younger generation created a high level of knowledge concerning COVID-19 related information. The study only focused on Spain; however, other studies presented information on how digital communication increased awareness in different countries for other publics. Such studies include Wang and Wang (2020) and Du Plessis (2018), who demonstrate that access to information and an established information technology infrastructure increases the efficiency of public relations and communication strategies that educate people in hard-to-reach areas. Hard-to-reach areas are locations where mass media organizations do not cover due to issues of setting up satellites to transmit broadcasting signals. Telecommunication organizations have invested heavily in setting up their satellites, and that has increased people covered by mobile phone services. With the help of the infrastructure of telecommunication organizations, it is easier to reach more people than televisions and radios can. Aldarhami et al. (2020) likewise concluded that increased awareness is directly related to improved educational levels, social media use, and demographic characteristics.

AlHumaid, Ali & Farooq (2020) assert that COVID-19 has affected many people psychologically and increased stress among the people of Saudi Arabia (AlHumaid et al., 2020). They argue that, despite some limitations,

the Saudi government has been effective at limiting the impacts of the virus as it has deployed effective public relations strategies such as the utilization of social media to communicate with the citizens. For example, the government has utilised constant communication forums to update citizens on the progress of response to COVID-19 and what citizens need to do to be safe. The effectiveness of these strategies is seen in each strategy's ability to address the issue of concern. For example, when communication helps to reduce panic and stress among members of society, it means that the communication effectively dealt with the issues it was designed to deal with (AlHumaid et al., 2020).

Rather than focusing on effectiveness, Hammad & Alqarni (2021) investigated the psychosocial effects of social media during COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia. Their research examines the negative side of social media and how social media platforms were used to increase fear and panic among members of society. One of the disadvantages of social media is that there is a lot of freedom and less supervision. Therefore, it becomes possible and easy for people with no facts to share their assumptions (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021).

Hammad & Alqarni found that anxiety, depression, and social alienation are evident among Saudis who used social media platforms during the outbreak (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Their study of 371 Saudi participants identified that 83% of them were exposed to social media (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Misinformation is one of the factors that led to the mental disorders that the patients were suffering from. Misinformation promoted the sharing of information that increased fear. As a result, stress among citizens increased, thus exposing them to a mental health issue (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Some people sharing COVID-19 information on social media did not source the information from reliable sources, which means that some of the information was inaccurate (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021).

Research Gap and Future Directions

Most millennials are active social media users and have the knowledge and capabilities to differentiate between genuine and misleading information. The benefits of social media in managing and communicating crisis has been reported by Fowler (2017); Eriksson and Olsson (2016). Governments worldwide, especially developing countries, prefer social media such as Twitter to engage the public and demonstrate a readiness to prioritize public health concerns. The reason behind it is that most of the popular social media platforms were founded in developed nations. Therefore, people in developed nations are more used to the technologies when compared to people in other nations across the world. The use of social media has become a priority, especially during this time of COVID-19 (Penny cook, McPhetres, Zhang, Lu, & Rand, 2020). Even though some of the developed nations have used interviewers who meet to face with citizens to collect information, the practice continues to decrease (Penny cook et al., 2020). The reason behind it is that one of the regulations of COVID-19 is social distancing, and social distancing has affected many face-to-face interactions.

Research by Islm et al. (2021) demonstrates a strong connection between social media use and governmental public relations. Their study acknowledges that governments utilize social media as a communication tool (Islm et al., 2021). During the outbreak of COVID-19, governments worldwide had to deploy the most effective forms of communication for their populations. Many people worldwide are subscribed to the internet and have social media accounts (Islm et al., 2021). The best way to communicate with the citizens is by looking into the tools that have high chances of effectiveness or tools that can reach a lot of people and help deliver accurate and timely information.

Multiple studies conducted by Al-Kandari et al. (2019) support the wide-ranging opportunities of social media in public relations. Primarily, social media tools are more efficient, and timesaving compared with traditional media. This is because a social media message can reach many people within the

shortest time and require fewer resources, human or financial, to create and disseminate. To this end, social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) play a pivotal role in public relations, provide insights into citizens' expectations, and amplify government efforts to engage the public. However, despite the numerous benefits of social media in public relations, disadvantages such as propaganda allegations erode public trust in the government to implement a communication crisis plan. In dealing with the issue, it becomes paramount for governments to use social media platforms only to use government sites and shut down any fake accounts. Doing so would reduce the erosion of trust among members of society. Despite extensive research on the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021), there remains a significant gap concerning the effectiveness of these strategies.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is an illness that was never anticipated, and its effects are dire (Abbas et al., 2021). The illness has affected and disrupted many people's lives in South Asia, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries worldwide. As a result, cases of mental illnesses also continue to increase. As opposed to two to three decades ago when there were no social media platforms, the introduction and utilization of social media continues to gain popularity, and governments worldwide have been using the platforms to connect with their citizens (Abbas et al., 2021).

According to Abbas et al. (2021), the pandemic has created fear. Social media platforms have been used as tools to cause fear, and at the same time, they have been used as strategies to help overcome fear (Abbas et al., 2021). With the help of social media, governments have had the opportunity to present clarifications that help erode false information at the citizens' disposal. Fear has been one of the contributing factors to mental illnesses (Abbas et al., 2021). When people share false information on social media, some subscribers take it seriously and allow the information to affect them (Abbas et al., 2021). Through social media, it has become possible for governments to share the truth about COVID-19.

Social media has been beneficial during the time of COVID-19 in different ways. First, it has helped to know the responses that have been made to the illnesses (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021). Second, people in different parts of the world have been able to know what nations across the world are doing to fight the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, through social media, people have been able to encourage each other during this challenging time. The lack of social media would have affected the situation because there would be no platforms to promote engagements and communication (Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021). Scholars have investigated and researched the use of social media in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic era. 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 public. The researcher will be answering the question of “how” effective social media can be as a communication strategy. The literature review bridges the gap by presenting materials that help rate the effectiveness of using social media as a communication tool during the era of COVID-19.

This review paper makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge for public relations and communications professionals working in governmental and non-governmental organisations. It emphasises the pivotal role that public relations and social media communication strategies played in disseminating information during the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and evaluates their dual impact on public health and government communication. The study addresses the existing research gap regarding the effectiveness of social media as a public communication tool in crises. Furthermore, it offers insights and a theoretical framework for public relations and communications professionals, providing a comprehensive analysis of theories and models in public relations and strategic communication.

References

- Abbas, J., Wang, D., Su, Z., & Ziapour, A. (2021). The role of social media in the advent of COVID-19 pandemic: crisis management, mental health challenges and implications. *Risk management and healthcare policy*, 14, 1917.
- Alahdal, H., Basingab, F., & Alotaibi, R. (2020). An analytical study on the awareness, attitude and practice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. *Journal of infection and public health*, 13(10), 1446-1452.
- Aldarhami, A., Bazaid, A. S., Althomali, O. W., & Binsaleh, N. K. (2020). Public Perceptions and Commitment to Social Distancing “Staying-at-Home” During COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of General Medicine*, 13, 677.
- Al-Dmour, H., Salman, A., Abuhashesh, M., & Al-Dmour, R. (2020). Influence of social media platforms on public health protection against the COVID-19 pandemic via the mediating effects of public health awareness and behavioral changes: integrated model. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 22(8), e19996.
- Al-Ghamdi, N. A., & Albawardi, A. H. (2020). Multivocality of Saudi COVID-19 Discourse in Social Media Posts: A Socio-Semiotic Multimodal Perspective. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 20(4).
- Al-Hanawi, M. K., Angawi, K., Alshareef, N., Qattan, A. M., Helmy, H. Z., Abudawood, Y., ... & Alsharqi, O. (2020). Knowledge, attitude and practice toward COVID-19 among the public in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: a cross-sectional study. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8.
- AlHumaid, J., Ali, S., & Farooq, I. (2020). The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and coping with them in Saudi Arabia. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(5), 505.

- Alhassan, F. M., & AlDossary, S. A. (2021). The Saudi Ministry of Health's Twitter Communication Strategies and Public Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Content Analysis Study. *JMIR public health and surveillance*, 7(7), e27942.
- Aljameel, S. S., Alabbad, D. A., Alzahrani, N. A., Alqarni, S. M., Alamoudi, F. A., Babili, L. M., ... & Alshamrani, F. M. (2021). A sentiment analysis approach to predict an individual's awareness of the precautionary procedures to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks in Saudi Arabia. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(1), 218.
- Al-Kandari, A. A., Gaither, T. K., Alfahad, M. M., Dashti, A. A., & Alsaber, A. R. (2019). An Arab perspective on social media: How banks in Kuwait use Instagram for public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 45(3), 101774.
- Alomari, E., Katib, I., Albeshri, A., & Mehmood, R. (2021). COVID-19: Detecting government pandemic measures and public concerns from Twitter Arabic data using distributed machine learning. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(1), 282.
- Andijan, T. A., Fazio, A. A., & Azhar, E. I. (2020). Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Current status and management practices. *Journal of infection and public health*.
- Asaad, A. M., El-Sokkary, R. H., Alzamanan, M. A., & El-Shafei, M. (2020). Knowledge and attitudes towards Middle East respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (MERS-CoV) among health care workers in south-western Saudi Arabia. *East Mediterr Health J*, 26(4), 435-442.
- Bahrini, R., & Qaffas, A. A. (2019). Impact of information and communication technology on economic growth: Evidence from developing countries. *Economies*, 7(1), 21.
- Brunner, B. R. (2019). *Public relations theory: application and understanding*: John Wiley & Sons.

- Desvars-Larrive, A., Dervic, E., Haug, N., Niederkrotenthaler, T., Chen, J., Di Natale, A., ... & Thurner, S. (2020). A structured open dataset of government interventions in response to COVID-19. *Scientific Data*, 7(1), 1-9.
- Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 40, 3-35.
- Du Plessis, C. (2018). Social media crisis communication: Enhancing a discourse of renewal through dialogic content. *Public relations review*, 44(5), 829-838.
- Eriksson, M., & Olsson, E. K. (2016). Facebook and Twitter in crisis communication: A comparative study of crisis communication professionals and citizens. *Journal of contingencies and crisis management*, 24(4), 198-208.
- Fowler, B. M. (2017). Stealing thunder and filling the silence: Twitter as a primary channel of police crisis communication. *Public relations review*, 43(4), 718-728.
- Geers, A. L., Briñol, P., Vogel, E. A., Aspiras, O., Caplandies, F. C., & Petty, R. E. (2018). The application of persuasion theory to placebo effects. *International review of neurobiology*, 138, 113-136.
- Gil-Garcia, J. R., Guler, A., Pardo, T. A., & Burke, G. B. (2019). Characterizing the importance of clarity of roles and responsibilities in government inter-organizational collaboration and information sharing initiatives. *Government Information Quarterly*, 36(4), 101393.
- Gruzd, A., & Mai, P. (2020). Going viral: How a single tweet spawned a COVID-19 conspiracy theory on Twitter. *Big Data & Society*, 7(2), 2053951720938405.
- Gutiérrez-García, E., Recalde, M., & Alfaro, J. A. (2020). Corporate communication in open innovation: a case-study of three multinationals. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.
- Hammad, M. A., & Alqarni, T. M. (2021). Psychosocial effects of social media on the Saudi society during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic: A cross-sectional study. *PloS one*, 16(3), e0248811.

- Hassounah, M., Raheel, H., & Alhefzi, M. (2020). Digital response during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e19338.
- Hinson, M. D. (2012). Examining how social and emerging media have been used in public relations between 2006 and 2012: A longitudinal analysis. *Public Relations Review*.
- Hung-Baesecke, C. J. F., Chen, Y. R. R., & Ni, L. (2021). 16 The Excellence Theory—origins, contribution and critique. In *Public Relations* (pp. 313-334). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Huynh, G., Nguyen, T. N. H., Vo, K. N., & Pham, L. A. (2020). Knowledge and attitude toward COVID-19 among healthcare workers at District 2 Hospital, Ho Chi Minh City. *Asian Pacific Journal of Tropical Medicine*, 13(6), 260.
- Islm, T., Meng, H., Pitafi, A. H., Zafar, A. U., Sheikh, Z., Mubarik, M. S., & Liang, X. (2021). Why do citizens engage in government social media accounts during COVID-19 pandemic? A Comparative Study. *Telematics and Informatics*, 62, 101619.
- Ittefaq, M. (2019). Revisiting News Value Theory in the Age of Globalization. *Journal of Media Studies*, 33(2).
- Jaziri, R., & Miralam, M. S. (2021). The impact of crisis and disasters risk management in COVID-19 times: Insights and lessons learned from Saudi Arabia. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*, 18, 100705.
- Ji, Y. G., Li, C., North, M., & Liu, J. (2017). Staking reputation on stakeholders: How does stakeholders' Facebook engagement help or ruin a company's reputation? *Public Relations Review*, 43(1), 201-210.
- Kubota, M. (2019). What is "Communication"?-Beyond the Shannon & Weaver's Model-. *International Journal*, 13(1), 54-65.
- Kyprianos, K., Sifaki, E., & Bantimaroudis, P. (2020). Digital gatekeepers and website visitors of the Acropolis Museum: revisiting gatekeeping theory in the cultural domain. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(4), 409-423.

- Mohammed, A., & Ferraris, A. (2021). Factors influencing user participation in social media: Evidence from twitter usage during COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. *Technology in Society*, 66, 101651.
- Mudrick, M., Miller, M., & Atkin, D. (2016). The influence of social media on fan reactionary behaviors. *Telematics and Informatics*, 33(4), 896-903.
- Muniz-Rodriguez, K., Ofori, S. K., Bayliss, L. C., Schwind, J. S., Diallo, K., Liu, M., ... & Fung, I. C. H. (2020). Social media use in emergency response to natural disasters: a systematic review with a public health perspective. *Disaster medicine and public health preparedness*, 14(1), 139-149.
- Nie, K. S., Ibrahim, F., Mustapha, S. M., & Mokhtar, A. H. A. (2019). A reflection on the stakeholder theory: Impact of government policies. *Search J. Media Commun. Res*, 11(3), 111-126.
- Orfali, R., Perveen, S., Aati, H. Y., & Al-Taweel, A. (2021). nCOVID-19 Outcomes on Curfews and Lockdown: Precautionary Decisions in Saudi Arabia. *Health Policy and Technology*, 100538.
- Park, Y. E. (2021). Developing a COVID-19 Crisis Management Strategy Using News Media and Social Media in Big Data Analytics. *Social Science Computer Review*, 08944393211007314.
- Pedrini, M., & Ferri, L. M. (2019). Stakeholder management: a systematic literature review. *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*.
- Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. *Psychological science*, 31(7), 770-780.
- Prasad, A. (2021). Anti-science Misinformation and Conspiracies: COVID-19, Post-truth, and Science & Technology Studies (STS). *Science, Technology and Society*, 09717218211003413.
- Simon, T., Goldberg, A., & Adini, B. (2015). Socializing in emergencies—A review of the use of social media in emergency situations. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(5), 609-619.

- Soffer, O. (2019). Algorithmic personalization and the two-step flow of communication. *Communication Theory*.
- Tambo, E., Djuikoue, I. C., Tazemda, G. K., Fotsing, M. F., & Zhou, X. N. (2021). Early-stage risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) strategies and measures against the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic crisis. *Global Health Journal*.
- Wang, J., & Wang, Z. (2020). Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of China's prevention and control strategy for the COVID-19 epidemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(7), 2235.
- World Health Organization. (2020). WHO, Saudi Arabia join forces to fight COVID-19 nationally, regionally, and globally.
- Zhao, Y., & Zhang, J. (2017). Consumer health information seeking in social media: a literature review. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, 34(4), 268-283.

Chapter 1

Ethics and Society: Challenges in Organisational and Public Communication

Evandro Oliveira

/EAE Business School, Spain

Gisela Gonçalves

/LabCom - University of Beira Interior, Portugal

In the contemporary era of unprecedented global interconnectivity, the ethical dimensions of communication have assumed heightened importance for organisations and public institutions. The function of communication has expanded beyond its traditional role as a mere conduit for conveying messages. It has become a strategic instrument that influences perceptions, shapes behaviours and builds relationships between entities and their stakeholders. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts, including technological advancements, global crises, and intensified public scrutiny, which have positioned communication as a central aspect of organisational and institutional operations. Those with a stake in an organisation or institution are becoming more demanding of transparency, accountability and authenticity, as a result of their greater access to information and ability to mobilise through digital platforms. It is thus imperative that communication practices align with societal values, with ethical commitments embedded not only in messaging but also in actions.

Keywords: ethics, normative imperative, societal challenges, transparency, accountability.

Chapter 2

The Normative Imperative: Ethics

Shannon A. Bowen

/University of South Carolina, United States of America

The normative imperative in strategic and organisational communication emphasizes the critical role of ethics in addressing sociopolitical challenges. This paper highlights the importance of normative theory in guiding ethical decision-making across various fields, particularly within strategic communication and through the use of normative scholarly analyses. Advocating for a Kantian deontological issues management framework, that normative paradigm utilizes the categorical imperative to ensure moral actions. A refined ethical issues management model is presented, integrating moral deliberation throughout the process. By adopting these principles, organizations can enhance ethical decision-making, improve relational outcomes, and build public trust, ultimately contributing to organisational effectiveness, relational outcomes, professionalism, and advanced scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: Ethics, Strategic Communication, Normative Theory, Kantian Framework, Public Trust.

Chapter 3

Adapting to the Challenges of Communication in the Digital Age: Ethical Principles for PR Practice in Germany

Elke Kronewald

/Kiel University of Applied Sciences and German Council for Public Relations, Germany

The relevance of ethical considerations in public relations (PR) practice is becoming increasingly apparent, especially with the advent of new technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI), which present new challenges and ethical dilemmas. The German Council for Public Relations plays a pivotal role in the advancement of ethical communication practices within Germany. The Council was established in 1987 and serves as a voluntary self-regulatory body for communications professionals. The primary responsibilities of the Council include the formulation and revision of ethical codes and guidelines, the monitoring of compliance with these standards, and the disclosure of misconduct. The Council's objective is to ensure the maintenance of ethical standards in communication, thereby preserving public trust. The German Communications Code of 2012 represents the most significant foundation for ethical PR practice in Germany. The Code emphasises fundamental principles, including transparency, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty, and professionalism. Other guidelines address more specific aspects of communication ethics, (e.g. science PR, AI). This chapter uses three case studies to illustrate the Council's work when established ethical guidelines are breached. In light of the evolving communications landscape, the Council assumes a prominent role in offering guidance by ethical guidelines to address the current challenges in PR practice. It is therefore imperative that PR ethics, codes and guidelines are integrated into communications education, as is adequate media visibility.

Keywords: PR ethics, codes, guidelines, AI, German Council for PR.

Chapter 4

Ethical Issues in the Contemporary Practice of Public Relations

Gisela Gonçalves

/LabCom – University of Beira Interior, Portugal

The rise of digital communication strategies — including sponsored content, social media influencers, and AI-driven tools such as social bots and big data analysis — presents new ethical dilemmas in public relations practice. These technologies blur lines between advertising and journalism, raising concerns about transparency, authenticity, and the potential for manipulation. This chapter debates how public relations legitimize organisational actions in the public sphere through persuasive communication, emphasizing the ethical challenges inherent in this process. By revisiting foundational concepts in public relations theory, it examines two normative perspectives: public relations as advocacy and as dialogue. Drawing on normative frameworks, including Habermas's ethics of discussion and Grunig's theory of excellence, it critically analyses the complexities of ethical public relations in the evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: public relations ethics, dialogue, symmetry, digital strategies, Habermas.

Chapter 5

Habermas's Communicative Action and the Constructivist-Relational Theory as References for the Communication of Sustainability in Organizations

Lauralice Ribeiro

/University of Coimbra, Portugal

Paula Ribeiro

/CECS and Instituto Politécnico de Portalegre, Portugal

This study explores and substantiates the normative foundations for a theoretical approach to organisational communication for sustainability, drawing on Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (1984) and Stanley Deetz's Politically Attentive Relational Constructionism (PARC) (2010). The objective of the research is to identify points of convergence between the two frameworks that can inform communication practices in the construction of shared meanings around sustainability. A non-systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify key authors whose work is aligned with the two theories. This review revealed that ethical conduct and the inclusion of diverse audiences are critical alignments between the two theories. These findings are in accordance with the recommendations set forth by organisational bodies regarding the communication of sustainability. The study underscores the potential of collaborative meaning-making as a means of addressing the challenges outlined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. It proposes collaboration as a model for achieving more effective and inclusive communication outcomes.

Keywords: Communicative action; Habermas; Relational-Constructivism; Stanley Deetz; Sustainability.

Chapter 6

University Fourth Mission and Social Impact. Ethic Imperative and Relational Challenges in the Context of High Education in Italy

Lucia D'Ambrosi

/Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Valentina Martino

/Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Paolo Brescia

/Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

The article examines the evolution of university missions within the context of corporate and public communication, with a particular focus on the emerging trends surrounding the Fourth Mission/social impact. The study investigates these developments in comparison to European trends and other organisational frameworks, while examining the extent to which these “new missions” are being institutionalised by academic governance. The findings indicate that, in addition to regulatory changes, there has been a transformation in definitions and cultural norms within the Italian university system, suggesting a broader shift towards a more strategic and ethically driven approach. This advanced vision places an emphasis on a relational and communicative framework that prioritises long-term responsibility and the creation of shared value with stakeholders and society. In this context, universities are not merely the disseminators of knowledge; they are reimagined as dynamic institutions that integrate traditional educational models with digital platforms, thereby fostering mutual engagement and community relationships. This shift is perceived as a departure from the traditional, unidirectional model of university impact, towards a reciprocal and strategic model that seeks to generate sustainable benefits for both academic institutions and their broader communities. The study’s findings emphasise the necessity of integrating this ethical approach into the institutional framework of academic governance to effectively address the evolving relational and communicative challenges facing Italian universities.

Keywords: university communication, university impact, university missions, value, corporate communication, public communication.

Chapter 7

Decoding the CSR Communication Paradox: Strategies for Effective Engagement

Bárbara Costa

/Polytechnic University of Leiria, Portugal

Alexandra Leandro

/CEOS.PP, CECS - University of Minho, and Polytechnic University of Coimbra, Portugal

Over the past few decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of companies engaging in CSR activities, which has subsequently led to a rise in the amount of CSR communication. The contemporary understanding of corporate social responsibility (CSR) may be attributed to a combination of factors, including academic research and social and political pressures that have emerged over the past seven decades. As stakeholders become increasingly informed and demanding, effective communication is essential for the dissemination of information, the establishment of trust, the enhancement of reputation, and the fulfilment of stakeholders' expectations.

Nevertheless, there are instances when CSR communication may engender scepticism rather than achieving the objective of demonstrating a company's contribution to societal well-being. Nevertheless, it is also thought that companies can play a significant role in addressing current social issues in a positive manner. This creates a paradox around CSR communication that presents a significant challenge for professionals in the field.

The objective of this study is to gain deeper insight into the paradox of CSR communication and to identify the most effective strategies for communicating CSR. The researchers employed a mixed methodology, comprising an initial literature review and an online survey of Portuguese consumers, followed by interviews with six companies. In conclusion, the study presents a set of guidelines on how companies should approach CSR communication, based on a synthesis of the findings.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; CSR communication; Organisational communication.

Chapter 8

Social Participation in Public Organisations: A Case Study of Santa Catarina's Prosecutor Office (MPSC)

Gisiela Klein

/University of Coimbra, Portugal

Clerilei Aparecida Bier

/University of Estado de Santa Catarina, Brasil

It is of the highest importance that civil society assumes an active role in the development of competencies within the public sphere. It is incumbent upon organisations, particularly those in the public sector, to facilitate this participation. The objective of this research is to ascertain the extent of social engagement in the communication channels of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Santa Catarina (MPSC), a Brazilian public institution with the mandate of defending citizens' individual and collective rights. The data collected provided a sample of 453 communications published on the organisation's social media platforms. The findings indicate that the communications disseminated by the organisation are primarily oriented towards disseminating information to the public, without actively involving them in participation or decision-making processes. The content of the social media messages is primarily informative and educational in nature. An analysis of the content of the posts reveals that the objective of the MPSC is to disseminate information to citizens regarding their rights. However, there is a notable absence of citizen involvement in the deliberations and decision-making processes.

Keywords: organisational communication; participation; social media; public organisation; Ministério Público de Santa Catarina.

Chapter 9

Public Sector Communication and Gender Perspectives: Italian Local Social Media Practices of Italian Regions

Marica Spalleta

/Link Campus University, Italy

Gea Ducci

/University of Urbino, Italy

Lucia D'Ambrosi

/Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Camilla Folena

/University of Urbino, Italy

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 emphasises the significance of gender-sensitive communication in promoting inclusivity, challenging stereotypes and strengthening trust in public institutions. This exploratory study examines the adoption of such practices in Italian public administrations, with a particular focus on social media. The findings indicate that there is a paucity of implementation due to factors such as bureaucratic resistance, political influence, and challenges that are specific to digital communication. Those regions with a left-wing political orientation tend to demonstrate a greater sensitivity to gender issues. The study highlights the potential of public communication as a space for the implementation of inclusive practices. It emphasises the necessity for professionals to be empowered and for future research to refine strategies and facilitate the adoption of these practices across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Gender-sensitive communication, Public communication, Digital Communication, Social media, Gender equality, Institutional communication, Policy implementation.

Chapter 10

The Sustainability Narrative Challenge: The Secil Group

Andréia Melchiades Soares

/ISCSP, University of Lisbon, Portugal

The environmental implications of the cement industry present a significant challenge to its reputation, necessitating the development of narratives by public relations professionals that highlight the sector's positive societal contributions. The image of an organisation is of great consequence in the formation of relationships with stakeholders and the attainment of legitimacy. The management of media relations plays a pivotal role in influencing public discourse and fostering trust in corporate endeavours.

This article examines the Portuguese media's perception of the Secil Group's sustainability image, a local cement company. This study has three specific aims: (1) to analyse Secil's intended public image as a sustainable organisation; (2) to evaluate its media portrayal; and (3) to identify and understand the discrepancies between the two. The findings of this study are based on a content analysis informed by framing theory (Entman, 1993) and Hallahan's (1999) attributes model. This analysis reveals a significant divergence between Secil's projected sustainability narrative and its media representation as an entity that pollutes.

In order to effectively address these challenges, it is recommended that Secil adopt a more comprehensive sustainability narrative. It is advisable that the scope of the sustainability narrative be expanded to encompass social and governance (ESG) dimensions in addition to environmental concerns. Such an approach would guarantee the consistent integration of these aspects into all forms of communication. The integration of this narrative into both institutional messaging and product marketing will facilitate the achievement of greater alignment between the company's intended and perceived images.

Keywords: intended image, media image, public relations, sustainability, framing, cement companies.

Chapter 11

'This is Me' – Says the Agency: A Multi-Method Case Study on the Projected Organisational Identity of Banco de Portugal

Éva Kaponya

/ICNOVA, NOVA University of Lisbon - School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Portugal

Public agencies are subject to the actual normative imperative of compulsory disclosure in the form of transparency and accountability requirements foreseen by the law. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that, by deliberately exposing themselves to social judgement, these entities can gain further benefits by building strong reputation and socio-political legitimacy. In this endeavour, the organisation's self-presentation is of critical importance, as it constitutes the base for external audiences' initial assessment on the attractiveness and appropriateness of the entity, featuring an interesting subject matter for strategic communication research.

As an illustrative case study, through the identification of the key dimensions of its self-definition presented in the permanent sections of the institutional website, this paper aims to assess the projected organisational identity of Banco de Portugal. Considering the methodological heterogeneity of the field, the article also seeks to provide rationale and justification for the necessity to opt for a blended approach applying a two-stage research design featuring discourse analysis and computer-assisted content analysis. Accordingly, the paper not only contributes to the scarce empirical evidence available on the organisational identity of public authorities, but also demonstrates the synergies stemming from the combination of two fundamentally different approaches in the investigation thereof.

Keywords: public agency, projected organisational identity, discourse analysis, content analysis, multi-method approach.

Chapter 12

Governmental Public Relations Strategies: The Saudi Public Communication in Social Media during the Pandemic Crisis

Mutaz Alotaibi

/King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia & Cardiff University, UK.

Susan Kinnear

/Cardiff University, UK

This paper examines the strategic role of public relations and social media communication by Saudi governmental organisations during the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). The objective of this study is to examine the public relations strategies employed by Saudi governmental organisations and their efficacy in crisis management through the use of social media as a public communication tool. By analysing existing theories and models of public relations and communication, the literature review offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of strategic communication in disseminating vital information during the pandemic.

Theories of communication are employed to examine pivotal concepts such as public relations, social media, communication strategies, and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic. The aforementioned theories include those pertaining to stakeholders, gatekeeping, persuasion, Grunig's four models, key opinion theory, and the two-step flow theory. The research study identifies a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the effectiveness of social media as a public communication tool. In particular, the research seeks to identify the most effective social media tools and to understand their impact on public engagement.

The research questions are designed to investigate the ways in which Saudi governmental organisations employed social media, particularly Twitter/X, to communicate with the public during the pandemic crisis caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). This review paper study employs a thematic methodology, with the objective of identifying, analysing, discussing and

providing knowledge related to themes in the literature, to offer a comprehensive insight into the social media communication strategies of Saudi governmental public relations during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Keywords: Public Relations; Social media; Saudi organizations; Strategic communication; Covid-19; Risk and crisis communication.

Authors

EDITORS

Evandro Oliveira is Associate Professor at EAE Business School in Barcelona and associate Researcher at LabCom, Portugal. His research focuses on civil society strategic communication, diversity, and intercultural communication. Before, he was a Serra Húnter professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). He has been a guest professor of nonprofit communication at various universities like the University of Mannheim, the Free University of Berlin, the University of Jena, the University of Beira Interior and the University of Münster. He researched at the University of Leipzig with Günter Bentele and Ansgar Zerfass in Germany; and at CECS – Uminho, Portugal. He is past chair of the Organisational and Strategic Communication section at the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). He wrote *The Instigatory Theory of NGO Communication* (Springer, 2019); has received awards from the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), and International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO); and worked for over 20 years in strategic communication management, including work for NGOs like Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Salvation Army, and Doctors Without Borders.

Gisela Gonçalves, PhD in Communication Sciences, is Associate Professor at the University of Beira Interior (UBI) and coordinator of the Strategic Communication research group of LabCom - a Communication research centre. Vice-president of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, she is the coordinator of the post-graduation studies in

Strategic Communication at UBI. She has authored 2 books, edited 17 collective volumes, published around one hundred scientific publications, supervised 6 PhD theses and 40 Master dissertations. Currently, she is Vice-chair of the IAMCR Organisational Communication Working Group and Vice-President of Sopcom, the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences. Former chair of the ECREA Strategic and Organisational Communication Section. She is the editor-in-chief of *Estudos de Comunicação*, a Portuguese journal indexed in Scopus. Her research interest's concern: ethics, public relations, political and strategic communication, crises and risk communication.

AUTHORS

Alexandra Leandro is professor of Communication Sciences, Organizations and Media at the Polytechnic of Coimbra (School of Education). Teaches curricular units of Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations. Currently, she also coordinates the new Post-Graduation in Strategic Communication for Municipalities (ESEC/IPC). Previously, Alexandra has had the opportunity to work in several Marketing departments, mainly in the Food Industry. In 1998, graduated in Social Communication (specialization in Advertising) by the University of Minho. Afterwards, Alexandra post-graduated in Communication Law (Faculty of Law of the University of Coimbra), has a MBA in Marketing and a master's degree in Management (Porto Business School, University of Porto). In 2017, has successfully concluded her Doctoral degree in the University of Minho. Alexandra's PhD dissertation was entitled: "The communication of socially responsible organizations: an analysis of CSR reports".

Andréia Melchíades Soares is a PhD Student in Communication Sciences at ISCSP - Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal. She develops research in public relations, strategic communication, sustainability, and culture, and is a collaborative researcher at Universidade de Lisboa, Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Centre for Public Administration and Public Policies (CAPP).