

**AN EXPLORATION OF ONLINE ORGANISATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS:
THE ROLE OF CRITICAL PR IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

by

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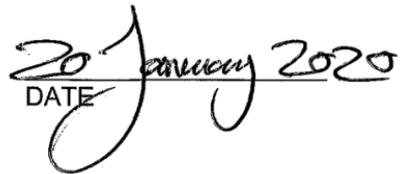
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I want to give God all the glory and honour, may God raise up reformers who will contribute to man's emancipation from those dominant power structures that subjugate and marginalise communities, not only in the Middle East but around the world.

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-

**AN EXPLORATION OF ONLINE ORGANISATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS:
THE ROLE OF CRITICAL PR IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

The Middle East has a rising demand for public relations (PR) professionals because many of the oil-producing countries in the region are implementing radical transformational strategies to develop their non-oil sectors to safeguard future generations. PR professionals in the region are challenged by volatile environments in which there are on-going conflicts and wars. However, PR in the Middle East is key to engagement in its complex social, economic and political climate. Information and communication technology has captured the attention of organisations in the Middle East, by contributing to the evolution of PR practices from monologue to dialogue and from control to engagement.

Against this background, the study explored critical PR and PR activism in the Middle East. Critical PR radically changes the traditional approach of PR, from asking how it can assist organisations to be more efficient, to asking what its role is in society? It advocates that the PR professional act as the facilitator of debate, dialogue and even dissent, and to encourage public input, thereby influencing public policies to develop long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society.

This study explored the theoretical characteristics of critical PR elements and the principles of online organisation–public relationships. These characteristics and principles were further explored and measured by a quantitative self-administered web-based survey and one-on-one interviews with PR professionals in the Middle East Public Relations Association and from leading listed Middle Eastern organisations.

Key terms:

Middle East, public relations professional, critical public relations, public relations activism, persuasion, power, online organisation-public relationships, digital activism, relationship cultivation strategies, social media.

**'N VERKENNING VAN AANLYN ORGANISASIES SE OPENBARE VERHOUDINGS:
DIE ROL VAN KRITIESE PR IN DIE MIDDE-OOSTE**

Die Midde-Ooste het 'n toenemende behoefte aan professionele persone in die gebied van openbare betrekkinge en PR. Baie van die olieproduserende lande in die streek implementeer radikale transformasie-strategieë om hul nie-oliese sektore te ontwikkel en om so toekomstige geslagte te beveilig.

Professionele PR-personeel in die streek het groot uitdagings in die vorm van vlugtige veranderinge in die verskillende gebiede waarin konflikte en oorloë alomteenwoordig is. Openbare betrekkinge in die Midde-Ooste is egter die sleutel om die verskillende partye te kan bereik en betrek, weens die komplekse sosiale, ekonomiese en politieke klimaat. Inligting- en kommunikasietegnologie het die aandag van organisasies in die Midde-Ooste gevang weens hulle bydrae tot die evolusie van PR-praktyke, van monoloog tot dialoog, en van beheer tot betrokkenheid.

Dit is teen hierdie agtergrond dat die studie kritiese openbare betrekkinge en openbare betrekkinge-aktivisme in die Midde-Ooste ondersoek. Kritiese openbare betrekkinge verander die tradisionele benadering van openbare betrekkinge radikaal. Dit stel vrae: hoe kan dit organisasies help om meer doeltreffend te wees, en watter rol kan dit in die samelewing speel? Dit bepleit dat die professionele PR-praktisyn as fasiliteerder vir debat, dialoog en selfs verdeeldheid kan optree, sowel as openbare bydrag aan te moedig. Sodoende kan hy of sy openbare beleid beïnvloed om langtermyn transformasieprogramme, wat die samelewing bevoordeel, te ontwikkel.

Hierdie studie het die teoretiese eienskappe van kritiese openbare betrekkinge-elemente en die beginsels van aanlyn-organisasies se openbare betrekkinge-praktyk ondersoek. Hierdie eienskappe en beginsels is verder ondersoek en gemeet aan die hand van 'n kwantitatiewe, self-geadministreerde web-gebaseerde opname en deur persoonlike onderhouds met professionele PR-persone in die Middle East Public Relations Association en toonaangewende en genoteerde Midde-Oosterse organisasies.

Sleutel terminologie:

Midde-Ooste, professionele PR-praktisyn, kritiese openbare betrekkinge, openbare betrekkinge-aktivisme, oortuiging, mag, aanlyn organisasie-openbare verhoudings, digitale aktivisme, verhoudingsverbouingstrategieë, sosiale media.

**UKUHLOLWA KWENHLANGANO EKUYI-INTHANETHI-UBUDLELWANO
BOMPHAKATHI: INDIMA YOBUCAYI BE-PR EMPUMALANGA EPHAKATHI**

IMpumalanga Ephakathi inesidingo esikhulayo sochwepheshe bezobudlelwano bomphakathi ngoba amazwe amaningi akhiqiza uwoyela esifundeni asebenzisa amasu amakhulu ezinguquko ukuze athuthukise imikhakha yawo engenawo uwoyela ukuvikela izizukulwane ezizayo. Ochwepheshe bezobudlelwano bomphakathi esifundeni babhekene nenselele yezimo eziguquguqukayo lapho kukhona izingxabano nezimpi eziqhubekayo. Nokho, ubudlelwano bomphakathi eMpumalanga Ephakathi buyinto esemqoka ekubhekanani nesimo sawo senhlalo esiyinkimbinkimbi, nasesimweni sezomnotho nesezombusazwe. Ubuchwepheshe bolwazi nobezokuxhumana buye badonsa ukunaka kwezinhlangano eziseMpumalanga Ephakathi, ngokufaka isandla ekuguqukeni kwemikhuba ye-PR isuke ekubeni imiyalelo iye ekubeni ingxoxo nasekulawuleni iye ekubambisaneni.

Ngokumelene nalesi sizinda, ucwaningo luhlole ubudlelwane obubucayi bomphakathi kanye nentshisekelo yobudlelwano bomphakathi eMpumalanga Ephakathi. Ubudlelwano bomphakathi obucayi buguqula kakhulu indlela yokwenza yendabuko yobudlelwano bomphakathi, kusukela ekubuzeni ukuthi bungazisiza kanjani izinhlangano ukuba zisebenze kahle, kuya ekubuzeni ukuthi iyiphi indima yabo emphakathini. Igcizelela ukuthi ochwepheshe bezobudlelwano bomphakathi basebenze njengomxazululi wempikiswano, izingxoxo ngisho nokungavumelani, futhi bakhuthaze nomphakathi ukuba ubambe iqhaza, ngaleyo ndlela bathonye izinqubomgomo zomphakathi zokuthuthukisa izinhlelo zesikhathi eside, zezinguquko ezizuzisa umphakathi.

Lolu cwaningo luhlole izici zemibono yezinto ezibucayi zobudlelwano bomphakathi kanye nemigomo yenhlangano eku-inthanethi-ubudlelwano bomphakathi. Lezi zimpawu kanye nemigomo yahlolisiswa kakhudlwana futhi yalinganiswa ngenhlolovo esuselwa kuwebhu esebenza ngobuningi kanye nokuxoxisana nomuntu ngamunye nochwepheshe bezobudlelwano nomphakathi Enhlanganweni Yobudlelwano Bomphakathi YaseMpumalanga Ephakathi kanye nasezinhlanganweni ezihamba phambili ezisohlwini lwaseMpumalanga Emaphakathi.

Amagama ayinhloko:

IMpumalanga Ephakathi, ochwepheshe bobudlelwano bomphakathi, ubudlelwane obubucayi bomphakathi, intshisekelo yobudlelwano bomphakathi, ukukholisa, amandla, inhlangano ye-inthanethi-ubudlelwano bomphakathi, intshiseko yedijithali, ukuhlakulela amasu obudlelwano, inkundla yokuxhumana.

إستكشاف الدور بين المنظمة والعلاقات العامة عبر الإنترنت:
دور العلاقات العامة الحاسمة في الشرق الأوسط.

يزداد الطلب في الشرق الأوسط على مهنيي العلاقات العامة لأن العديد من الدول المنتجة للنفط في المنطقة تنفذ استراتيجيات تحول جذرية لتطوير القطاعات غير النفطية لحماية الأجيال القادمة. يواجه المتخصصون في العلاقات العامة في المنطقة تحديات بسبب البيئات المتقلبة التي تشهد صراعات وحروبًا مستمرة. ومع ذلك ، فإن العلاقات العامة في الشرق الأوسط هي مفتاح المشاركة في مناخها الاجتماعي والاقتصادي والسياسي المعقد. استحوذت تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات على اهتمام المنظمات في الشرق الأوسط ، من خلال المساهمة في تطوير ممارسات العلاقات العامة من مونولوج إلى حوار ومن التحكم إلى المشاركة.

على هذه الخلفية ، استكشفت الدراسة العلاقات العامة الهامة ونشاط العلاقات العامة في الشرق الأوسط. تغير العلاقات العامة الحرجة بشكل جذري النهج التقليدي للعلاقات العامة ، من التساؤل عن الكيفية التي يمكن أن تساعد بها المنظمات لتكون أكثر كفاءة ، إلى السؤال عن دورها في المجتمع. وتدعو إلى أن يتولى مهني العلاقات العامة دور المنسق في النقاش والحوار وحتى المعارضة ، ويشجع على المساهمة العامة ، وبالتالي التأثير على السياسات العامة لتطوير برامج تحويلية طويلة المدى تفيد المجتمع.

استكشفت هذه الدراسة الخصائص النظرية لعناصر العلاقات العامة الهامة ومبادئ العلاقات بين المنظمات والعلاقات العامة عبر الإنترنت. تم استكشاف هذه الخصائص والمبادئ وقياسها من خلال مسح كمي ذاتي الإدارة على شبكة الإنترنت ومقابلات فردية مع المتخصصين في العلاقات العامة في جمعية العلاقات العامة في الشرق الأوسط ومن المنظمات الرائدة في الشرق الأوسط المدرجة.

المصطلحات الأساسية:

الشرق الأوسط ، العلاقات العامة المهنية، العلاقات العامة الحرجة ، نشاط العلاقات العامة ، الإقناع ، القوة ، المنظمات عبر الإنترنت والعلاقات العامة ، النشاط الرقمي ، استراتيجيات زراعة العلاقات ، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GMER	Greater Middle East Region
IABC	International Association of Business Communicators
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
LR	Levant Region
MEPRA	Middle East Public Relations Association
MSA	Measure of Sampling Adequacy
OPR	Organisation-Public Relationships
PR	Public Relations
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study contributes to critical research on the practice of public relations (PR) in a Middle East context. Various critical theorists claim that there are significant paradigm shifts in the way PR professionals are dealing with societal issues (Benecke & Oksitycz 2015:1; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Verwey, Benecke & Muir 2017:67). The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is contributing to the evolution of PR practices from monologue to dialogue and from control to engagement (Appleby 2015:28; Sohail 2012:237). ICTs are shifting the PR profession from timed, controlled communication towards a critical, interactive, integrated and dynamic approach (Fox 2015:49). This allows the public to play a dominant role in influencing the organisation's behaviour, reputation and decision-making (Navarro, Moreno & Al-Sumait 2017:1; Fox 2015:49). The public's influence can be observed through the discourse generated by the interactive communication enabled by social networking platforms (Prasad 2011:55).

The literature highlights that organisations cannot exist without various relational connections with their public, as the success of any organisation is dependent on the quality of its relationships with its public's issues (Mohammed 2014:485; Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). These organisation–public relationships (OPRs) should be addressed by PR professionals. However, PR activism can contribute even more to the process of building and sustaining mutually beneficial online OPRs, using social media as a strategic tool (Mohammed 2014:485).

PR activism is a practice that is motivated by the critical PR paradigm (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880) that challenges PR professionals to shift their focus towards issues of power and resolving societal issues (Dolea 2017:195; Verwey et al 2017:70). Critical PR radically changes the traditional approach of PR, from asking how it can assist organisations to be more efficient, to asking what its role is in society (Dolea 2017:176). PR professionals acting as PR activists in the organisation would use persuasive techniques to influence the dominant leadership power structures to participate in debating societal issues on social media (Dolea 2017:195). This noteworthy shift in PR has been argued to be the key to engaging in the complex social, economic and political climate in the Middle East (Prasad 2011:53).

The current study explores the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs in the Middle East, as there has been a lack of research on this PR perspective in the Middle East (Tønnessen 2016:2).

It is worth mentioning that, although this study explores critical PR approaches, it does not altogether avoid organisation-centric elements and functionalist concepts or definitions of PR,

as the study explores the perceptions of PR professionals who are working in Middle Eastern organisations or agencies. Furthermore, some organisation-centric approaches to PR are still relevant to the study as it explores online organisation-public relationships. These include public identification, as well as various relationship cultivation strategies used in the process of online OPRs.

The interest of the study is to explore the role that critical PR plays in developing online relationships between the organisation and its public and to discover ways in which critical PR can contribute to these relationships. As Fourie (2014:54) argues, in order for an organisation to achieve its objectives and goals, it needs to be involved in understanding its public's issues, needs and values. The organisation also needs to determine a course of action to build mutually-beneficial relationships that actually attempt to solve public issues (Fourie 2014:54). The benefit of OPRs to the organisation is that it can determine what outcomes would satisfy the public, it can also identify common interests and shared goals, as well as promoting solutions through interactions with the public that may improve mutual relationships (Bruning et al 2004:436). Furthermore, the organisation benefits because its contribution to online relationships with its public safeguards its investment (Jahansoozi 2007:399; Shamsan & Otieno 2015:4).

This chapter provides an orientation and rationale for the study; firstly, by outlining the context of the study. This is followed by a discussion of the key concepts in the literature and a description of the research problem. The chapter concludes with an elaboration on the research methodology and an overview of the subproblems and research questions.

1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This section provides a brief overview of the background to the study, the objectives and relevance of the study, and its relation to the field of communication, as well as other relevant research.

1.2.1 Background to the study

The theoretical foundation of this study is in the field of PR, which is fundamentally a communication process that builds and maintains public relationships (Lordan 2005:41). Sriramesh (2009:2) confirms that PR is responsible for building relationships with relevant groups of people (publics) through the process of communication. PR is, therefore, a purposeful communication activity that attempts to develop long-term mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Mizrahi 2016:1). In order for an organisation to exist, it needs to interact and develop various relational connections with its public (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). It is in this context that PR plays a significant role in building and sustaining

meaningful OPRs (Mohammed 2014:485). OPRs primarily focuses on the quality of the relationships between the organisation and its public; it is essentially a method of measuring the outcomes of relationships between the organisation and its public (Jahansoozi 2007:399; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26). In order for PR to develop strategies that build OPRs, it needs to have a clear understanding of its specific publics' issues and needs (Fourie 2014:54; Ki & Hon 2009:245).

ICT has captured the attention of organisations as it provides a direct link to genuine societal issues (Shalaby 2015:17). Developments in ICTs in the form of social networks have advanced interactive communication between organisations and the public (Oluwatayo 2014:67). Online OPRs are regarded as a growing network where relationships are created and sustained through the process of interactive communication and PR uses social media as a strategic tool to develop online OPRs (Vanlentini, Romenti & Kruckeberg 2016:4059).

Social media enable the public in the Middle East to express views about specific issues through online discussions (Adam 2012:10). Social media have had an unprecedented influence in developing human rights activist groups in the region, including a prominent online activist movement that is challenging power structures and inspiring transformation (Gheyntchi & Moghadam 2014:6; Meyer et al 2009:218).

Many of the Middle Eastern countries are struggling with on-going wars and conflict (Aman 2016:181). The majority of governments in the Middle East use online surveillance and trolling (the systematic process of monitoring online users) as a form of social control (Jones 2013:82). The majority of these governments do not tolerate criticism of their policies on human rights and freedom of speech, which are two distinct issues that are noticeably growing on social networks in the Middle East (Al-Shamsi 2015:493).

Many of the oil-producing countries in the Middle East developed national transformation programmes (Callen, Cherif, Hasanov, Hegazy & Khandelwal 2014:4), desperately attempting to develop a non-oil sector that would transform their economies and safeguard the next generation (Aman 2016:181). For these Middle East countries to establish stable economies in the future, urgent strategic direction needs to be given to develop economic diversification and reduce the reliance on oil revenues (International Monetary Fund 2016a:15). It is argued that PR in the Middle East is the key to engaging in this complex social, economic and political climate (Prasad 2011:53). Middle Eastern countries have a rising demand for PR professionals, as many of the countries are driving radical transformational strategies (Woodcraft 2006:27).

Against this background, the study explores critical theorists' claims that PR activism as a concept within the critical PR paradigm challenges the purposes and practises of mainstream

organisation-centric PR approaches (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Ciszek 2015:447; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Dolea 2017:175; Holtzhausen 2002:10; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40; McLeod 2014:3; Shim 2014:74; Tyma 2008:196). Critical PR is fundamentally a practice that confronts organisation-centric and mainstream PR approaches; focusing on the interests of the public rather than of the organisation (Dolea 2017:195; Holtzhausen 2002:10).

PR has become decentralised and encourages PR professionals to critically interrogate issues of dissent, power and activism (Reber & Berger 2006:3; Uwalaka 2019:24; Verwey et al 2017:70). It promotes the idea that PR professionals should have a more social role in the organisation, influencing public policies to develop long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society (Dolea 2017:195). Holtzhausen (2002:10) argues that a PR professional can achieve this by becoming a PR activist in the organisation.

McCown (2007:47) acknowledges that these PR activists would convince their organisations to initiate dialogue with their public and encourage debate on specific societal issues. These activist PR professionals would encourage dialogue and public input through interactive discussions (Holtzhausen 2002:10). They would drive the organisation out of its comfort zone towards a dynamic state that is mediated by interactive communication (Greeff 2015:220). PR activists present arguments that support the people's interests and promote the wellbeing of society (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015:45).

In this context, this study explores the characteristics of critical PR and the role it plays in online OPRs in the Middle East.

The next subsection explains the objectives of the study.

1.2.2 Objectives of the study

The first objective of this study is to explore the existing literature on critical ideologies, with a specific focus on critical PR and PR activism. Additional literature is also explored to gain a perspective on the development of critical PR in the Middle East.

The second objective of this study is to discover existing theories on online OPRs. This is done through studying the principles of OPRs, their processes for identifying strategic publics and the stages of measuring the antecedents of relationships, the relationship cultivation strategies and the quality outcomes of OPRs. Additionally, ICT, social media and digital activism is explored to develop a deeper understanding of how these critical PR elements contribute to online OPRs through social media.

The third objective of this study is to conduct empirical research to measure the existing practices of PR professionals in the Middle East, exploring the role of critical PR in online OPRs in the region.

The first two objectives relate to the exploration of theoretical concepts regarding critical PR elements and the principles of online OPRs. These two objectives are essentially the building blocks to the study. To address the third research objective, empirical research conducted with PR professionals in the Middle East. The research is carried out with PR professionals from the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) and from the region's top 100 listed organisations. It is assumed that they have adequate knowledge about critical PR and online OPRs as they play a vital role in developing strategic online OPRs in the region (Marshall 2011:1; Yousef 2004:1).

1.2.3 The relevance of the study and its relation to the discipline of communication

The relevance of this study lies in its exploration of critical PR and discovering the role that it plays in online OPRs in the Middle East, as research in the Middle East on this subject has been lacking (Tønnessen 2016:2). This study encourages new ways of thinking about PR by exploring the characteristics of critical PR and online OPRs. A principle of this study is that it promotes the idea that a PR professional could act as an organisation's PR activist to influence and build genuine long-term online OPRs through interactive communication, that is predominately concerned with resolving societal issues. Social media plays a significant role as a communication tool in the PR industry and enables PR professionals to facilitate online discussions (Luo & Jiang 2012:60).

PR's two distinct objectives are to build OPRs and to use communication to sustain these relationships (Kriyantono 2017:196). The terms "public relations" and "corporate communications" are often used interchangeably (Steyn 2002:11) to describe a management function in the organisation that communicates with its public to achieve common goals (Meintjes, Niemann-Struweg & De Wet 2012:12044; Tankosic, Ivetic & Vucurevic 2016:290). The ultimate purpose of PR is to build relations through managing communication activities, which gave rise to the term "corporate communications" (Kriyantono 2017:196).

Verwey et al (2017:70) assert that critical PR has shifted away from the traditional organisation-centred PR perspective, where PR is mainly used to benefit the organisation, towards including "the individual practitioner, and their symbolic power relationships". This recent shift has "resulted in critical interrogation of issues such as dissent, power and activism in professional role enactment" (Verwey et al 2017:70).

1.2.4 Other research in the field

Various databases were studied to identify relevant research in the field. The ProQuest database identified a doctoral thesis by Sen (2014), entitled “Public relations and the democratizing role of new media: How public relations practitioners who also are activists use social media for their activism”. Sen (2014) reflects how PR practitioners from the top 50 Fortune 500 companies use social media in their activism and how they engage with the organisation's stakeholders. The ProQuest database also provided a master's dissertation by Kelly (2017), entitled “Internal activism and its implications for organizational legitimacy: A case study of the NBA's reaction to the national anthem protests in sports”. Kelly's (2017) dissertation acknowledges how members working in an organisation become internal activists to drive change and motivate organisational involvement through new media. The South African universities' institutional repositories provided a doctoral thesis by Benecke (2019), with the title, “The social representation of public relations activism in selected early career South African public relations practitioners”. Benecke (2019) reflects on exploring PR activism in the context of the PR practitioners' early careers in South Africa, and how these PR practitioners represent their roles as PR activists.

Other research in the forms of articles in academic journals similarly inspired this study. One of the most relevant academic articles was titled “Fringe public relations: How activism moves critical PR towards the mainstream” by Coombs and Holladay (2012). These academics explain that activism has emerged as a mainstream PR concept, which formed the premise of this study. An earlier academic article that encouraged this study was titled “Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organisational activist” by Holtzhausen and Voto (2002). This article proposes the idea that the PR professional would act as the internal organisational activist when practising critical PR. The concept of the internal organisation activist established a vital link between critical PR and PR professionals. Ciszek's (2015) article titled “Bridging the gap: Mapping the relationship between activism and public relations” also provided valuable insight into the various difficulties linked to activism and public relations.

McLeod (2014) studied the PR tactics of activists and protesters during the 2013 Gezi Park uprising in Istanbul, Turkey. McLeod's article titled “People power PR: Recasting activists as practitioners” supported Coombs and Holladay's (2012) position that PR activism had emerged as a concept that should be considered as a part of the mainstream PR. McLeod proposes an operative example of how social media was used as a strategic tool for activists to circumvent mainstream media and to build the national movement.

An academic article entitled “A postmodern turn for social media research: Theory and research directions for public relations scholarship” by Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) challenged PR professionals to rethink approaches to social media through a critical PR lens. It highlights power imbalances, deconstruction of existing research, dissensus, disorder and discourse for marginalised publics.

Lastly, an article written by Men and Tsai (2014) titled “Perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioural outcomes of organisation–public engagement on corporate social networking sites”. Men and Tsai (2014) provides a deeper understanding of the importance of how social media can be leveraged to cultivate online OPRs.

This study builds on the above research and contributes to critical PR research by addressing PR practice in a Middle East context. The study extends Benecke’s (2019) doctoral thesis in a Middle Eastern context, where the research focuses on determining the degree to which critical PR is practised by PR professionals. Furthermore, the study expands on Sen’s (2014) doctoral thesis and Kelly’s (2017) master’s dissertation as it incorporates an organisational perspective, specifically the role of PR activists in online organisational–public relationships in social media.

The next section discusses the literature that contributes to the foundational concepts used in this study.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPLORING KEY CONCEPTS OF THE STUDY

This section provides a brief literature review of essential concepts in the study. It starts by defining PR and what the “public” includes. This is followed by a definition of critical PR and PR activism, as well as brief explanations of persuasion and power. In the segment following that, a definition is provided for OPRs and online OPRs. To conclude, the section provides a brief description of the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs.

1.3.1 Defining public relations

There is a wealth of literature that defines PR from an organisational paradigm, which can be understood as a functionalist approach that predominantly focuses on using PR practice to benefit the organisation’s interests and goals (Bourne 2016:35; Edwards 2012:14). Generally, organisation-centric approaches to PR align with concepts such as managerialism, centralisation and functionalism; which are mainly “mechanistic approaches to business management” (Swart & Verwey 2003:81). These concepts are evident in the literature as, over the past decades, numerous attempts to define the term “public relations” have mainly represented an organisation-centric approach (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:3; Sriramesh 2009:2). This is clearly noticed in “mainstream PR’s emphasis on representing the capitalistic, goal-oriented aspirations of organisations” (Kelly 2017:24).

There have been countless debates on what to call PR: the terms include “integrated marketing communications”, “public affairs”, “public information” and “marketing communications” (Pritchard & Smith 2015:35). Brunner (2008:153) explains that the concept reflects the importance of relationships between an organisation and its publics. Holtzhausen (2002:251) claims that PR is an organisational process that encourages organisational discourse with its public. Lordan (2005:41) suggests that PR is a process to “develop and sustain relationships with key publics by presenting the most favourable, but still completely truthful, information”. Grunig and Grunig (2008:334) offer a definition that focuses on the importance of relationships as it “plays a pivotal role in sustaining public relationships through two-way symmetrical communication, and, through these strategic relationships, the organisation will develop shared goals favoured by both the organisation and its publics”. Smith (2008:3) highlights that PR is the most common embodiment of communication. Sriramesh (2009:2) emphasises that PR is “communication that different types of organisations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics”. Pieczka (2009:2) links the definition of PR to “purposeful and ethical ethics communication”. Park and Reber (2011:240) refer to PR as a “process that generates mutual understanding between organisations and their publics”. Grunig (2011:15) argue that PR “provides organisations with a way to give voice to and empower publics in organisational decision-making”. Hou, Zhu and Bromley (2013:319) argue that “PR is about information control and management, which is an important source of the government political power”. Jinadasa (2016:56) refers to PR as a process that builds the public image of the organisation. Mizrahi (2016:1) claims that the nature of PR is primarily to “maintain goodwill between an organisation and its various stakeholders”. Hayes, Waddell and Smudde (2017:255) connect PR to public tragedy and crisis communication. Kuok and Santos (2017:50) further define PR as a process that “distributes messages, lobbying and solving problems”.

In 2011 and 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) led a global effort to develop a modernised definition of PR (Molleda & Kochhar 2015:949). PRSA identifies PR as a “strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics” (Molleda & Kochhar 2015:949). PRSA also defines PR as an organisation’s efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people and to assist an organisation and its publics to adapt to each other mutually (Fourie 2014:1). In this context, PRSA’s definition suggests that PR develops the organisation’s relationships with its publics (Steyn 2002:11). A vital aspect of the PRSA definition is that it focuses on serving both the organisation and the public interest (Tankosic et al 2016:290).

Edwards (2012:12) declares that, because the “focus on PR as an organisational function is so strong, it is evident in approaches to PR that do not align themselves with functional work”.

This was confirmed by Motion and Weaver (2005:50), who assert that functional theorists take on roles that are privileged and focus on the “interests of organizations, the elite or dominant coalition and capital”. Edwards (2012:18) reflects that PR is fundamentally embedded in the social and organisational cultures in which PR professionals work. Verwey et al (2017:70) highlight that PR has shifted away from organisation-centric approaches that benefit the dominant power structure and focuses more on PR professionals and their symbolic power relationships. Dutta-Bergman (2005: 287) acknowledges that PR should take on a bolder role that benefits society and that PR professionals should act against silencing marginalised communities and facilitate the expressions of the marginalised voices. Verwey et al (2017:70) claim that this shift has “resulted in critical interrogation of issues such as dissent, power and activism in professional role enactment”. Edwards (2012:21) defines “PR as the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous transactions with other social entities”.

These definitions identify that PR is produced on behalf of an individual, which suggests that PR practice needs to be decentralised from the organisational control; in other words, PR needs to be decoupled from the organisational context (Edwards 2012:22; Gezgin 2019:4; Uwalaka 2019:24). Dolea (2017:195) agrees that PR should place a deliberate focus on the interests of society rather than on the dominant coalition. Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:4) argue that PR professionals should be change agents that facilitate public dialogue as an opportunity to create new meaning between participants that would lead to an “uneasy and uncomfortable status resulting in change”. Verwey et al (2017:76) suggest that PR needs to place a “greater emphasis on collaborative deliberation and generating practical knowledge through processes of social innovation and engagement”. Verwey and Muir (2018:6) highlight that “PR practice will continue to be regarded as a ‘dark art’ that lacks legitimacy and value for society unless it can free itself of moral constraints inherent to the reflexive modernist PR practices and assumptions that prevail”. According to Pritchard and Smith (2015:35), the collective focus among the various PR definitions is to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships.

The next subsection provides a clarification of the term “publics”.

1.3.2 Defining publics

A public is understood to be a collection of individuals, or a social group, that have a specific interest towards a particular dominant structure of power, matter or issue (Fourie 2014:2; Fuchs 2014:62). There is an accepted process that can be observed in the establishment of a public that occurs when disengaged individuals, with limited to no synchronisation, are transformed into a group or public (Kim, Grunig & Ni 2010:127). This happens as a result of

sharing common problems, the individuals, therefore, become connected (Kim et al 2010:127). A public establishes itself when a group of individuals experience similar conditions and collectively agree that specific challenges are prevalent in a situation (Fourie 2014:2). Furthermore, the public collectively works towards resolving these challenges through generating solutions (Fourie 2014:2). Publics form due to common problem recognition (Kim et al 2010:127); in other words, issues give rise to publics (Sriramesh, Moghan & Wei 2007:309). Publics are known to be problem solvers as the individuals that form the group use communication (vernacular discourse) as an instrument to resolve shared problems and situations (Tomaselli & Sakarombe 2015:316; Kim et al 2010:126). Publics generate continued dialogue, which produces new meaning and interpretations; this on-going process of dialogue formulates a collective public opinion about a specific issue (Tomaselli & Sakarombe 2015:317). This interaction produces diverse viewpoints on a specific issue (Tyma 2008:194). Various individuals have specific roles that are used to interact and influence the public discourse; these include (Habermas 2006:416):

- media practitioners (control of the media system);
- politicians (centre of a political system, co-authors of public opinions);
- lobbyists (represent special-interest groups);
- advocates (represent a general interest, or marginalised groups);
- experts (scientific or highly knowledgeable individuals);
- moral entrepreneurs (create public attention); and
- intellectuals (prompt general interests).

The tenets of building relationships between an organisation and the public are derived from the process of initiating the relationship and maintaining the bond (Navarro et al 2017:3). PR is, therefore, a conduit for identifying societal issues that are relevant to the public (Coombs & Holladay 2013:136). Public engagement is fundamentally supported through communication activities that use dialogue as a process to identify and further understand public issues or expectations (Bruce & Shelley 2010:3). Organisations that meet public expectations build loyalty, trust, confidence and satisfaction (Navarro et al 2017:3). The public has the power to enhance or damage the organisation's reputation, continued dialogue is, therefore, crucial to gain intelligence to make tactical decisions (Bruce & Shelley 2010:4).

Members of the public should be perceived as mutual partners who generate value for the organisation and can be part of its problem-solving process (Steyn 2002:20). Organisations need to have various PR strategies, as there are significant differences between public groups, which cannot be treated equally (Maxwell & Carboni 2014:302). To maintain a relationship with the public, the organisation needs to manage the process of communication, as the outcome

of this process influences the relationship (Grunig 2006:167). A PR strategy is an evolving process that develops through the practice of public identification, where new strategic issues arise for the organisation to adapt to the public's needs; it is therefore, not realistic to expect that organisations can address all public issues (Steyn 2002:21).

An organisation needs to be visible in a variety of interactions with its publics (Podnar & Jancic 2011:297). Organisations can create a competitive advantage when they transform the unique knowledge provided by each public, political support and economic resource into financial and social wealth (Steyn 2002:20). An organisation can improve its success and financial performance when it understands and meets its publics' needs and expectations (Jung & Pompper 2014:84). PR professionals inform the organisation of what behaviours are acceptable and required by its publics. When organisations are in alignment with these expectations, it has been shown to curtail costs and risks (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang & Grunig 2013:202).

It is also worth considering stakeholders and to understand how they relate to publics. Any individual, group or system that is impacted by the organisations operation can be defined as a stakeholder (Bruce & Shelley 2010:3). Drawing from the stakeholder theory organisations have a responsibility towards all their stakeholders and society that extends above shareholders and financial achievement (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:224). Although there are different definitions for stakeholders, the power that they have in relation to the organisation – as well as the organisation over the stakeholder – is a principle in prioritising stakeholders (Podnar & Jancic 2011:298). There are two groups defined by principles that differentiate stakeholder groups, which are a) the primary stakeholders can be described as those who are most critical or influential to the organisations performance (employees and customers), and b) the secondary stakeholders are those not directly engaged with transactions with the organisation and are only influenced (public and community) (Homburg, Stierl & Bornemann 2013:57). Stakeholders should be perceived as partners who generate value for the organisation and can be part of its problem-solving process (Steyn 2002:20).

The following subsection provides a description of critical PR.

1.3.3 Defining critical public relations

The literature verifies that critical theory has influenced the field of PR and that it encourages alternative ways of thinking, which challenge traditional mainstream PR practices (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880). The term "critical theory" refers to a logical methodology that interrogates the discipline and practice of organisation-centric PR practices (Tyma 2008:195). In this regard, Tyma (2008:196) claims that "the driving focus of critical theory and those that practice it is to understand and change the same social institutions (whether they are grounded in

business and commerce, government, entertainment, or education) that oppress one group of people or class in favour of another". The literature emphasises that critical approaches to PR are practical for identifying and articulating the socio-cultural concerns in the PR profession; however, it does not provide solutions to these concerns (Tyma 2008:195). Ciszek (2015:451) explains that "critical theory addresses nuances of activism and public relations and provides new ways to conceptualise activism that serve to enhance the theoretical and empirical domains of public relations in ways that functionalist approaches cannot".

Critical PR is essentially the critique of traditional PR theories and practices, which focus mainly on managerialism, functionalism and centralisation (Ciszek 2015:451; Edwards 2012:22; Gezgin 2019:4; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:225; Hou et al 2013:309; L'Etang 2005:524; Motion & Weaver 2005:50; Swart & Verwey 2003:81; Uwalaka 2019:24). Gezgin (2019:1) suggests that critical PR research is in total contrast to mainstream PR. Hou et al (2013:309) claim that critical PR research examines PR as a practice rather than a centralised function. Verwey et al (2017:70), as well as Reber and Berger (2006:3), further claim that it promotes the idea that an individual should critically interrogate issues such as power and dissent. A critical PR approach separates the meaning of communication in PR so that it can identify its intentions (Hou et al 2013:309). Critical PR urges that focus should be placed more on power and activism in PR than on the dominant power structures (Cheng 2016:90). Critical PR promotes that professionals and scholars investigate how PR practice is used to advance the hegemonic power and how organisations gain public consent to pursue their goals (Motion & Weaver 2005:50).

Critical PR has shifted PR from mostly disseminating information to taking on a more social role in facilitating discussions and "becoming meaning-makers and sense-givers" (Verwey et al 2017:71). Furthermore, PR scholars and professionals who are inspired by critical theory focus their efforts mainly on challenging the "dominant configurations and suggest[ing] alternatives to dominant articulations" (Ciszek 2015:451). They also place more emphasis on discussions that are focused on social power issues in the public domain, rather than on an individual privileged actor (Dolea 2017:175).

Critical PR focuses on interpretivism, constructivism and acceptance of diversity and dissensus (Macnamara 2012:371). Critical PR places a strong focus on the interests of society rather than on the dominant coalition; thus, moving away from PR as a management function to achieve organisational objectives (Dolea 2017:195). This concept promotes the idea that PR professionals need to take on a more social role that influences the dominant coalition policies and procedures to benefit society (Dolea 2017:195). Critical PR promotes ethical practice as an agenda and distinguishes the situation through specific moments that construct

reality; there is an evident correlation between critical theory and the ethical goals of PR (Tyma 2008:196).

The next subsection provides a definition of PR activism and briefly elaborates on how it is inspired by critical PR.

1.3.4 Defining public relations activism

There has been a noteworthy paradigm shift in the way PR professionals deal with societal issues (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Verwey et al 2017:67). Holtzhausen (2002:7) and Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:3) claim that a PR professional should become an internal organisation change agent or PR activist.

The term “activism” can be defined as an action towards a particular cause (Shim 2014:74). Activism primarily uses PR strategies and tactics to engage in interactive communication (Ciszek 2015:447; Coombs & Holladay 2012:884). In this regard, activists practice critical theory as they promote ethical decision-making and influence discourse that prompts and challenges what truth, morality and meaning are (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24). Critical theorists claim that PR activism within the dimension of critical PR challenges the intentions of organisation-centric PR approaches (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48). Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:3) highlight that the role of PR activism is consistent with the characteristics of critical PR. PR activism has in the past been marginalised because it departs significantly from the dominant functionalist PR models and theories (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Macnamara 2012:368).

Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:3) explain that defining PR activism is challenging as it “relates more to a state of mind and the self-awareness of the practitioner than to a set of concepts”. L’Etang (2005:522) defines PR activism as an attempt to “subvert the dominant or official culture prescribed by management”. Kelly (2017:19) recognises PR activism as “encompassing any act or stance of opposition or resistance that a PR practitioner might engage in to express her or his disapproval of organisational injustices and/or malpractices”. Verwey et al (2017:70) argue that PR activism is a position that interrogates and resists dominant power structures, and that it encourages debate.

PR activists are mainly concerned with (Dolea 2017:175; Dumitrica & Felt 2019:14; Grunig 2009:2,10; Tyma 2008:196; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh 2007:24; Holtzhausen 2002:7; Kelly 2017:38; Verwey et al 2017:69):

- challenging organisation-centred approaches;
- focusing more on social issues;
- promoting ethical practices;
- resisting dominant structures of power;
- challenging authorities' legitimacy;
- striving for inclusive power;
- using dissensus to promote discourse; and
- giving a voice to those deprived of power.

Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:48) claim that PR activists demonstrate “organisational activism through situational ethical decision-making, a desire for change, the use of biopower to resist dominant power, a concern for employee representation, and the practice of dissensus”. Therefore, these PR professionals advocate issues on behalf of the marginalised and stand up to oppressive power (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48). Activists attempt to change organisations' behaviour or policies, which requires them to utilise persuasion and power (Coombs & Holladay 2012:881).

The following subsections describe persuasion and power as supporting concepts relating to PR activism.

1.3.4.1 Describing persuasion

The term “persuasion” can be understood as a tactic to change or shape beliefs, attitudes or values (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32; Perloff 2003:3). It mainly focuses on the primary thoughts that individuals have regarding attitudes, either in response to a message or self-generated (Brinol, Tormala & Petty 2013:103). Persuasion is an activity that supports PR activism, as it is an interactive communication technique that PR activists practise in order to achieve the change they require (Coombs & Holladay 2012:881).

Generally, persuasion definitions are composed through conflicting values, to understand and solve deadlocks; it is essential to define the type of conflict involved, which is either a matter of values or different perspectives towards a specific reality (Macagno & Walton 2008:205).

The concept of persuasion in PR generally has a negative association with unethical practices and manipulation (Coombs & Holladay 2012:881). However, persuasion is considered in this study as the point of advocacy, whereby a PR professional acting as the organisation's PR

activist attempts to use PR strategies to develop rhetoric that influences the beliefs of a specific entity for an ethical cause (Torp 2015:104; Coombs & Holladay 2012:881).

The next subsection describes power as a concept relating to PR activism.

1.3.4.2 Describing power

PR activism is primarily concerned with resisting dominant power structures and attempting to empower the marginalised (Motion & Weaver 2005:50). PR activists use PR strategies and tactics to assist in developing an ethical cause and to attain power for marginalised people (Cheng 2016:92). PR activists examine positions of truth and power through the discourse strategies employed by dominant structures (Motion & Weaver 2005:51). The premises to critical thinking are to manage the challenges of power (Grunig 2009:9).

Power can only be detected once it compels a person to act upon the knowledge presented (Daldal 2014:149). Foucault (1980:52) states that it is inconceivable that power can be exercised without knowledge, and likewise, it is impossible for knowledge not to produce power. In critical PR, the link between power and knowledge is crucial, especially in the perspective of discourse (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:57). The literature argue that organisations express symbiotic power through PR and that critical approaches critique how this power is discursively deployed through PR (Ciszek 2015:451).

For the purpose of this study, power is considered an element relating to PR activism, which places importance on developing discourse around social power issues and oppression in society (Dolea 2017:175).

Critical theorists claim that the public has greater power than the organisations, as they can obtain power through becoming activists and using PR to exercise influence over the organisation (Coombs & Holladay 2012:883; Grunig 2009:9; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48). For an organisation to achieve its objectives and goals, it needs to be involved in understanding its publics' issues, needs and values (Fourie 2014:54). It also needs to determine a course of action to build mutually-beneficial relationships that actively attempt to resolve public issues (Fourie 2014:54). OPRs can determine what outcomes would satisfy the public, as well as what the common interests and shared goals are (Bruning et al 2004:436).

The next section provides a definition of OPRs.

1.3.5 Defining organisation–public relationships

OPRs can be explained as methods that facilitate the measurement of relationships between the organisation and its publics (Meng 2007:6; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26). OPRs provide a perspective that shifts the attention away from the organisation's being the central point and,

instead, enhances its licence to operate based on establishing meaningful communication that builds quality relationships with its publics (Jahansoozi 2007:398). Furthermore, it can promote solutions through interactions with the public that may improve mutual relationships (Bruning et al 2004:436).

An organisation that exchanges information through interactive communication with its public may positively affect the public's attitudes and behaviour towards the organisation and improve the organisation's reputation (Bruning, Dials & Shirka 2008:25; Men & Hung 2012:153). The organisation's perceived reputation is based on its historical communication activities, which are contextualised through the situational issues that affect the members of the public (Kim et al 2013:207). The concept of OPRs contributes to building and sustaining quality relationships between an organisation and its public (Jo 2006:225). An organisation that fosters sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships with its public is more likely to achieve its set goals and objectives (Mohammed 2014:485). Therefore it is essential that an organisation commits to forming quality bonds with individuals (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). It is also worth mentioning that communication is not the only factor that affects OPRs, as the behaviour of the organisation and public also has a profound impact on the longevity of these relationships (Ledingham 2003:194).

The next section provides a description of online OPRs.

1.3.6 Defining online organisation–public relationships

Online OPRs can be defined as progressive networks in which mutual expectations are created through the process of interactive communication (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059). ICTs have shifted the idea of the public space from a physical location to an online (virtual) environment (Zeri 2014:1581). This development has contributed to the creation of a critical public sphere that is a dynamic space where individuals can participate in online discussions through social networks (Ndlovu & Mbenga 2013:172). ICTs have contributed to the evolution of PR practices from monologue to dialogue and from control to engagement (Appleby 2015:28). It is observed that, in this online space, publics are debating societal issues (Al-Shamsi 2015:483). Social media have changed the landscape of the relations between an organisation and its public, having given publics the power to influence the organisation's behaviour, reputation and decision-making (Navarro et al 2017:1). Social media channels encapsulate the contemporary communication environment, whereby individuals and organisations can participate in online public communication through open dialogue (Cunningham 2010:114). Social media channels have contributed to the productivity of creating online OPRs through interactive communication (Fox 2015:43).

PR professionals use social media as a strategic tool to cultivate and sustain online OPRs (Tankosic et al 2016:290). For the purpose of this study, social media will be selected as the strategic tool for exploring online OPRs (Luo & Jiang 2012:57). PR professionals need to encourage public input and facilitate discussions on social media channels in order to build and sustain online OPRs (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059). These conversations manifest through specific issues that attract the attention of the organisation and its public (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059). Social media play a significant role in the industry of PR and challenge PR professionals to act as mediators of discussions with online OPRs (Luo & Jiang 2012:60).

The next section briefly explores the ways critical PR can contribute to online OPRs.

1.3.7 Describing the role of critical PR in online OPRs

ICTs in the form of interactive social communication networks (social media) reflect the nature of critical theory, as they promote public engagement that challenges traditional paradigms and elevates ethical public issues (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40). PR professionals who play the roles of PR activists compel organisations to initiate dialogue and participate in the online debate about societal issues (McCown 2007:47). The PR activist urges interactive discourse about social power issues and oppression in society (Dolea 2017:175; Holtzhausen 2002:10). These PR professionals who are motivated by critical PR are seen as the organisation's conscience (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:64; Verwey et al 2017:69). They also encourage the organisation towards a dynamic state that is mediated through transparency (Greeff 2015:220). PR activists focus on social issues and solutions to social problems and promote ethical decision-making (Auter 2016:99; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Sommerfeldt 2012:270; Tyma 2008:203). They use deconstructive discourse and form alliances with online publics that are subordinated or marginalised (Brown 1995:1; Butler 2002:15). Social media channels are prominent tool for critical PR practices as they distribute information cost-effectively, and mobilise and coordinate the public towards a specific social cause (Titifanue, Kant, Finau & Tarai 2017:136). Critical PR practised on social media are fundamentally a strategy to deliberately challenge and interrogate dominant structures intentions and strategies used to oppress society (Hicks 2004:3).

The relationship between knowledge and power is a crucial focus in critical PR, as it uses dissensus to promote discourse, which challenges the power of the dominant structure (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:57). It also aims to disclose breaches and inconsistencies of knowledge, thereby opening online OPRs to new opportunities and new ways of thinking (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:35).

The next section identifies the study's research focus.

1.4 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section explains the research problem, subproblems and research questions for this study.

1.4.1 The research problem

This study contributes to critical PR research on PR practice in a Middle East context. Its purpose is to examine the practice of critical PR and to understand how it could play a role in the online organisation–public relationships in the Middle East. This study, therefore, explores the degree to which critical PR can support PR professionals in online OPRs via social media.

The next subsection lists the subproblems that are relevant to addressing the research problem.

1.4.2 The subproblems

- **Subproblem 1:** To explore the emergence of critical PR from theory and practice.
- **Subproblem 2:** To explore touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations.
- **Subproblem 3:** To determine how the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics.
- **Subproblem 4:** To determine the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR are practised in the Middle East.
- **Subproblem 5:** To determine the role that critical PR plays in building online OPRs in the Middle East.

The next subsection lists the research questions that address the subproblems.

1.4.3 The research questions

- **Research question 1:** How are PR ideologies defined in theory and in practice?
- **Research question 2:** What are the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations?
- **Research question 3:** How do the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics?
- **Research question 4:** Are the characteristics of critical PR acknowledged and practised in the Middle East?
- **Research question 5:** What role does critical PR play in building online OPRs in the Middle East?

The next section gives an overview of the research methodology that will be used to measure the quantitative web-based survey and analyse the qualitative one-on-one interviews.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section explains the research methodology that is used to explore the role of critical PR and how it contributes to online OPRs in the Middle East. The study's philosophical position leans towards an exploratory and interpretive paradigm (Mayer 2015:54). The term "exploratory" refers to a procedure whereby new ideas and concepts are explored according to models, hypotheses and empirical evidence (Habib, Maryam & Pathik 2014:7). The interpretive paradigm is centred on interactional epistemology, relating to subjective experiences of the world (Faris 2015:186). Literature is interpreted to form a foundation of knowledge for the study and the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research methods is interpreted (Mayer 2015:54).

Quantitative and qualitative research approaches are used in order to adopt triangulation as a preferred research design for this study (Dawson 2002:20). This study applies methodological triangulation, specifically the between-method approach, whereby both quantitative and qualitative research methods are used to decrease deficiencies produced from using only a single method (Hales 2010:14). The study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to produce a multifaceted set of data, whereby one method informs the other (Vogt, Gardner & Haeffele 2012:14). A quantitative survey aims to produce numeric data to yield specific insights into concepts developed from the literature (Vogt et al 2012:14). This frame of knowledge informs the qualitative research method, which is in the form of semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Vogt et al 2012:14). As a strategy for this study, methodological triangulation reinforces the validity and credibility of generating new insights into the PR professional's situation (Guion, Diehl & McDonald 2011:1; Hales 2010:18). Triangulation provides a deeper understanding of the role critical PR plays in online OPRs in the Middle East (Hales 2010:20).

This study gives its attention to PR professionals to quantify and explore the role of critical PR in online OPRs, so PR professionals constitute the unit of analysis, in line with literature that states that the most suitable unit of analysis is required to have adequate knowledge and understanding of critical PR and online OPRs (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs 2014:4).

The population is carefully considered in order to capture a comprehensive portion of the representatives that are being researched (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:12). The population that is considered for this study are PR professionals from the top 100 listed organisations from the Middle East Business Intelligence Index (Angrist 2013:2; Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37). This study has a heterogeneous population, as it contains a variety of business sectors typically characterised by great diversity (Alvi 2016:10; Ruane 2016:234).

The sampling method for this study is non-probability sampling, which means that the results obtained from the selected PR professionals only represent themselves and cannot be generalised as representing the whole Middle Eastern population (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018:217). Purposive and convenient sampling techniques are also used in the non-probability method (Elo et al 2014:4).

For this study, two sampling frames are used: The first sampling frame consists of PR professionals from the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) who complete the quantitative web-based questionnaire. The second sampling frame is PR professionals from the top 100 listed organisations from the Middle East Business Intelligence index who take part in the qualitative one-on-one interviews (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37).

Table 1.1 provides a concise summary of the research methods that will be used for this study.

Table 1.1: Summary of the quantitative and qualitative research methods

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
Data collection method	Self-administered, web-based survey hosted on SurveyMonkey (online survey tool).	One-on-one interviews.
Questionnaire and interview guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statements and closed-ended questions compiled from the literature. • Response systems include dichotomous responses, multiple-choice responses and the Likert scale. 	The interview guide presents questions based on the specific topics under investigation.
Measures that were employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the web-based survey and the trustworthiness of the one-on-one interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A statistician provides consultation to assess the measurement techniques. • The questionnaire is translated into Arabic, and a review is done by an Arabic PR professional. • A pilot study is conducted. • A panel of Middle Eastern PR experts are consulted. • Cronbach alpha coefficient and Pearson's correlation coefficient methods are used to measure internal consistency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interview guide is structured from the quantitative results. • A pilot interview is conducted. • All interviews are recorded.
Data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A computer-aided software program (SAS version 9.4) is used to tabulate the data. • An exploratory factor analysis are used to calculate the Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy on all the web-based survey questions. • Several different descriptive and inferential data analysis techniques are used. • The Kruskal-Wallis test is used to determine whether three or more independent groups will be the same or different in some value of interest on an ordinal or nominal level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed. • Thematic and content analyses are used as the approach to qualitative data analysis.

As the study delves into sensitive information, the researcher needs to uphold a standard of ethical consideration that ensures the respondents or participants in the study are not in any way harmed or negatively impacted (Baarends & Van der Klink 2017:5; Kuada 2012:112). Therefore, the anonymity of the respondents and participants are maintained, which means the study will not collect data that identifies them (Walliman 2011:49). This ensures that the participants remain anonymous (Spring, Sen & Grant 2013:71).

The next section differentiates the various chapters in this study.

1.6 DEMARCATION OF THE STUDY

Table 1.2 provides an overview of the sub-problems and research questions as discussed in each chapter in this study.

Table 1.2: Demarcation of the study

Chapter	Focus	Subproblem and research question addressed	Overview
Chapter 1	Orientation and rationale of the study. Definition of key concepts.	This chapter does not focus on a specific sub-problem or research question. It does, however, provide an orientation and rationale for the study.	Chapter 1 provides context and background to the study. It outlines the study's objectives and explains its relevance and relationship to the discipline of communication. The chapter further explains the fundamental concepts of the study and research methodology.
Chapter 2	Literature review	<p>Subproblem 1: To explore the emergence of critical PR from theory and practice.</p> <p>Subproblem 2: To explore touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations.</p> <p>Research question 1: How are PR ideologies defined in theory and in practice?</p> <p>Research question 2: What are the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations?</p>	This chapter discusses PR as a foundational concept to the study. It describes the concept of PR, the critical theory of critical PR and PR activism, and the characteristics of PR professionals who act as PR activists. The chapter provides an overview of Middle Eastern countries with a specific focus on the Gulf Cooperation Council, which are seen to be leading the wider region. It further explores contemporary issues in the Middle East and concludes with critical developments in the Middle East.
Chapter 3	Literature review	<p>Subproblem 3: To determine how the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics.</p> <p>Research question 3: How do the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics?</p>	Chapter 3 discusses the dimensions and characteristics of OPRs. It also discusses the salience model as a process for public identification. The chapter explores three stages in developing OPRs, which include identifying key antecedents of relationships, relationship cultivation strategies and relationship cultivation outcomes. It also explores other critical concepts relating to this study, namely ICTs, social media, digital activism and the characteristics of a PR professional practising digital activism. It concludes with a discussion of online OPRs and identifies ideal conditions for online OPRs, as well as the role of social media in online OPRs.

Chapter 1: Orientation and rationale for the study

Chapter	Focus	Subproblem and research question addressed	Overview
Chapter 4	Research Methodology	This chapter does not focus on a specific subproblem or research question. It provides an overview of the research methods for the quantitative and qualitative approaches.	This chapter gives an overview of the research methods required to address the subproblems and research questions. It explains the relevance of the explorative and interpretive paradigm to the study. It expounds on how triangulation will be used to gather data from multiple data sources such as literature, a quantitative survey and qualitative one-on-one interviews. It identifies the unit of analysis and data collection methods. Furthermore, it discusses the quantitative web-based survey and the qualitative interview guide. It also presents the strategies to improve the study's reliability, validity and trustworthiness. It concludes with ethical considerations.
Chapter 5	Data reporting and interpretation of findings	<p>Subproblem 4: To determine the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR are practised in the Middle East.</p> <p>Subproblem 5: To determine the role that critical PR plays in building online OPRs in the Middle East.</p> <p>Research question 4: Are the characteristics of critical PR acknowledged and practised in the Middle East?</p> <p>Research question 5: What role does critical PR play in building online OPRs in the Middle East?</p>	Chapter 5 focuses on reporting and interpreting the data results from the quantitative web-based survey and the findings from the one-on-one interviews with representatives of the top 100 listed organisations in the Middle East. The chapter then discusses the critical differences between the quantitative results and the qualitative findings.
Chapter 6	Conclusion	Although the chapter does not address a specific subproblem or research question, it focuses on providing a comprehensive summary of the significant findings of the study.	This chapter summarises the significant findings of the study, and will reflect on the research methodology used to explore the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs. It also identifies the limitations and contributions of the study. It concludes with recommendations for future research.

The next chapter contextualises critical PR and discusses critical developments affecting the Middle East.

CHAPTER 2: THE MIDDLE EAST: A CRITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Various theorists claim that PR activism is a dimension of the critical paradigm which critiques the purpose and practise of organisation-centric approaches to PR (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Ciszek 2015:447; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40). This chapter discusses elements of critical PR and explores the extent to which it is apparent in the Middle East, from a theoretical perspective.

Middle Eastern governments have intensified their efforts to transform and deal with the economic dilemma that was triggered by an extreme reduction in oil prices (Freitag & Stokes 2009:162). For this reason, the purpose of this chapter was to explore how organisations in the Middle East region needed to reflect on how PR plays a critical role in mediating the power struggles in the transformation (Freitag & Stokes 2009:162).

This chapter focuses on addressing the following research subproblems and questions to answer the main research problem, which was to explore the practice of critical PR and to understand how it could play a role in online OPRs in the Middle East.

Subproblems	Research questions
To explore the emergence of critical PR from theory and practice.	How are PR ideologies defined in theory and in practice?
To explore touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations.	What are the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations?

The first part of this chapter focuses on exploring PR as a foundation for the study. It establishes an understanding of PR by exploring various definitions and concepts relating to the field of study. Elements under the critical paradigm are discussed, including critical PR and PR activism (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880). One of the most significant characteristics of PR activism is that it places a substantial focus on the interest of the public, rather than on the organisation (Dolea 2017:195). In light of this, PR practitioners who practice PR activism take on a more social role and tend to influence policies in developing long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society (Dolea 2017:195). This chapter also elaborates on the characteristics of PR professionals who play the role of internal activists who induce the organisation to initiate dialogue and debate societal issues (McCown 2007:47).

The second part of the chapter focuses on the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations. Issues related to the Middle East region and its oil price dilemma, as well as the various power struggles, are discussed (Freitag & Stokes 2009:162). The Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are the most powerful, strategic and wealthy bloc in the Middle Eastern region; they include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Williams 2016:2). These GCC countries are the driving force and leaders in the larger transformational changes in the Middle East (Guastella & Menghi 2016:4). There are also discussions of contemporary issues relating to transformational visions that are consistent in the GCC and the greater Middle East region. The chapter concludes with an elaboration on critical PR developments in the Middle East, where many PR professionals are struggling with balancing the cultural differences that are causing political conflict in the region (Allagui 2014:984).

2.2 PUBLIC RELATIONS

PR is a complex and fluid activity (Kenny 2016:78) with two distinct objectives, which are to build relationships and to use communication to sustain these relationships (Kriyantono 2017:196). The terms “public relations” and “corporate communications” are often used interchangeably (Steyn 2002:11).

From an organisation-centric approach, PR is often described as a management function in the organisation that communicates to its public to achieve organisational goals (Tankosic et al 2016:290; Meintjes et al 2012:12044). The discipline of PR, therefore, gave rise to the term “corporate communications” and its function is to build relations through managing the organisation's communication activities (Kriyantono 2017:196). This organisational paradigm uses business management to determine PR outcomes, which results in a mechanistic approach to PR (Swart & Verwey 2003:81).

Critical theory influenced PR and gave rise to critical PR, which has essentially evolved through challenging organisation-centric approaches of PR (Dolea 2017:176; Friis 2013:5). These functionalist approaches have been dominantly based on theoretical perspectives from the models of PR and the excellence theory which places more emphasis on how the organisation can support society than on advancing its one-sided objectives (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:225; Laskin 2009:37; Sherratt 2005:197). In light of this shift, PR has become more decentralised, and PR professionals have taken a stronger position as the conscience of the organisation through acting as internal organisational activists (Gezgin 2019:2; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Verwey et al 2017:69).

The following subsections provide a brief overview of the concepts of PR, the public sphere, models of PR, the excellence theory and the responsibilities of the PR professional.

2.2.1 The concept of public relations

Historically, PR ascended as an academic discipline in the 1970s (Frandsen & Johansen 2015:443), which had a predominately organisational-centric approach (Edwards 2012:12). The purpose of PR is to cultivate mutual relationships between the organisation and its publics through active communication strategies (Fourie 2014:2). The key issues that surround PR relate to purpose and ethics (Pieczka 2009:2). According to Johnson and Gillis (2014:208), institutions attempted to standardise PR codes of ethics, which were developed and led mainly by two professional organisations representing corporate communication professionals, namely the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).

Sisco (2014:81) explained that the PRSA proposed professional standards and recommended a code for PR professionals to practise when facing an ethical decision. Arrow (2015:62) stated that the majority of PR associations had created codes of conduct and codes of ethics.

Johnson and Gillis (2014:208) propose that a PR association should:

- uphold codes of ethics that stress the importance of sharing accurate information;
- ensure a mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics;
- develop a free flow of information;
- respect cultural differences and values;
- avoid personal and professional conflicts of interest; and
- furnish unbiased counsel to employees and clients.

Freitag and Stokes (2009:171) state that, in the Middle East region, the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) was created to represent the interests of the Middle East PR industry. It played a strategic role in promoting a set of standards for quality and ethical conduct (Freitag & Stokes 2009:171).

However, the literature has questioned the role of PR associations and has indicated that “codes of conduct are not sufficient to protect business enterprises against moral failures”; there should be more “public debate on ethical standards in professional practice, especially in the social media and online interaction spaces” (Verwey & Muir 2018:2). Verwey et al (2017:70) argue that PR professionals have “different standards of morality; there is no single standard of morality”. This indicates that the PR professional needs to have personal values that distinguish what ethical PR practice would be.

The literature emphasises that PR practices mainly focus on organisational interests, which prompts questions of ethics about what role PR plays in communication in organisations (Edwards 2012:14). Lee and Choi (2009:174) argue that this organisation-centric approach

could be observed as the PR function's attempt to improve the image of the organisation through process, strategies, measurements and evaluations. However, the organisation's image has been criticised as being an abstract or symbolic concept (Fourie 2014:6), formed from PR building relationships and communities through communication activities (Logan & Tindall 2014:164). The area of PR responsibility covers both internal and external environments of the organisation: From an internal organisational perspective, PR manages internal communication channels to effectively communicate with the organisation's human resources to streamline its developments (Rivero & Theodore 2014:3). From an external environmental perspective, therefore, the role of PR should serve the purpose of encouraging relationships between interacting organisations and its publics (Ledingham & Bruning 2007:190).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study does not avoid organisation-centric approaches altogether because it aims to explore and develop a deeper understanding of online OPRs. Literature has suggested that PR does play a role in the organisation to bridge the gap between the organisation and its publics in order to establish a rapport (Mohammed 2017:196). Relationships between organisations and their publics do not only require information sharing, but are also motivated by purposeful interactive communication (Maxwell & Carboni 2014:303; Sommerfeldt 2012:269). Identifying stakeholders and segmenting various kinds of public categories supports the process of building relationships (Grunig & Grunig 2008:334). As the public is a key focus area for PR programmes, PR must consider the public's needs and interests (Kriyantono 2012:124; Rivero & Theodore 2014:2). PR professionals should be aware of the organisation's public needs and desires, how they think, and what they consider essential (Mylrea 2015:3).

The goal of PR should be to influence an organisation's performance purposefully, as performance would be decreased without meaningful interactive communication (Cox 2014:34; Hallahan et al 2007:10). Purposeful communication in the PR process cannot control public behaviour but can be mindful of it (Murphy 2015:252). The nature of PR is to communicate purposefully, which provides the organisation with the opportunity to interact with its public and stakeholders (Hallahan et al 2007:16). Organisations use PR to communicate purposefully with their publics in order to accomplish their objectives. Although this is in total contrast to critical PR, it cannot be ignored, as PR functions are still practising PR that benefits the organisation instead of focusing on resolving societal issues (Ki 2015:608). Organisations, through PR, use information to deliberately and purposefully alter the state of a person's knowledge (Lewis 2017:1). Purposeful communication is grounded in relationships, interaction and mutual understanding (Valeryevna & Grigoryevich 2015:311).

Edwards (2012:12) highlighted that the focus on PR as an organisational function dominates literature and is only evident when PR is researched from a perspective that does not align with functional paradigms. Literature also reveals that the role of PR professionals has shifted from that of predominately information disseminators to that of mediators who facilitate debate and encourage public input (Ngozi, Malachy, Christy, Ngozi & Prince 2016:289; Verwey et al 2017:70). Verwey et al (2017:70) claim that this “has resulted in critical interrogation of issues such as dissent, power and activism”.

This shift additionally moved PR away from the functionalist approaches that hold PR as a central management function (Edwards 2012:12). The shift also encouraged PR to use methods or tactics for negotiating power and legitimacy between the organisation and its publics (Motion & Weaver 2005:50). Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:3) argue that PR could no longer be defined as a service that only benefits “corporate environments and political elites”, but should instead be re-examined as a service that relates to and represents the social cause in the public sphere.

The next subsection discusses and explores the concept of the public sphere.

2.2.2 Public sphere

Reid (2014:34) emphasised that Jürgen Habermas had a significant influence on the subject of the public sphere in 1962. The public sphere has been understood as being a space free from political authorities’ influence or control (Bodrunova 2013:4), where people or players can debate, critique, negotiate and discuss a variety of issues (Al-Shamsi 2015:483; Dori-Hacohen & Livnat 2015:909; Fuchs 2014:58). It is a figurative space where people gather as equals to participate and deliberate critical issues (McGaurr 2016:19). The people occupy a public space known as the public sphere where debate is conducted on mutual issues and interests (Ndlovu & Mbenga 2013:172). The public sphere is known as a social space where public opinion is formed through debate, in a process similar to voting, which is a method of legitimate political decision-making (Nærland 2014:39). Although the public sphere aims to reach a consensus amongst those engaged in it, the reality is that it is incredibly complicated and idealistic (Tyulenev 2013:470).

The public sphere can also be understood as the space where formal or informal communication is conducted between the organisation and the people in the community (Amezaga, Arana, Narbaiza & Azpillaga 2013:107; Habermas 2006:415). It is, therefore, also a space where communities can influence matters of general concern (Tyulenev 2013:469). The public sphere is not confined to political and societal issues but can also entertain discussions about general day-to-day topics (Amezaga et al 2013:94). A liberating phenomenon occurs in the public sphere that transfers an individual’s opinion into public

opinion (Rasmussen 2008:80). It is in this relationship that the role of the public sphere performs its characteristic of problem-solving (Hove 2008:9). The public space in which the public conducts debates cannot be dominated by a specific government; it is a space where freedom of expression and equality needs to be prevalent (Reid 2014:35). It is furthermore a space that brings attention to reforming society (Stroud 2012:148).

The public sphere demonstrates three interconnected concepts: (a) democracy, (b) public opinion and (c) power (Al-Shamsi 2015:483). The general features of the public sphere are understood to include open access, equality, rationality and criticism (Dori-Hacohen & Livnat 2015:909). The public sphere is concurrently a space and a process, as it develops when citizens in a community contest for improvements in their respective societies; this contesting effort is understood to be a process to establish spatial spheres in the public (Fuchs 2014:65). In an evolved public sphere, a supra-institution has been created and is stimulated by various entities interacting uniquely and dynamically (Bentele & Nothhaft 2010:106).

It is worth mentioning that the public sphere has evolved over time and that it is also known as the “communicative sphere” as it is more participative than representative (Belousova & Pavlova 2013:1; Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson 2014:317; Mitu & Vega 2014:106). Vishnyakova and Polyakova (2017:93) explain that the communicative sphere is thought to be constructive in the sense that it is used for interpretation in the course of the communicative process. Moreover, it “creates critical spaces to reflect communicative interaction which may challenge dominant discourses and redefine the limits of legitimate communication in the public sphere” (Masip, Ruiz-Caballero & Suau 2019:6).

The next subsection explores the models of PR.

2.2.3 Models of public relations

The models of PR established by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) are considered to be the most dominant organisational-centred theoretical perspectives in PR (Laskin 2009:37). As shown in Table 2.1, it describes the characteristics of the various communications used by an organisation (Grunig & Grunig 2008:33; Kenny 2016:79; Laskin 2009:47; Murphy 1991:127; Rhee 2004:24).

Table 2.1: The Models of PR

Model	Type of Communication	Characteristic
Press agency	One-way communication	The organisation attempts to influence public behaviour through persuasion and manipulation by emphasising favourable publicity.
Public information	One-way communication	The PR professional within the organisation makes use of one-way communication techniques such as press releases to disseminate organisational information and does not use any form of research or two-way communication.
Two-way asymmetrical	Two-way communication (imbalanced)	The organisation does not use research techniques to understand the public or to determine the public's perception; the organisation attempts to influence public behaviour through persuasion and manipulation and only portrays the agenda of the organisation, not the interests of the public.
Two-way symmetrical	Two-way communication	The organisation uses communication in the form of dialogue to form an understanding with its various publics, in order to overcome issues and create a positive understanding. The organisation does not utilise research to persuade but rather to build mutual understanding between the organisation and its public. Based on what the organisation learns from the public, it is more likely under this model to change its policies and procedures.
Mixed-Motive	Mixed communication	The mixed-motive model evolved through the critique of the two-way symmetry model. It is the fifth PR model that combines elements of the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models. It is especially relevant to PR professionals that are both loyal to their organisation and the public that is affected by the organisations behaviours.

With regards to Table 2.1, the PR professional makes use of a variety of practices to build and sustain the relationships between the organisation and its public (Tirkkonen & Luoma-aho 2014:214). The maintenance or sustainability of relationships is facilitated and governed through the principles of communication (Ngozi et al 2016:288). It can be noted that the aim of PR is to build and sustain relationships; therefore, PR professionals would opt not to merely conduct one-way communication with publics but to strategically opt for mixed communication to enhance relationships (Hayes et al 2017:263).

PR has gained a reputation for using press agents or publicity techniques to persuade and manipulate public perceptions (Kuok & Santos 2017:50). Ethically, PR does not attempt to manipulate publics, instead, it aims to use communication as a process that enables organisations and publics to gain a shared understanding through dialogue and negotiation (Jinadasa 2016:56). PR is, therefore, a dynamic process where social players interact with the

organisation and create new definitions, meanings and interpretations through communication (Dolea 2017:178). The PR function is, therefore, an interactive form of communication as publics do not merely consume information (like in the agency and public information models), they also voice their concerns and issues about the organisation (Mohammed 2014:484). PR professionals act as counsellors who manage communication efforts and support management-level decision-making in identifying threats to the organisation (Waters 2014:45). There are mixed-motives involved in any PR communication (mixing of PR models among a variety of communication tactics), this means that both the two-way symmetrical model and the two-way asymmetrical model are practised (Theaker 2012:36). The most influential people in the organisation practise mixed-motive PR as they understand the value that it provides in facilitating communication between the organisation and its public (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh & Lyra 1995:170).

Although this study focused on a critical PR perspective, it does not aim to exclude organisational-centric PR approaches. The next subsection will explore the excellence theory as a dominant organisational-centric approach to PR. It is also worth mentioning that great bodies of research which include various critical theories, have challenged and critiqued the excellence theory, which has contributed to the progression of critical PR (Kenny 2016:88).

2.2.4 The excellence theory

James E. Grunig defined the excellence theory as a set of characteristics that determine excellent PR departments and how these departments can potentially make their organisations more effective (Grunig & Grunig 2000:303). Grunig (2006:151) further explained that the excellence theory takes into consideration the role of PR in strategic management and how it contributes to the organisation by adding value to its strategic public relationships. One of the core purposes of the excellence theory was to construct a theory that determines how PR can contribute to the organisation's effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig 2008:332).

The excellence theory, developed by James E. Grunig (1983), was derived from a project funded by IABC, to determine the value of PR in achieving organisational success (Frandsen & Johansen 2015:443). IABC's purpose in developing the excellence theory was to create a universal approach for PR, which was instrumental in explaining to PR professionals the expectations and characteristics that organisations need to have, in order to acquire an excellent PR function (Tyma 2008:196). The research aimed to answer the 'effectiveness question' (why, and to what extent, does PR increase organisational effectiveness) (Dolea 2017:174). It also included the 'excellence question' (how PR must be organised and managed to contribute to organisational effectiveness) (Grunig & Grunig 1998:144). The excellence

theory is understood to be a general theory for PR that provided guidance to PR professionals and to safeguard the PR practices (Kenny 2016:84; Ngozi et al 2016:290; Laskin 2012:355).

The excellence theory is summarised in Table 2.2, which described the various characteristics and principles of excellence relating to the PR function (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335-338; Kriyantono 2017:194; Kim et al 2013:198).

Table 2.2: Characteristics of an excellent PR function

Dimensions of Excellence	Description of the principles of excellent PR
Empowerment of the PR function	The PR professional is involved in the strategic function of management and, therefore, with the organisation's management processes.
	Communication programmes are created by excellent departments, who strategically manage communications with publics.
	The PR department is part of the decision-making management group or the PR professional is a member of the dominant coalition and can directly communicate with the top management of the organisation.
	All PR roles have a level of diversity.
Communication Roles	A senior manager heads the PR department.
	The PR professional needs not have adequate managerial knowledge and understanding.
	There needs to be an equal opportunity for men and women in the managerial role.
The organisation of the communication function and its relationship to other management functions	The PR function is integrated into one communication department
	PR function should be separate from other managerial functions and should be independent.
Models of PR	The PR department and the decision-makers in the organisation agree to adopt a two-way symmetrical model as the primary basis of establishing PR.
	For building and maintaining relationships, communication activities are created for targeted publics and use two-way symmetrical strategies.
	The PR professional needs to be efficient in applying the two-way symmetrical model.
	Internal communication systems within the organisation should be symmetrical.

The characteristics discussed in Table 2.2 presented the excellence theory as a normative ideology, which identified how the PR function can be more active within the organisation

(Tyma 2008:196). Table 2.2 demonstrated that an excellent PR function can be viewed from four key categories. The first three categories reflected the strategic connection of PR to the senior decision-makers and management of the organisation (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). The last category emphasised the use of implementing two-way symmetrical strategies to balance the interests of the public and the organisation (Frandsen & Johansen 2015:452). The excellence theory defined various models, dimensions and roles that can be measured, based on the researcher's needs (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335).

Laskin (2012:364) indicated that these issues can be measured on scales from either of the following perspectives:

- individual (PR professionals' knowledge and expertise);
- campaign or programme (PR communication);
- department (day-to-day activities); or
- organisation (expectations of the CEO or dominant coalition).

The research findings from the excellence theory verified that PR generates value for organisations and publics, when it is "managerial, strategic, symmetrical, diverse, integrated, socially responsible, ethical and global" (Kim et al 2013:197). The research outcomes have also shown that organisations which neglect to empower the PR function do not reach their full capability in being effective (Sriramesh 2009:4). The excellence theory pronounced how the PR function should be organised and managed (Kim et al 2013:198). The excellence theory demonstrated how organisations can interact with internal and external publics, it realised that publics do not accept messages from hegemonic structures and that they are not passive but interactive (Tyma 2008:194). This theory also recognised that PR provided an organisation with added value as it recognised strategic publics and cultivated sustainable relationships through communication activities (Kim et al 2013:200). As a result, the value of the PR can be measured by the excellence of its relationships with these strategic publics (Kim et al 2013:200).

One of the perceived outcomes of the excellence theory is that, when the organisation empowers the PR function as part of the critical management function, it would be more useful towards the organisation (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). Through empowering the PR function, it could contribute to the organisation's strategic decision-making process (Sriramesh 2009:4; Verinder 2015:90). One of the tasks would include the PR function scanning the environment to identify publics who could potentially influence the outcomes of the organisation's decisions (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). Hence, an excellent PR function would interact with these publics and raise their concerns and issues to influence the organisation's decision-making process (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). It has been observed through the excellence study that PR

becomes less useful to the organisation when its role is not central to conveying information to the public about organisational decision making (Kim et al 2013:202). The PR professional's knowledge and capability to act within a managerial role, and to be able to disseminate the correct information to the public and the organisation is essential to influence the decision-making process (Laskin 2012:364).

According to the excellence theory an excellent PR function needs to provide measurable evidence to prove that the communication programmes are achieving the objectives, as well as building long-term organisation and public relationships (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). The excellence theory places the emphasis on the PR function having an empowered role within the organisation, this is therefore, only possible when the PR professional can raise concerns to the management level that has the most control in the organisation (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335). Another aspect to the excellence theory is that the PR function needs to empower diversity through having a mix of cultural backgrounds, mainly ethnic, racial and gender differences (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335).

Although the excellence theory was developed in an era before social media shifted the practice of PR, it did, however, attempt to lay a foundational representation of an excellent PR function which was intended to support PR professionals and the organisation (Grunig & Grunig 2000:303; Kim et al 2013:199; Jones 2013:75). Scholars and practitioners have argued that the excellence theory is based on a western ideology, which limits its application as a universal theory and has hindered theory-building of new marginalised alternative views (Kriyantono 2017:207; Macnamara 2012:370). There has been significant resistance in accepting the excellence theory as a universal theory for PR, as it cannot represent the actual practice of PR as it would become "an evaluative framework for practice, setting a false standard and potentially limiting the direction of theoretical development" (Smith 2013:63). Critical theorists argue that the excellence theory is predominantly grounded in functionalism, managerialism and centralisation which limits its application as a universal theory (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Macnamara 2012:371).

Kenny (2016:87) argued against the excellence theory's position that PR professionals should have a strategic managerial role, as these roles are "inevitably imbalanced in favour of the organisation". Holtzhausen (2002:251) stated that the manager as a rational person cannot determine the organisational outcomes through strategy and that managerialism is essentially the practice of suppressing workers into workplaces that benefit the manager more than the worker. Kenny (2016:88) criticised the excellence theory as it enforces "its monocultural and normative management model, it devalues national traditions, minorities and cultural differences, and subjects the wellbeing of society to corporate profitability".

Grigorași (2015:59) condemned the excellence theory of using the two-way symmetrical communication model as the primary basis of establishing PR, as this practice make use of the public identification process which in itself takes a bias position towards publics of interest to serve the objectives of the organisation. Kenny (2016:88) contended that “where the company’s interest is profit-driven, the dialogue inevitably becomes normative, leading to debate over whether consequences of dialogue can really be considered for the common good”.

Further criticism suggested that the excellence theory is not applicable in the current social, political or corporate realities (Tyma 2008:193). Smith (2013:64) argued that the excellence theory “represents one interpretation of how excellent public relations may be practiced, and it should not be considered the only interpretation”. Other critics convict the excellence theory as it promotes the concept of centralisation, which is incongruent to the shift which has taken place through the development in ICT that have resulted in decentralised PR practice (Appleby 2015:28; Dolea 2017:195; Navarro et al 2017:1). This shift has confirmed that organisations cannot control online discourse but only engage or participate in it (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:223; Uwalaka 2019:24). Kenny (2016:88) stressed that “professionals need to move beyond the excellence theory in order to fulfil the present and future potential of the public relations industry”.

The next subsection explores the responsibilities of the PR professional.

2.2.5 PR professional responsibilities

PR professionals must be socially and culturally sensitive, and familiar with the conditions that affect people in voicing their opinions (Lee, Oshita, Oh & Hove 2014:187). PR professionals use the intelligence gathered from analysing and segmenting publics to establish strategies that would aid in the problem-solving process (Kim 2011:1). PR professionals can be more effective in stimulating public debate when they are familiar with the player’s positions and what factors/themes would contribute to the public debate (Tyulenev 2013:469). Regardless of whom PR professionals work for, their responsibilities ideally focus on creating relationships with various publics (internal and external) (Kuok & Santos 2017:50). PR professionals are required to be consistent in conducting communication activities that involve societal issues; this practice will improve interaction and build public confidence (Rivero & Theodore 2014:1).

The PR professional serves as a critical link between the organisation and its publics (Sisco 2014:81). PR professionals cannot accurately predict individuals’ or publics’ responses and interactions (Bowen & Stacks 2014:242). PR professionals utilise various communication tactics during their communication activities with public groups, which are created through various societal issues (Grunig 2009:14). These issues are also prioritised based on their

consequences for or risk to the organisation (Steyn 2007:165). When the organisation is aware of the public's issues or, more specifically, its expectations, the organisation can initiate dialogue to build mutually beneficial relationships or attempt to resolve the issue (Wiggill 2011:227).

The following are essential responsibilities that PR professionals may have in an organisation:

- assuming a social role, where the focus is on public interest and societal issues (Dolea 2017:173);
- raising public issues to influence the organisation's decision-makers (Kim et al 2013:201);
- bringing alternative issues and solutions to the attention of these strategic decision-makers (Kim et al 2013:201);
- using communication activities to sustain the relationships between the organisation and its public (Aldoory & Grunig 2012:93);
- resolving issues between the organisation and its public (Verinder 2015:90);
- soliciting public opinions, which can be used to influence the organisation's decision-making process (Reid 2014:35);
- acting as the facilitator of debate, dialogue and dissent, and encouraging public input (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Reber & Berger 2006:3);
- encourage decisions that benefit the society in which the organisation operates (Meintjes et al 2012:12045);
- contributing intelligence on the public; and not merely on one group, such as customers (marketing) or the government (public affairs) (Steyn 2002:13); and
- empowering the public by allowing a way for their voices to be heard in organisational decision-making (Grunig 2009:10).

From a critical perspective, PR professionals tend to have a biased commitment towards their respective organisations; they do not listen to the public involved, as they fail to represent the public during the negotiations with the organisation's decision-makers (Kenny 2016:87). The idea that dialogue is symmetric is contested by the concept of subjective transposition; the reality of dialogue produces a biased outcome, as it intends to serve the interests of the dominant individual or group (Grigorași 2015:59).

The next section discusses critical theory and explores critical PR, PR activism and the role of the PR professional acting as the PR activist.

2.3 CRITICAL THEORY

According to Sherratt (2005:177) and L'Etang (2005:521), the term "critical theory" was coined by Max Horkheimer, who developed the intellectual sociological project with various theorists in the Early Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s. Horkheimer explained that critical theory "has for decades exercised a liberating and stimulating influence, the theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:246). Critical theory was therefore developed under the influence of society, philosophy, history and psychology theories with the aim of eliminating individual suffering and social injustice (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:225).

Critical theory promotes a kind of reasoning that critiques modern concepts of reason and ideology (Asghar 2013:3124; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:225; Sherratt 2005:197). Motion and Weaver (2005:64) claim that, in critical theory, the concept of truth is perceived as conditional and relative. Asghar (2013:3126) explained that critical theory provides a refreshing perspective to engage with issues; it strives to make a difference and reform the world. Critical theory is practised through a distinctive process known as "immanent" or "internal critique" (Sherratt 2005:199), which is used in the analysis or examination of features of our society, such as political or governmental institutions (Sherratt 2005:177). Critical theory is dynamic and flexible in the sense that it can adopt any methodology or technique that helps support improvement in an unbalanced social system (Asghar 2013:3124).

Critical theory focuses on interpretivism, constructivism and acceptance of diversity and dissensus (Macnamara 2012:371). It is simultaneously normative (promotes ethical practice as an agenda) and subjective (distinguishes the situation through specific moments that construct reality) (Tyma 2008:196). Sherratt (2005:199) argued that critical theory might expose the reality that "our world failed to achieve its own ideals including that of emancipation". L'Etang (2005:524) explained that critical scholars need to have the freedom to challenge the boundaries of knowledge and participate in mythological debates with a view to educating society about new ideas. Asghar (2013:3123) suggested that there should be three criteria for an adequate approach to applying critical theory: (a) it needs to explain what is wrong with the current social reality; (b) it needs to propose an action to change it; and (c) it needs to establish explicit norms for critique. Horkheimer stated that critical thinking is motivated to critique the mechanical work-processes that society is built on (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:210). Critical theory aims to liberate individual researchers through their responsibility to observe, perceive, analyse and interpret data (Asghar 2013:3126). Critical theory is concerned with investigating issues of power relations in society, and is motivated to establish a democratic society (Asghar 2013:3123). L'Etang (2005:521) argued that critical theory is an approach that aimed to transform the social, political and economic structures that

limit human potential. In a practical sense, it pursues structures that are dominating and oppressing society and aims to challenge their strategies through public debate, which acts as a catalyst for change (Asghar 2013:3123; L'Etang 2005:522).

The next subsection defined critical PR and developed an understanding of how critical theory contributed to its development.

2.3.1 Critical public relations

L'Etang (2005:521) stated that critical PR “challenges assumptions, alters boundaries, produces a paradigm shift, critiques policy or practice, and draws inspiration from the intellectual sociological project known as Critical Theory”. The term “critical PR” relates to the critique of mainstream PR approaches associated with managerialism, centralisation and functionalism that predominantly come from functionalist organisation-centric approaches to PR (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Macnamara 2012:368). Critical PR places a substantial focus on the interests of the public rather than on those of the organisation, which implies that the PR professionals need to take on a more social role and influence public policies in developing long-term, transformational programmes (Dolea 2017:195). It changed PR from asking what it can do to help organisations be more efficient, to asking what its role in society is (Dolea 2017:176).

Holtzhausen (2002:251) claimed that critical PR rejects the manager as a rational person and suggests that the manager cannot determine the organisational outcomes through strategy. L'Etang (2005:522) agreed that the “managerial life is not rational, logical and predictable but messy, emotional, political and fragmented”. Holtzhausen (2002:251) further suggested that critical theorists challenge the legitimacy of managers’ making decisions and setting goals for the organisation. Critical theorists are not opposed to management but rather against the ideology of managerialism (Holtzhausen 2002:251; L'Etang 2005:522; Tyma 2008:201). Holtzhausen (2002:251) explained that managerialism is the practice of suppressing workers into workplaces that benefit the manager more than the worker.

PR scholars and PR professionals who are inspired by critical theory focus their discussions mainly on activism and power issues in the public sphere, rather than on an individual privileged player (Cheng 2016:91; Dolea 2017:175). Edwards (2012:20) further explained that critical PR had become a “means of social connection, a source of resistance, a structured system of domination or a means of agentic reflexivity”. According to Motion and Weaver (2005:50), critical PR has established itself as a legitimate tactic that enables professionals and scholars to contribute to the struggle for and negotiation of power. Critical PR also focuses on ethical practice, in the sense that it is used to investigate how dominant power structures are using mainstream PR strategies to advance the hegemonic power over its publics (Gezgin

2019:4; Motion & Weaver 2005:50). Edwards (2012:19) and L'Etang (2005:522) further contend that PR professionals who practise critical PR would reject functional PR research or organisation-centric approaches to PR and instead demand a more active and progressive approach. Literature indicates that the main challenge in critical PR is for the PR professionals to place issues of power and truth at the core of all their inquiries, as this would enable PR to have more influence on the organisation's decision-making process (Motion & Weaver 2005:65).

Critical theory advocates that PR professionals need to take on a more social role and act as the PR activist in the organisation (Invernizzi & Romenti 2015:426; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48), which encourages the PR professional to act as the facilitator of debate, dialogue, dissent and encourage public input (Verwey et al 2017:70; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Reber & Berger 2006:3). Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:18) support this claim.

The following subsections discuss PR activism and explain how persuasion and power play a significant role in supporting it.

2.3.2 Public relations activism

Kelly (2017:1) claimed that there had been limited research in the field of PR activism, even though it offers alternative insights towards maintaining legitimacy. However, various critical theorists claim that PR activism, as a dimension of the critical paradigm, aims to question the intentions of organisation-centric approaches to PR (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Ciszek 2015:447; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40). Kelly (2017:3) argued that activism has been predominantly studied from an organisational perspective where it is understood to be counterproductive; this approach limits the potential of alternative perspectives to PR activism. However, the tactics and strategies employed by activists are fundamentally in PR (Ciszek 2015:447).

Generally, activism has been defined and understood as a political action towards a particular cause (Shim 2014:74). Activists' primary resolution is to influence government policy and impact society's attitudes (Moloney, McQueen, Surowiec and Yaxley 2013:5). The dynamics in power relationships recognise activist publics as mediators, moderators, interferers, targets and bystanders (Sommerfeldt 2012:269). Activists are more loyal to a cause than to a specific organisation (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60). They also have a specific reform agenda (the cause) that requires governments or organisations to take particular actions (Paterson 2007:2). Activists promote ethical decision-making and influence discourse that prompts and challenges what truth, morality and meaning are (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24).

ICT established social networks that are ultimately a form of network power for activists (Uysala & Yang 2013:467). Activists have advanced specific causes through distributing information through the networks to educate larger clusters of individuals (Ciszek 2015:452). Yet it is a general perception that activists are troublemakers who should be avoided (Ciszek 2015:448). Activists have used social network sites, such as social media, to reach and educate publics (Shim 2014:74), even though social network sites are generally monitored through filtering and surveillance, which threaten the safety of the activists (Lynch 2014:2680). Activists keep individuals up to date with information and stimulate their engagement in the cause (McLeod 2014:3). Activists compel their opposition to initiate dialogue and debate (McCown 2007:47). Organisations or governments should not ignore requests to engage in dialogue with activists as they are capable of using highly disruptive strategies that threaten the organisations' or governments' public image and reputation (Paterson 2007:1).

Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:18) suggest that PR professionals acting as PR activists need to be change agents that investigate and create opportunities for debate so that social players can contribute to co-creating new meanings and values. They are thereby influencing public policies in developing long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society (Dolea 2017:195). PR activism, therefore, motivates the PR professional to align with "alternative organisational cultures (sub or micro) to subvert the dominant or official culture prescribed by management" (L'Etang 2005:522). Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015:3) argue that these PR activists are essentially change agents that are motivated to address and resolve societal issues, and to "stand-up to oppressive power on behalf of those less powerful". Verwey et al (2017:69) stress that the significant challenge for PR activists in the organisation is to demonstrate to the organisation that the "new way of thinking, and new practices" is established according to ethical principles. Another challenge in PR activism is that the committed PR activist would essentially be identified as a "whistle-blower" who is generally targeted and treated like a traitor by the organisation's elite or dominant coalition (L'Etang 2016:208). This notion is supported by Kelly (2017:16) who criticised the concept of a PR activist as utopic, as there is little reason for PR professionals to risk their jobs by resisting the same power structure in which they work.

Nevertheless, a key feature of PR activism is that members in the organisation take on the role of the PR activist to address social injustice or ethical issues of the organisation (Kelly 2017:4). Cheng (2016:90) highlighted that this approach is rooted in critical PR as it challenges the organisation's intentions and addresses issues of power through activism. An activist's cause is most effective in making publics active when it includes the strategies of power and persuasion (Werder 2015b:520).

The following subsections specifically discuss persuasion and power as activities in PR activism.

2.3.2.1 Persuasion

A person is not governed by force alone, but also by ideas (Bates 1975:351). Persuasion can be understood as a tactic to change beliefs or values (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32); it is therefore an objective of rhetoric (Torp 2015:104). Community life is subject to direct and indirect efforts of persuasion (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2004:5). The understanding of persuasion is that it focuses on the primary thoughts individuals have about attitudes, either in response to a message or self-generated (Brinol et al 2013:103). Any shaping of attitudes involves persuasion (Perloff 2003:3).

Generally, persuasion definitions include issues relating to conflicting values or deadlocks. To understand and break deadlocks, it is essential to define the type of conflict involved, which is either a matter of values or different perspectives on a specific reality (Macagno & Walton 2008:205). Trust is the precondition and aim of persuasion (Torp 2015:110). Macagno and Walton (2008:205) claim that there are three concepts that influence the success of persuasion: (a) ambiguity; (b) the connection between the meaning and common ground; and (c) dependence on shared knowledge for communication.

Persuasion is a purposeful communicative technique. In order for it to occur, a message (verbal or non-verbal) needs to be communicated; it may be rational or objective, reasonable or unreasonable (Perloff 2003:11). It may also have the intention to change behaviour and not merely influence it (Perloff 2003:11). Persuasion is distinctly different from influence: Influence does not directly carry the weight to change others intentionally (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2004:6). Although persuasion is a pathway to influence, it intentionally attempts to modify values, beliefs and change an individual's actions in a particular direction that favours the persuader (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2004:6).

PR activists are motivated towards informing and persuading individuals to have a specific perception (Tankosic et al 2016:292). Persuasion is a message that carries a particular point of view or favoured action that the receiver needs to accept voluntarily (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32). The aim of communication in a relational perspective is to persuade others to work towards a unified objective (Hallahan et al 2007:17). PR activism is, therefore, a process of persuasion that involves interactive communication (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32).

Persuasive strategies are suitable when the dominant structure's motivation to change is low (not applicable when there is a lack of resources to sustain change), especially when the scale of change is large or the perception holds that it is of high-risk (Werder 2015b:512). PR activists

use persuasive strategies to alter perceptions to favour the cause (Perloff 2003:4). Generally, individuals respond to persuasion that offers to assist them in meeting their desires and needs (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:33). It is therefore critical for persuaders to integrate the persuadee's needs – persuasion is then a situational transactive dependency (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:33). The next subsection discusses the concept of power and explains how it relates to PR activism.

2.3.2.2 Power

It is not conceivable that power can be exercised without knowledge and, similarly, it is impossible for knowledge not to produce power (Foucault 1980:52). In a critical ideological perspective, the link between power and knowledge is crucial, especially in discourse (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:57). The literature related to power highlighted two distinct concepts, the first of which is the equilibrium of power, knowledge and truth (Foucault 1980:34). The second concept refers to power as the ability to disseminate knowledge (Foucault 1980:34).

The fundamental premises of critical thinking are to manage the challenges of power (Grunic 2009:9). Power can only be detected once it compels a subject to act upon the knowledge presented (Daldal 2014:149). Knowledge perpetuates the effects of power, and the application of power continuously generates knowledge (Foucault 1980:52). An individual formulates reality through the interaction of a knowledge exchange (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24). This interaction directly increases power and knowledge, which frame the constructs of the individual's reality (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24).

It is worth mentioning that power is not for the dominant coalition to give (Tyma 2008:201). PR activists resist dominant structures and challenge issues of power by investigating their intentions (Benecke & Oksitycz 2015:3). The literature identified two coercive strategies that dominant structures of power use to attain compliance (Werder 2015b:512). The first strategy referred to a cynical coercion strategy (threat and punishment), which implies that the sender's message demands an outcome that is feared by the receiver (Werder 2015b:512). The second strategy referred to a positive coercion strategy (promise and reward), which implies that there is a contingent outcome linked to performance; the sender's message controls the outcome desired by the receiver (Antoniades 2008:10).

Hostile laws and military force can be relevant in seizing power, but consent is required to maintain that power (Taha, Zahra & Al-Khaoli 2008:239). It can be understood that, wherever networks of power and knowledge occur, the members connected to this network will continually contest it and create resistance to ascertain truth (Stoddart 2007:206).

Naturally, power relations are subjected to various methods of resistance (Foucault 2000:329). Wherever resistance exists, there are mechanisms of power, which not only operate on a macro level but also on a variety of micro and local levels (Stoddart 2007:205). Where organisations are observed to be using knowledge as a means to dominate, resistance is formulated through disseminating critical knowledge that elevates truth, revealing the intention of domination (Rouse 2005:6).

Critical theorists resist domination as it fundamentally overpowers people (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63). It is observed that, when dominant structures of power disregard public issues, those publics will emerge as activists that formulate tactics and strategies to force the dominant structure to engage in dialogue (Coombs & Holladay 2012:884). It is worth noting that discourse can generate and reinforce power – but it can also expose and weaken the power, making it vulnerable and unstable (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:25).

In the literature covered earlier, it was mentioned that, from an organisation-centric perspective, PR would be used to formulate discursive strategies that advance the hegemonic power (Motion & Weaver 2005:50). In this functional perspective, communication is used to yield power to the organisation; therefore, hegemony is realised when publics relinquish power to the organisation and consent to its viewpoint (Coombs & Holladay 2012:881). Traditionally, PR has been institutionalised as an activity that organisations utilise to enforce their power over their public (Grunig 2011:11).

Foucault (1982:781) explained that two facets distinguish power in an individual (subject). The first is that the individual is dependent on another's control (Foucault 1982:781). The second is that individuals can be bound to their individuality and identity by being conscious of self-knowledge (Foucault 1982:781).

Discourses are mostly arrangements of knowledge that are present autonomously from a person, and it is in the engagement with multiple discourses that a person can construct a sense of self (Stoddart 2007:203). Individuals who have the power to communicate, control the discourse through what is discussed (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24). Critical PR indicates that PR activists would define “power as the inner power of one to resist the subjugation from a more powerful party” and to resist the practice of empowering marginalised societies to join the dominant coalition (Cheng 2016:92).

The next section explores the touchpoints of PR professionals acting as PR activists.

2.3.3 PR professionals as PR activists

PR professionals who practise critical PR aim to provide alternative ways of thinking, which have a deliberate focus on the interests of the public rather than the dominant coalition (Friis

2013:5). Holtzhausen (2002:7) proposed that PR professionals can become internal organisation activists or change agents. Benecke and Oksitycz (2015:2) support this idea. These PR activists have a different understanding of how organisations should function and attempt to influence organisational policies through the process of decision-making (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:61). Such PR activists also embrace subjectivity and reject universal theories and strategies; they deconstruct theories to identify intentions and determine which ways of thinking have been included (Grünig 2011:13). They tend to challenge the hegemonic authority's metanarratives and form alliances with those groups or individuals that do not fit into these beliefs or truths (Butler 2002:15). They also attempt to intensify the voices of the subordinated and marginalised groups (Butler 2002:15). These PR activists mainly aim to expose illegitimate dictatorial principles that are embedded in autocratic structures (Friis 2013:5).

PR activists inspired by critical theory and critical PR focus their discussions mainly on the power issues of various players in the public sphere, rather than the issues of a privileged individual (Dolea 2017:175). Critical PR reflects resistance to dominant power structures, being the voice for marginalised publics and promoting dialogue to resolve conflict (McCown 2007:47; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:64).

The PR professional needs to be part of top management to play the role of PR activist in the organisation (Invernizzi & Romenti 2015:426). This motivates the PR professional to act as the facilitator of debate, dialogue and even dissent, and to encourage public input (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Reber & Berger 2006:3; Verwey et al 2017:70). PR activists compel organisations to initiate dialogue and debate societal issues (McCown 2007:47); they reject one-way communication (Holtzhausen 2002:10) and act as the organisation's conscience (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:64; Verwey et al 2017:69). They also drive the organisation out of its comfort zone towards a dynamic state that is mediated through dialogue (Greeff 2015:220). They focus on power issues and solutions to social problems (Auter 2016:99; Sommerfeldt 2012:270) and strive for ethical decision-making (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Tyma 2008:203). Furthermore, PR activists ensure that all voices are heard, respected and taken into consideration (Toledano 2016:44). They also strategically use rhetoric and purposeful communication to build their coalition with marginalised public groups (Sommerfeldt 2013:351). PR activists must focus on social situations as a precondition for economic progress; they should also take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, the environment and social equality (Prasad 2011:56).

The following summarises the characteristics of PR professionals acting as PR activists (Grunig 2009:2,10; Hallahan et al 2007:4,14,24; Holtzhausen 2002:3-4,7; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:59,62-63,78; Verwey et al 2017:69):

- they use biopower to resist dominant power;
- they do not align with authoritative organisational power structures;
- they strive for multidirectional and inclusive power;
- they challenge the legitimacy of determining organisational outcomes through strategies and goal setting;
- they use dissensus to promote discourse that challenges authorities' power;
- they act as change agents who deconstruct the language of management and give a voice to those deprived of power;
- they are the voice of conscience in ethical situations;
- they resist philosophical and theoretical metanarratives; and
- they base decisions on the particular circumstances at hand.

It can be argued that an activist is generally perceived as a radical individual who confronts the status quo (McCown 2007:57). A PR activist is essentially a person who uses PR for ethical purposes to empower oppressed social groups (Grunig 2006:165; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63; Sommerfeldt 2013:350). PR activists are inclined toward social problem-solving strategies (Kim, Kim, Tam & Kim 2015:406); they encourage participation and concentrate on social conditions to alert organisations of public issues and expectations (Prasad 2011:56).

These PR activists are more loyal to a cause than to a specific organisation (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60). When PR activists' efforts to resolve issues through dialogue are unsuccessful, they administer asymmetrical tactics (dissent, media advocacy, lobbying and litigation) to force the organisation to address unethical decisions or behaviour (McCown 2007:53; Reber & Berger 2006:5). They create opportunities for dissent such as mobilising other supporters, whistle-blowing, leaking information or planting rumours in the organisational grapevine (Reber & Berger 2006:3; Sen 2014:48). In this context, the PR activist will resist power structures in the organisation, even though they are part of the dominant coalition (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:61).

The next section explores how the low oil price has affected Middle Eastern countries, and discusses contemporary issues that have contributed to their visions of national transformation.

2.4 PUBLIC ISSUES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

2.4.1 The low oil price and transformation

Society in the Middle East region was faced with a dilemma triggered by the significant reduction of oil prices (Freitag & Stokes 2009:162). Governments and organisations in the region needed to reflect on how PR could play a more critical and ethical role in strategically mediating the power struggles to address transformation (Freitag & Stokes 2009:162). In this context, PR had an opportunity to demonstrate its value by addressing and attempting to resolve societal issues, in line with critical PR. As this study aimed to explore the role that critical PR could play in developing online OPRs in the Middle East, this section explores the region's touchpoints and critical PR developments.

The Middle East is dominated by two fundamental issues: firstly, the on-going wars, and secondly the balance of power between the countries that surround these conflicts (Friedman & Shapiro 2017:6).

There is a lack of consensus on which geographical areas or which countries collectively make up the Middle Eastern region (Özalp 2011:18). However, the following countries are represented: Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Angrist 2013:2; Freitag & Stokes 2009:163). The structure of these countries is mainly based on varying interests and agendas (Özalp 2011:19).

The most powerful, strategic and wealthiest bloc in the Middle East is the GCC, which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Williams 2016:2). According to Guastella and Menghi (2016:4), and Saif (2009:19), the GCC countries have led the larger transformational changes in the Middle East. They are the fastest developing regions in the world due to their strategic investments from oil revenues (Callen et al 2014:6). Eighty of the 100 largest listed organisations from the Middle East Intelligence Index (2017:36-37) are located in the GCC, which emphasises the substantial leadership role that the GCC plays in driving transformation and reform in the broader Middle East region (McGregor & Novarese 2016:13). The GCC countries have adopted much bolder economic strategies than other neighbouring Middle Eastern countries (Zeineddine 2017:212).

The constant conflict and instability in the Middle East completely undermine its economic progress, as massive numbers of refugees spill over into neighbouring countries and place considerable strain on their economies (Schwab & Sala-I-Martin 2016:22). The shock waves

generated from the reduction of oil prices forced Middle East countries to urgently diversify income revenues, resulting in many countries' promoting ambitious transformation strategies (Williams 2016:2). Middle Eastern countries were strongly cautioned by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to take immediate action in formulating national plans for economic and social reforms (Aman 2016:180). Due to the unsettling economic activities in the region, international investors lack confidence and are uncertain when stability will return (Chopra 2016:22).

Investors have claimed that political rights and civil liberties contributed to the unpredictable economy (Melewar, Turnbull & Balabanis 2000:530). Middle Eastern countries need to move towards an aggressive market-based approach because traditional government-led economic models have been and will be unsuccessful in the current and future business environment (Aman 2016:181).

Economic diversification is needed to decrease instability and stimulate private-sector jobs to establish a non-oil economy (Callen et al 2014:4). The region needs to take a balanced approach between creating jobs and raising living standards (Saif 2009:21), as the largest unemployed group in the Middle East is the youth (Sturm, Strasky, Adolf & Peschel 2008:5). Public sector employment can no longer support the scale of unemployment and, therefore, the private sector needs to increase job opportunities (Sturm et al 2008:5). The radical shift to attain revenue from various sources has prompted Middle East countries to introduce new models of corporate taxation, sales taxation and value-added tax (McGregor & Novarese 2016:7). There is a great deal of expectancy in Middle Eastern societies as new rulers have come onto the leadership scene, bringing a real potential for radical political change in the community (Joffé 2006:19).

ICTs have been the building blocks in establishing a distinctive online (virtual) community in the region, stimulated by interactive dialogue (Gheyntanchi & Moghadam 2014:6). The activists in the region are empowered by Web 2.0 technologies and networking sites such as social media, and individuals who generally would not participate in activism are now speaking out (Gheyntanchi & Moghadam 2014:6). Online activism has ushered in a powerful force that allows Middle East societies to acknowledge and energise systemic change (Sreberny 2015:360). ICT applications (such as TOR, which is a virtual private network) circumvent government censorship and control, which allows Middle Eastern activists to gain strategic support from the international community (Gheyntanchi & Moghadam 2014:4).

In the near future, activism will play a key role in Middle East politics, so governments and organisations need to be aware of activists' needs and engage with the activists involved in advocacy (Khatib & Lust 2014:1). Traditionally, governments have had a better understanding

of how to control physical protests than of how to handle invisible online activism (Sreberny 2015:360). Although social networks provide immediate dissemination of information over an open virtual space, they have their limitations, especially when complex topics require tactics and strategies: The central leadership role is not prominent and therefore generates confusion (Gheytauchi & Moghadam 2014:6).

The Middle East region has always been observed to promote its religious movement, authoritarian governments and unceasing conflicts (Moghadam 2010:19). However, civil, political and social rights were significant factors that led to the mass social protests across the Middle East (Gheytauchi & Moghadam 2014:20). Individuals have been standing up for critical causes such as human rights, democracy, transparency and gender equality (Hajj, Haddad & Karmouni 2016:1). Females in the region have been challenging governments' power and the masculinist hegemony (Sreberny 2015:360). Women's organisations have emerged, advocating family law reform, equal nationality rights and laws against domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as economic and political participation (Moghadam 2010:19). There would be significant socio-political effects if females were not only heard, but also listened to (Sreberny 2015:360). Even though political and social activism is dominated by men (Khouri & Shehata 2011:17), young females have emerged and are leading movements of change, especially in Middle East countries like Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen (Satterfield 2013:22). Females have made significant inroads in shaping the politics of religious political movements in the region; they have pushed for participation in the upper echelons of movements and want to be seen as leaders of change (Abdellatif & Ottaway 2007:1).

The youth have also been expressing genuine anxieties about the lack of opportunities and jobs (Khouri 2011:14). There has been an increase in the emigration of Middle East youth, as many graduates claim they cannot obtain jobs with the skills that they have acquired; unemployment and poverty are major factors motivating the youth to migrate (Nielsen 2011:36). The youth have been at the centre of various activist movements in the Middle East, as existing customs have frustrated and deprived them of economic and social opportunities and have restricted them from voicing their political concerns (Kurtz 2012:5).

Governments in the Middle East region do not offer adequate protection for children and do not have the capacity to bring those responsible for violating the rights of children to justice; they need to address these issues before tensions erupt (Pybus & Jacoby 2011:41).

The next section concentrates on the GCC countries because they are economic and social leaders in the region. The discussion elaborates on touchpoints between critical PR and contemporary issues in each country.

2.4.2 Overview of touchpoints in GCC countries

The GCC countries are the social and economic leaders in the Middle East and drivers of transformation in the broader region (Guastella & Menghi 2016:4). The GCC countries Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reviewed below in some detail (Williams 2016:2), with a concise concluding overview of other Middle Eastern countries.

2.4.2.1 *Bahrain*

Bahrain is the financial and business centre of the Middle East, with substantial levels of international investment and trade (The Heritage Foundation 2016a:306). Bahrain has a variety of fast-growing non-oil-related sectors that have emerged (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2016a:23).

Saudi Arabia plays a prominent role in suppressing and controlling activism in Bahrain (Khatib & Lust 2014:4). The literature indicates that female activists in Bahrain have bypassed the government's tyrannical policies in an unprecedented way (Satterfield 2013:22). Female activists have used online social networks to represent their gender-focused demands in advocating for improved human rights and democratisation (Satterfield 2013:22).

The Bahrain government is known to use social networks as a tool for surveillance, censorship, propaganda and social control (Jones 2013:69). The government has been widely criticised for its human rights practices, where freedom of expression has been a critical area of fear for many activists who dare to speak out (Katzman 2017c:14). There has also been an increased movement by the government to imprison anybody who insults the king (Katzman 2017c:14). The government has imprisoned key online activists to instil fear and remind Bahrainis of the consequences of utilising social networks to inspire any ideology that opposes the government (Jones 2013:82). The Bahrain government has moved towards a more security-oriented model of governance, which has pushed many Bahrainis into opposing the government (Kinninmont 2012:1).

Bahrain was the first to be affected by declining oil production and, coincidentally, faced the most significant level of unrest in 2011 (Kinninmont 2012:1). On 14 February 2011, pro-democracy activists protested to demand political and social reform and, although this type of unrest is common in Bahrain, during this particular protest the scale of brutality towards the protestors was unprecedented (Jones 2013:71). The militant Bahrain government (ruled by the Al Khalifa family) appears unwilling to enact or support any ideas of political reform, although the United States has attempted to pressure the Bahrain government to stop the prosecution of activists and to allow free speech (Wehrey 2013:22).

The next subsection discusses the touchpoints between critical PR and Kuwait.

2.4.2.2 *Kuwait*

Kuwait has taken active steps towards developing its diversification strategy, which aims to advance its private sector participation and place a priority on job creation for nationals (Guastella & Menghi 2016:12). Kuwait's critical concern is that it faces water shortages due to the population growth, lack of natural water resources and lack of a well-developed supply infrastructure (Aliewi, El-Sayed, Akbar, Hadi & Al-Rashed 2017:40).

Kuwaiti females have been seen to be leading activist movements in the region (Khouri & Shehata 2011:17; Meyer, Meyer & Rizzo 2009:218). There is an incremental social change concerning gender roles under way in Kuwait as females are using ICTs to advance their agenda (Gheytonchi & Moghadam 2014:18).

There is an ongoing critical debate on human rights in Kuwait (Amnesty International 2015:5), as the principle of freedom of expression is undermined by laws that make it an offence to harm Kuwait's relations with other countries or to transmit perceived criticism of members of the judiciary, public officials, religious figures or the Amir (Katzman 2017b:6). It has been noted that there has been an exponential increase in Kuwaitis violating this lese-majesty constitutional principle through social media (Diwan 2017:21). This has spurred the ruling family to publicly punish individuals who step out of line (Diwan 2017:21), such as the outspoken female leaders in Kuwait who have lobbied for moral order and for females to have access to education (Meyer et al 2009:224).

There is a growing population of educated and professional females who are inspiring activism, new ideologies and personal and political goals (Meyer et al 2009:224). In 2005, females were given the right to vote and to participate in a government office (Shalaby 2015:3) and, in 2009, females won eight per cent of the seats in the electoral arena (Katzman 2017b:6). Females in Kuwait have greater rights to political participation than in any other GCC country (Amnesty International 2015:4). Kuwait has projected an image of political tolerance, but the government continues to imprison and revoke the citizenship of social media critics for insulting the Amir (Katzman 2017b:6).

The next subsection discusses the touchpoints between critical PR and Oman.

2.4.2.3 *Oman*

Oman has taken significant steps towards diversification in comparison to other GCC countries and has a modest financial cushion to invest in projects (Katzman 2017a:2; Guastella & Menghi 2016:12). Oman continues to develop its metals and industrial mineral resources, which contribute significantly to the nation's economy (Nasir & Al-Jabri 2017:1). The banking sector is relatively small in comparison to its neighbours, as Omanis use social networks to find more

attractive banking offers and consumer loans at competitive terms, and are not afraid to change banks for a better deal (Al-Ghammari & Ahmed 2017:1). Oman's tourism sector has grown significantly, and the Ministry of Tourism is using social network technologies to attract international attention (Al-Badi, Tarhini & Al-Sawaei 2017:84). The result of tourism growth can be seen by the country's building additional airports, hotels, resorts and roads (Al-Badi et al 2017:84).

PR in Oman has emerged strongly in organisations, as many of these organisations embrace the understanding that PR needs to facilitate effective decision-making that fosters mutually beneficial relationships with its publics (Prasad 2011:53). The Oman government has launched a significant PR exercise to rebrand the country; it focused on Oman's openness to diversity instead of the repressive image that the rest of the Middle East presents (Cooper & Momani 2009:107).

Oman has made it possible for citizens to engage in political discussions on social networks (Al-Shamsi 2015:483). Omanis have changed their social and political activism from public forums and blogging to using Facebook as a new space for expressing their opinions (Al-Shamsi 2015:493). Even though the Oman government has shown a great deal of leniency to promote freedom of speech through social networks (Katzman 2017a:7), cyber-activists are still being prosecuted through a royal decree prohibiting individuals from disseminating information that threatens Oman's reputation (Katzman 2017a:7).

Oman was one of the first GCC countries that allowed females political rights and made it possible for females to join its government structures (Al-Talei 2010:2).

There is much uncertainty in Oman, as the Sultan, Qaboos bin Said al Said, does not have an heir to take over the royal family's leadership (Diwan 2017:24). The transition of power is unpredictable and will cause a power vacuum once he inevitably passes from the scene (Diwan 2017:24). Young Omani activists have held protests in order for the government to address the issue of establishing the foundations for governance for a post-Sultan Qaboos Oman era (Valeri 2015:3).

The next subsection discussed the touchpoints between critical PR and Qatar.

2.4.2.4 Qatar

Qatar has enormous oil and gas deposits; its banking sector has also been at the forefront of its economic growth (Abdul-Wahab & Haron 2017:298). The country has taken a leading role in mediating regional and international conflicts through diplomatic and military interventions (Nuruzzaman 2015:2). Qatar has major projects in the pipeline (Maalouf & Malesa 2016:11), that aim to meet its ambitious Qatar National Vision 2030 and its milestone in hosting the FIFA

World Cup 2022 (Sofotasiou, Hughes & Calautit 2015:17). Despite the conflict and uncertainty in the Middle East, Qatar continues to demonstrate strong economic growth (Abdul-Wahab & Haron 2017:298).

Although Qatar is a very small country, it does not have a socialist system or a democracy, rather an enlightened monarchy that is driving its vision 2030 (Hansen 2013:1). Qatari officials have positioned themselves strategically as mediators and speakers in various regional conflicts (Blanchard 2014:2).

Qatar owns one of the world's most influential satellite news channels, known as Al-Jazeera, which is continuously criticised for broadcasting unverified or fake videos from the Syrian anti-government activists, that have caused tension with its GCC neighbours (Nuruzzaman 2015:8). Al-Jazeera is perceived as an activist news channel and is scrutinised for not favouring particular Arab government agendas (Fahmy & Al-Emad 2011:217). The controversial broadcasting network is a crucial tool that Qatar uses for national branding and PR (Zeineddine 2017:215; Blanchard 2014:2).

Qatar is seen as being involved in international activism as it uses soft-power and its alliances with regional powers to promote its image of being a good member of the international community (Kayaoğlu 2015:94). Qatar's foreign policies have continued to create tension and confrontation with its long-standing rival, Saudi Arabia (Khatib 2015:3). In the GCC, Qatar has a negative perception and is known as an unpredictable power (Hammond 2014:10).

Its Prince, Hamad Bin Khalif Al-Thani, is among the contemporary leaders in the Middle East (Cooper & Momani 2009:114). One of his greatest achievements was to promote his ideology for an independent media network (Al-Jazeera) in the Middle East (Cooper & Momani 2009:114).

The next subsection discusses the touchpoints between critical PR and Saudi Arabia.

2.4.2.5 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has some of the world's most significant oil deposits and the decrease in oil prices forced it to prioritise diversification and privatisation programmes (Guastella & Menghi 2016:12). The country is at a transition point (Al-Kibsi, Woetzel, Isherwood, Khan, Mischke & Noura 2015:8) as it requires strategic direction in developing a diversified economy and creating jobs for the next generation (Pant & Behar 2015:13).

Saudi Arabia has the boldest National Transformation Programme and Vision 2030 in the Middle East (International Monetary Fund 2016b:2). The Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, has become a key leader in the GCC and the broader Middle East region, as he is leading the Vision 2030 and is the driving force behind the radical transformational

aspirations for the future (Diwan 2017:24). Saudi Arabia plays a dominant role in leading the GCC and advancing technological capabilities (Tseng 2014:212). It has privatised public institutions, such as power generation and telecommunications, and has developed a variety of manufacturing industries (Freitag & Stokes 2009:167).

Saudi Arabia has had a marked impact on the global economy due to its influence on oil supply, and therefore its PR professionals play a significant role in bridging the cultural gap between international countries and Saudi Arabia (Freitag & Stokes 2009:169). The country has a government system that considers society's views, which enables future reformers to be victorious in the long term (Wegaemakers, Kanie & Geel 2012:13).

However, Saudi Arabian activists have influenced limited economic and political reforms; its leaders also disregard any foreign interference in the country's internal affairs (Blanchard 2017:2). Saudi Arabia has zero-tolerance for protests, as it fears the repercussions that democratisation can have in its geographical region (Khatib & Lust 2014:4). Saudi Arabia's Article 39 of the Basic Law prohibits "unspecified acts leading to disorder and division, rendering anyone who engages in political activity, including human rights advocacy, vulnerable to prosecution" (Doumato 2010:20). The country enforces the most significant levels of restrictive laws towards political expression in the Middle East (Bayat 2010:10). Saudi Arabia prohibits any form of political party or civil society and has no constitutional right to free speech or religion (Doumato 2010:20; Human Rights Watch 2013:1). It is a closed country where researchers battle to gain access to information, especially regarding laws and court cases (Tønnessen 2016:2). Saudi Arabia has several pieces of anti-terrorism legislation and executive decrees that, in effect, would criminalise virtually all forms of peaceful dissent (Amnesty International 2017:4). These laws define terrorism vaguely and in terms so broad as to criminalise activities that amount to no more than the legitimate exercise of human rights (Amnesty International 2017:4). Transparency in Saudi Arabian government activities is almost non-existent (Freitag & Stokes 2009:167).

Even though civil society organisations are prohibited in Saudi Arabia, female rights activists are dynamic players in the pursuit of transformation (Tønnessen 2016:1). The country has a male-ruled society, enforces a culture of repression, and uses government surveillance in social networks to quell females' aspirations for liberalisation (Allagui 2014:1001).

Despite its authorities' attempting to block online content, Saudis have used ICTs to bypass heavily censored state media and have actively promoted campaigns for human rights activism (Human Rights Watch 2013:1). The country has the highest percentage of active Twitter users in the Middle East, and posts can be seen daily that contain complaints about the quality of public services (Alsaedi & Alroobaea 2017:2).

The next subsection discusses the touchpoints between critical PR and the UAE.

2.4.2.6 United Arab Emirates

The UAE economy is one of the strongest and most promising economies globally (Al-Mansouri 2015:11; Mehrotra & Gopalan 2017:62). The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has been instrumental in transforming the country and building one of the world's strongest economies (Diwan 2017:23). Furthermore, he has taken on the contentious struggle against extremism and religious activism (Diwan 2017:23). The UAE is perceived as a progressive, high-performance macro-economic environment and is the most diversified country in the Middle East (Schwab & Sala-I-Martin 2016:23; Ahmed & Alfaki 2013:11). The significant concerns challenging the UAE economy are the lower-than-expected performance from government-owned organisations (Guastella & Menghi 2016:12). The UAE has established itself as one of the most desirable business destinations in the world (Al-Mansouri 2015:11). Dubai has managed to elevate its image to become the flagship-brand of the UAE, which has also positioned itself as the most valuable brand in the Middle East region (Zeineddine 2017:208). In 2006, the UAE was placed third in the top Global Brands and was worth more than US\$400 billion (Zeineddine 2017:213).

The Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) is a non-profit organisation established in Dubai Media City, it represents PR in the Middle East and helps standards for excellence and ethical practice (Freitag & Stokes 2009:171). The UAE has a diverse cultural and racial workforce and, because of this, organisations understand the importance of implementing the best intercultural communication strategies (Al-Jenaibi 2011:50).

The UAE has received praise from advocates of expanding freedoms in the Middle East for its relatively open policy towards domestic politics and human rights; however, it is still unsuccessful in its efforts to control human trafficking (Katzman 2014:2). Activist groups have struggled against the UAE bureaucracy for approval to operate legally as non-profit organisations (Kirdar 2010:6).

Young Emirati females are considered to be potential leaders in the Middle East and have been seen to drive various campaigns as Twitter users (Strong & Hareb 2012:1). Emiratis are avid social media users and have used social networks as a platform for business; they have also attempted to use it to mobilise political change (Nasser & Jenaibi 2015:22). It is not legal issues that constrain females from emerging as leaders and taking on more senior positions in organisations, but rather cultural issues in the family (Kirdar 2010:15). The UAE government provides free education through universities to Emiratis and has seen a significant increase in female participation (Strong & Hareb 2012:4). The UAE has shown its commitment to

empowering females through establishing a female business council to encourage Emirati females to contribute to the economy (Kirdar 2010:16).

The next subsection briefly discusses the touchpoints between critical PR in Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria and Yemen.

2.4.3 Overview of touchpoints in other Middle Eastern countries

The civil war in Iraq has demolished social infrastructure and communities. Most schools in Iraq have also been destroyed, and those that remain require teachers and staff to work triple shifts to accommodate the students (Pybus & Jacoby 2011:41). Females in Iraq have an essential role in the future revival of Iraq's society (Al-Ali & Pratt 2006:18-19). With the intensification of activism in the country, females are making active claims to their rights to participate in rebuilding the country (Al-Ali & Pratt 2006:18-19).

Iran plays a significant role in the Middle East in the balancing of power between Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Assad government and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Sullivan & Tobin 2014:51). The extreme hostility by the Iranian government paralyses community activism (Bayat 2000:11). Iranian females with higher education achievements have been the driving force in political activism and cultural change as they attempted to revolutionise Iran's gender segregation and established the 'New Arab Women' movement (Moghadam 2010:22). The level and severity of persecution of Iranian female activists in Iran are unprecedented; females who resist the misogynous laws encounter extreme harassment, repression and detention, and are even violently beaten by moral police or their male guardians (Bayat 2010:16).

Israel finds itself in an on-going power conflict with young Palestinian factions, and is continually in military operations, incursions and raids throughout the territory (Pybus & Jacoby 2011:41). Most of the anti-Israel groups are student-led with no substantial professional guidance (Bard & Dawson 2012:3). Activists in Jordan have abandoned street protests and are more focused on driving broad socio-political demands via social networks (Khatib & Lust 2014:1). Syrian refugees have burdened Lebanon economically, politically and socially – refugee shelters have been operating at full capacity, causing migrants to become even more displaced (Building Markets 2016:6). Activists in Lebanon have been responding to domestic conflicts caused by the Syrian crisis (Khatib & Lust 2014:1). Large numbers of Lebanon youth are leaving the country due to the instability and lack of opportunities (Nielsen 2011:37). The Palestine-Israel conflict has been labelled as the most complex and controversial geopolitical power conflict in the world, and endless peace talks have resulted in little to no resolution for change (Rodriguez 2013:1).

Syria's economic, social and human development has been set back decades by the unceasing and devastating civil war (Gobat & Kostial 2016:3, which is expected to continue and has no end in sight (Building Markets 2016:39). The task of reconstructing the damage to Syria's infrastructure will require an unprecedented and monumental effort from its society, as more than half of the Syrian population have been displaced (Gobat & Kostial 2016:3). Syrian female activists have used social media to wage extensive campaigns rallying Syrians to resist repressive government policies; they are also acting as local journalists, disseminating evidence of police and military brutality (Gheytaichi & Moghadam 2014:5). Syrian activists are divided over militarisation of the Syrian conflict and the strategies from the international community (Khatib & Lust 2014:1).

Most of the Yemen population do not use banking services (Al-Qasa & Balhareth 2015:20), which has a profoundly negative impact on its economy (Al-Qasa, Isa, & Othman 2013:1). Social media in Yemen has predominantly been left untouched by the authoritarian government and has emerged as a point for mobilisation to gain international support (Khatib & Lust 2014:3). Tawakkol Karman (a leading female activist in the Yemen revolution) played a dangerous and momentous role in persuading people to participate in protests that caused the downfall of the Yemeni dictator (Satterfield 2013:24). Tawakkol Karman was recognised for her unparalleled activist leadership against patriarchal traditions and was the first Arab female to win a Nobel Peace Prize (Satterfield 2013:24). Yemen activists have been extensively persecuted and have become frustrated by the complex and violent conflict (Khatib & Lust 2014:1).

The next section discusses contemporary issues that are consistent in the Middle East.

2.4.4 Contemporary issues

Government spending in the Middle East has been dramatically reduced due to the reduction in oil prices, as these governments are obligated to develop alternative channels of revenue to safeguard future growth (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2016a:10). For these Middle Eastern countries to establish stable economies in the future, urgent strategic direction needs to be taken to develop economic diversification and reduce the reliance on oil revenues (International Monetary Fund 2016a:15). The challenge for oil-producing countries in the Middle East is to transform their economies by developing a non-oil sector, which is far more complicated than expected (Aman 2016:181). However, national development plans have already been implemented, and the non-oil sector is being developed gradually (Callen et al 2014:4).

The following are national transformational visions implemented by Middle East countries (strategic national intentions):

- Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 (Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council 2011);
- Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 (Bahrain Economic Development Board 2016b);
- Iran Vision 2025 (Ministry of Cooperatives Labour and Social Welfare 2016);
- Jordan Vision 2025 (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation 2015);
- Oman Vision 2020 (Sultanate of Oman Supreme Council for Planning 2016);
- Qatar National Vision 2030 (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics 2016); and
- Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016).

The next subsections discuss the top five contemporary issues that have been consistent in all the transformational visions in the Middle East: post-oil era preparations, transformation, economic growth and reform, diversification of revenue sources, and job creation.

2.4.4.1 Post-oil era preparations

Although the world oil consumption continues to rise, particularly in Brazil, Russia, India and China, causing energy production and exports to increase, global economic advancements are adding to the global oil surplus and consequent reduction in oil prices (Aman 2016:180). The government owns many of the oil-exporting organisations in the Middle East; these oil-dependent countries have found it challenging to allow services to the economy as the oil revenues decline (Callen et al 2014:10; International Monetary Fund 2016a:12).

Government resources from oil-producing countries in the Middle East are being reduced, and they have to use any available provision to support their economic development (Aman 2016:180; International Monetary Fund 2016a:16). In the GCC, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have the highest dependency on hydrocarbon resources, whereas Bahrain and the UAE have the lowest (Sturm et al 2008:13). Post-oil preparations in the oil-dependent countries need to raise revenues from diversified sources to balance the state budgets (Stevens 2016:2). Based on international attempts to diversify away from oil, success or failure is inevitably dependant on the execution of strategic policies before the oil revenues have declined (Callen et al 2014:4).

The next subsection discusses transformation as a contemporary issue in the Middle East.

2.4.4.2 Transformation

More focus needs to be placed on strengthening the Middle East's private sector, with a specific focus on logistics, tourism, energy, financial services, healthcare, manufacturing and public-private partnerships (Guastella & Menghi 2016:9). A deeper perspective that needs to

be addressed in meeting these various transformational plans is the transformation of Middle East societies, which are vital to reforming the economic structures (Yousef 2004:1). Leaders in Middle East countries need to review their position towards governance, finance, social and economic policy to accomplish sustainable growth (Saif 2009:25). New reinvigorating models need to drive future growth; the foundation of governance and social engagement needs to facilitate the transformation (Yousef 2004:1). The literature highlighted that the Middle Eastern organisations had established centres that would share knowledge to assist societies in responding to the transformational plans (Khan, Al-Saud, AlKhathlan & Al-Derham 2014:174). Societies can better adapt to this transformational growth when there is political stability (McGregor & Novarese 2016:8) and when the attitudes of the individuals in the Middle East are mainly determined by the country's political and economic reflections (Yousef 2004:110).

The Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, aimed to reform the nation's economy by designing and promoting the most ambitious transformation plan in the Middle East (Aman 2016:182).

The next subsection discusses economic growth and reform as a contemporary issue in the Middle East.

2.4.4.3 *Economic growth and reform*

For economic growth and reform to be attained, there have to be "reformers" taking on leadership roles to bring about the desired change (Trapans 2007:85). One of these reformers in the Middle East could well be the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (Stevens 2016:2), which could place Saudi Arabia as the dominant leader in the Middle East (Saif 2009:14).

Saudi Arabia is in the process of creating its new economy and needs to address the existing bureaucracy, which hinders private investments (Saif 2009:14). Middle East governments have been attempting to promote privatisation to bring about economic reform, as economic reform requires highly productive industries that directly link to improving the human capital of the nationals and developing a highly-skilled labour force (Callen et al 2014:11; Stevens 2016:2).

There are two main challenges for economic reform: The first is addressing the structural nature of diversifying the economy and the availability of labour skills, and the second is addressing existing policies relating to issues of inflation and governance (Saif 2009:13). Middle East economies that are pursuing sustainable growth in the future face extraordinarily challenging and complex choices (Prasad 2011:53). Economic reform will not happen in the Middle East without its governments' establishing political stability and social peace first, and this can only be achieved through political openness (Yousef 2004:112).

The next subsection discusses the diversification of revenue sources as a contemporary issue in the Middle East.

2.4.4.4 *Diversification of revenue sources*

Diversification is discouraged when a country is dependent on only a few sources of revenue (United States Institute of Peace 2007:5). Governments need to spend continuously to realise the diversification of their economies (Foreman 2015:20). Middle East countries are moving towards diversification in different directions and speeds (Sturm et al 2008:6), and there has been increased public spending by Middle Eastern governments to modernise infrastructure (Saif 2009:4).

The benefits of diversification are that it creates additional jobs, reduces the economies unpredictability, increases productivity and creates a non-oil segment of the economy, which will mostly play a pivotal role when the oil reserves diminish (Callen et al 2014:10). The fact that a few countries in the Middle East, such as Iraq, Libya and Yemen, are deeply impacted by war, influences the economy and reduces investor confidence in diversification efforts (International Monetary Fund 2016a:4). Diversification efforts will not be practical if governments do not make policy changes that will support private sector development; therefore, economic diversification requires security (International Monetary Fund 2016a:4; Saif 2009:21).

The channelling of investment into the non-oil sector's is the driving factor in privatisation (Saif 2009:4). The term "privatisation" refers to selling existing government-owned entities into the private sector (Stevens 2016:2). Middle East governments also have alternative ways to support diversification, specifically in the small and medium enterprises that comprise the majority of their private sectors, through bodies, general business-focused ministries and institutions (Middle East Business Intelligence 2014:27).

Oil-producing countries are still in their initial economic diversification stages as Middle East countries have attempted to diversify their economies, but many economies remain government-dominated and are not sufficiently diversified (Schwab & Sala-I-Martin 2016:23; International Monetary Fund 2016a:36). The urgency for diversification cannot be related only to depleting oil reserves and price fluctuation, but also to the increased population growth and unemployment among young nationals (Sturm et al 2008:14).

The next subsection discusses job creation as a contemporary issue in the Middle East.

2.4.4.5 Job creation

Middle East countries are challenged by two major factors affecting job creation and employment: The first, refers to the fast-growing young national workforce, and the second refers to the large-scale dependence on expatriates in the private sector (Sturm et al 2008:5). There is a significant challenge in creating jobs for the young populations in most Middle East oil-exporting countries (International Monetary Fund 2016a:12). In the GCC countries, it is estimated that by 2020, 3.3 million new jobs need to be created (Zuazua, Willen, Olivari, and Al-Yousef 2014:2). This does not include the disproportionately high level of unemployment among the younger generation, as the oil sector alone cannot support and sustain the number of jobs required (International Monetary Fund 2016a:13; Zuazua et al 2014:2).

The private-sector jobs in the Middle East are limited and not attractive for nationals as the majority of national employment is in the public sector (International Monetary Fund 2016a:14; Callen et al 2014:12). The private non-oil sector has a limited role in generating new jobs for nationals, and female work participation is very low (Saif 2009:16). In Saudi Arabia, policies on female employment have been reformed, allowing only specific business sectors to attract female employment (International Monetary Fund 2016a:26).

Middle East countries have made a significant effort to raise the educational level across the region, but there is still a significant mismatch of skills and employment opportunities in the private sector (Guastella & Menghi 2016:6). Advancing the educational and professional skills of nationals is the fundamental focus in creating employment opportunities, and governments in the region need to support this through developing policies for the nationalisation of the labour force (Sturm et al 2008:18). If Middle East governments do not change the way in which they are dealing with job creation, the economies will be destabilised by rising unemployment (Yousef 2004:1).

The next section discusses critical PR developments as touchpoints in the Middle East.

2.4.5 Critical public relations developments

There is an apparent struggle for power from the next generation of leadership in the Middle East, which is causing significant instability in the region (Diwan 2017:2). According to Marshall (2011:1), the power structures in the Middle East have mandated PR functions in organisations and agencies to promote government-sponsored communication campaigns. For example, Saudi Arabia promotes its national transformational programme for diversification to repair its tarnished image (Marshall 2011:5); the UAE promotes itself as the number-one holiday destination in the world; Oman has tasked its government with creating hundreds of brand managers to promote the Oman Brand for tourism (Marshall 2011:5), and Qatar advertises

itself as an international activist in building alliances with regional powers to promote its image of being a good member of the international community (Kayaoğlu 2015:94).

Middle East countries are increasing their investments in PR to refashion their negative public image and to attract business investors to the diversification programmes (Cooper & Momani 2009:103). The Middle East has a rising demand for PR professionals, as many of the countries are driving radical transformational strategies (Woodcraft 2006:27). PR professionals in the region are faced with a volatile environment as PR budgets have been negatively affected due to the financial impact of the reduction in oil prices (Prasad 2011:55). PR professionals need to keep a much closer watch on their organisation and have a keen understanding of how it is shifting with the complex environmental developments (Prasad 2011:55). Rebranding the Middle East is an enormous challenge, even though Middle Eastern leaders may have a positive outlook on the region's position, as there is still a negative image of the Middle East (Cooper & Momani 2009:115).

PR in the Middle East is the key to engaging in this complex social, economic and political climate (Prasad 2011:53). The PR industry in the Middle East region has been significantly affected by the attention to the female's rights crusade (Meyer et al 2009:218). Females are active on social networks in the region; these networks have been observed to be platforms for raising societal issues and public debates (Meyer et al 2009:218).

Because there is a strong need for organisations to include societal issues in their decision-making process, ICT has captured the attention of organisations in the Middle East for its ability to provide a direct link to genuine societal issues, (Shalaby 2015:17). Most PR activities in the Middle East are influenced and restricted by government policy; the culture of accepting public opinion does not hold any weight or consequence and it is generally ignored (Freitag & Stokes 2009:164). This adds to the reasons why the development and growth of ICTs in the region have shown a direct link to protests and political revolutions (Bodrunova 2013:1). Organisations in the Middle East are looking at PR to play the role of social mediator and to use social networks to formally (associated with the organisation) or informally (not associated with the organisation) interact with its publics (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon & Suto 2014:362).

It is well known in the Middle East that online activism was a driving factor in the 2011 Arab Spring (an Arab revolution that spread through the Middle East in the form of violent and non-violent protests) (Adam 2012:10). The Middle East is still struggling with balancing the cultural differences that are causing political conflict in the region, as the leaders in the region are trying to shape and reorganise society according to specific beliefs and values (Allagui 2014:984).

Governments in the region have created a climate of fear and intimidation for activists using social networks to speak against these beliefs and values (Jones 2013:82). Governments are

using social network surveillance and trolling (the systematic process of monitoring online users) as a form of online social control (Jones 2013:82). Human rights and freedom of expression are two distinct issues that are growing noticeably on social networks in the Middle East (Al-Shamsi 2015:493). Activists in the region understand the power that social networks have to inform and raise consciousness about facts and events that form the foundation of creating awareness about a specific cause (Allagui 2014:985).

Activists in the region have also become aware of the power of sousveillance, which is the practice of a participant recording activity using mobile technologies (Jones 2013:75). For example, during the uprising in 2011 in Bahrain, females protested and documented the brutality that they faced during the protest, and this footage was instantly distributed on social networks, which held the government accountable for its violation of human rights (Alfoory 2014:14). The use of digital communication (such as the internet, mobile phones, social networks, cameras and videos) has become regular practice during activism, each moment in an activist event can be categorised using digital communication (Allagui 2014:984). Activists in the Middle East use ICTs to bring situations and causes directly to international public attention, it allows the activists' voices to be heard and for events to be witnessed instantaneously through live streaming (Alfoory 2014:5). Developments in ICTs have provided Middle Eastern individuals, citizens and activists with the hardware and software to confront dominant power structures such as organisations, governments and hegemonic monarchs (Jones 2013:75).

The next section provides a brief summary of this chapter.

2.5 SUMMARY

This section started by addressing the research subproblem, "to explore critical ideologies from theory". It discussed the intellectual sociological project known as critical theory as the foundation from which critical PR was developed. Critical theory critiques modern concepts of reason or ideology to make a difference and reform the world. It is practised through a distinctive process known as internal critique. A unique feature of critical theory is that its proponents need to have the freedom to challenge the boundaries of knowledge and participate in mythological debates with a view to educating society about new ideas. The theory investigates issues of power relations in society and is motivated to establish a democratic society.

Critical PR relates to the critique of mainstream PR approaches such as the excellence theory, which is predominantly an organisation-centric approach to PR that is grounded in managerialism, centralisation and functionalism. PR scholars and PR professionals who are inspired by the critical theory focus their discussions mainly on activism and power issues in

the public sphere, rather than on individual privileged players. Critical PR advocates that PR professionals take on a more social role and act as PR activists in their organisation.

Various critical theorists claim that PR activism is a concept that essentially challenges the purpose and intentions of organisation-centric approaches to PR. A key feature of PR activism is that members in the organisation address social injustice or ethical issues of the organisation. PR activists also aim to balance the relationship dynamics between the organisation and its public through facilitating debate, dialogue and dissent, and encouraging public input. They are radical change agents who rigorously interrogate normative PR practices, and are motivated to address and resolve societal issues, and to stand-up for those who are being dominated by dominant structures.

The second research question addressed the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations. It was apparent from existing literature that the region is faced with a dilemma caused by low oil prices, as the majority of the countries' source of income is dependent on the oil industry. In the Middle East, the wealthiest and most influential bloc is known as the GCC, and its six countries are the driving force behind the larger transformational changes in the region. The GCC countries are making significant inroads in promoting their national transformational visions, which have a significant focus on post-oil preparations, transformation, economic growth, reform, diversification of revenue sources and job creation.

However, there is still a power struggle in the region, which is causing significant instability. Government leaders are sponsoring and imposing PR campaigns for their respective radical transformation programmes, which encourage organisations to align their business and strategies accordingly.

PR professionals in the region are faced with a volatile environment and are required to understand how organisations are shifting in these complex developments. They find themselves torn between the public resistance and the dominant power structures, which are pressing for economic and social transformation. It is in these matters that critical PR plays a significant role, motivating PR professionals to facilitate and mediate online relationships by encouraging their organisations to participate in online debates and discuss societal issues. They must also focus on social situations as a precondition for economic progress and need to take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, environment and social equality.

The reason why PR activists in the region are predominantly female is due to the masculinist hegemony within the government power structures which oppress females rights. These female PR activists use online platforms such as social networks. Social media allows them to disseminate strategic information, to speak out against power structures and to mobilise other

activists towards a specific cause. Human rights and freedom of speech are significant concerns.

The next chapter explores how organisations continually engage in sustained online communication with their public, through discussing the theory regarding OPRs and social media.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter reflected on critical ideologies and explored various critical PR developments in Middle East organisations. It was found that there is a particular need for PR professionals to take on more of a social role and act as the organisational PR activists to facilitate debate, dialogue, dissent and public input (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Reber & Berger 2006:3; Shalaby 2015:17; Verwey et al 2017:70).

This chapter focuses on addressing the following research subproblem and question as part of the solution to the main research problem, which was to explore the practice of critical PR and to understand how it could play a role in online OPRs in the Middle East.

Subproblem	Research question
To determine how the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics.	How do the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics?

This research question is addressed as follows: firstly, OPRs are discussed as they underpin the understanding of developing quality relationships between the organisation and its public (Mohammed 2014:485). The concept of OPRs is expressed as methods that facilitate the measurement of relationships between an organisation and its publics (Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26). Three distinct OPRs stages are explored: the antecedents of relationships; relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes (Mohammed 2017:197). The salience model is explored as a public identification process that enables the PR activist to focus activities on developing social movements and building mutually-beneficial OPRs (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:2).

Secondly, the chapter explores how social media is used as a strategic tool in PR (Maxwell & Carboni 2014:303), discusses social media as a component in online OPRs (Vanlentini et al 2016:4067). "Social media" is defined as an online social networking platform that enables users to participate in public and private discussions (Vanlentini et al 2016:4055; Luo & Jiang 2012:60). Furthermore, a discussion on digital activism is explored, specifically how ICTs have enabled online social movements and have inspired social change (George & Leidner 2017:4). This is followed by a discussion of prominent strategies that PR professionals use to practise digital activism, which ultimately endorses online debates on societal issues and discloses unethical behaviour (Titifanue et al 2017:136). Thereafter, a discussion is presented about online OPRs and the conditions that make an ideal online public sphere where players can

practice dissent, debate and critique, and negotiate and discuss a variety of issues (Shaw 2014:154; Reid 2014:34).

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the techniques of cultivating online OPRs through social media.

3.2 ORGANISATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

Organisations purposefully influence, and are influenced by, various factors in the environment and cannot exist without various relational connections with public groups and their respective issues (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1; Mohammed 2014:485). The success of any organisation is dependent on the quality of its relationships with its publics, and PR plays a significant role in sustaining mutually beneficial OPRs (Mohammed 2014:485).

The following subsections discuss the dimensions and characteristics of OPRs, and examine the salience model as an identification process that supports PR activists.

3.2.1 Dimensions of organisation–public relationships

There are three relationship dimensions between an organisation and its public, namely professional, personal and community relationships (Boie 2012:7). Table 3.1 defines these OPR dimensions (Bruning & Galloway 2003:309; Bruning & Ledingham 1999:164).

Table 3.1: Organisation–public relationship dimensions

OPR dimensions	Definition
Personal	Refers to an organisation that takes a personal interest in an individual and focuses its attention on a personal relationship orientation with a specific public member.
Professional	Refers to an organisation that takes on a professional role when dealing with critical members of the public and reflects on the total perception of the organisation.
Community	Refers to an organisation's role and commitment in interacting with its communities, and being actively involved in the lives of the communities it serves.

From Table 3.1, it can be inferred that the three relationship dimensions serve as indicators of relationship quality, assisting PR professionals in distinguishing the organisation's role in personal, professional or community-based relationships (Bruning & Ledingham 1999:164).

Organisations have a variety of publics with different problems (multidimensional). In order for the organisation to establish its social license to operate, it needs to pay attention to all three of these dimensions (personal, professional and community) (Jahansoozi 2007:399). These three relationship dimensions act as an instrument for PR professionals to measure the

influence of OPR perceptions, attitudes, tendencies or behaviour over time (Bruning & Ledingham 1999:157). PR professionals need to understand how the historical behaviour of the organisation and its publics plays a crucial role in evaluating situational relationships (Park & Reber 2011:244).

The following subsection explores the characteristics of OPRs.

3.2.2 Characteristics of organisation–public relationships

Publics gradually form and build relationships with organisations because it is a necessary part of the communication process and exchange of resources (Kazlauskienė & Bartuševičienė 2013:498). Organisations can impact the lives of people through their decisions and policies; therefore relationship-building requires a constant exchange of information and resources (Boie 2012:6; Park & Reber 2011:244). It is essential for both parties in a relationship to align their understanding to ensure that there is a balanced mutual benefit (Bruning, DeMiglio & Embry 2006:34).

OPRs should be understood to be multi-dimensional (Bruning & Galloway 2003:318), as organisations are faced with a variety of publics who have different issues, conflicts, needs, expectations and interests (Hon & Grunig 1999:12). Managing OPRs in the perspective of common interests and shared goals between an organisation and its public will result in establishing mutual understanding over time (Ledingham 2003:190). PR enables relationships to be created through a dialogic process, where communication is the channel for engagement to occur between an organisation and its public (Bruning et al 2008:29).

Effective relationships require longevity for long-term commitment between two parties who share common beliefs in order to build the trust that is a fundamental basis for the survival of a relationship (Fourie 2014:53; Kazlauskienė & Bartuševičienė 2013:498). Trust essentially ensures reliability and improves the quality of the relationship (Boie 2012:3; Mohammed 2014:488). Collaboration can be understood in the perspective of a partnership where the organisation and its publics generate value by creating benefits that suit both parties (Fourie 2014:53). This achieves collaborative solutions to issues; it is therefore crucial that PR professionals manage these relational expectations between the organisation and its public, to sustain and build long-lasting, mutually-beneficial relationships (Fourie 2014:53; Lee & Choi 2009:167). The PR professional can balance the relationship dynamics between the organisation and its public by facilitating debate, dialogue, dissent and public input (Fourie 2014:53; Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Reber & Berger 2006:3).

The following subsection discusses the use of the salience model to identify an organisation's public in order to support PR activists in developing social movements.

3.2.3 Identifying strategic publics for organisation–public relationships

A vital activity in PR is the process of identifying strategic stakeholders and segmenting various kinds of public categories (Grunig & Grunig 2008:334). The importance of identifying and segmenting relevant individuals and groups is that the PR activist can develop specific communication messages for each group to support the cause (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:225). These groups are created by the issues presented in the public sphere (Grunig 2009:14).

PR is, therefore, a conduit in identifying issues that are relevant to society (Coombs & Holladay 2013:136). The PR activist needs to be familiar with and understand the conditions that cause people to be cooperative or cautious in voicing their opinions (Lee et al 2014:187).

A PR strategy is an evolving practice that develops through the process of public identification because, where new strategic issues arise, it is vital to adapt to the public's needs (Steyn 2002:21). PR activists cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach in building and sustaining public relationships; they need to adopt techniques that customise and personalise interactions (Bruning et al 2008:29). This relational aspect requires PR activists to tailor communication and actions to specific social needs (Bruning & Galloway 2003:317).

PR can be measured by assessing members of the public's opinions and attitudes towards a specific issue (Lee & Choi 2009:169). Traditionally, organisations believed that they could use PR to manage their relationships with their public and influence their attitudes, opinions or behaviour towards the organisation (Geçikli 2014:54). However, critical PR highlights that organisations cannot control these elements as PR does not have the power to do this; people have their own will to decide (Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26). It is worth mentioning that OPRs are not intended to persuade the public but rather to build mutually beneficial and meaningful relationships between the organisation and its publics (Freitag & Stokes 2009:166). Organisations can have positive relationships with their publics, but these relationships can change depending on the organisation's behaviour, and they can change based on how the members of the public respond to how the organisation deals with a given situation (Park & Reber 2011:241).

Human behaviour is complicated, as predicting people's behaviour through cause and effect is not a reliable form of managing OPRs (Boie 2012:7). Organisations tend to take a biased approach in selecting and identifying publics to build relationships; they tend to focus on the public that they need to survive and to achieve their goals (Grunig & Grunig 2008:339); publics that are not in support of the organisation's goals are generally seen as negative publics (Jahansoozi 2007:399).

The PR activist needs to be conscious of public perception, even though it is a subjective process (Jo 2003:15). The organisation and the public may differ in how they view a specific problem but both parties still need to find a midpoint in understanding their expectations (Hashim, Kee & Rahman 2014:381). As publics engage in different levels of activities with the organisation, PR activists could make use of the salience model to better understand relationships and their relevance in developing social movements (Mylykangas, Kujala & Lehtimäki 2010:66; Grunig & Grunig 2008:339).

It is worth mentioning at this point that there is strong criticism within the critical PR paradigm of any public identification process, because the dominant power structures take biased positions in which publics are only of interest to serve their objectives (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:18; Grigoraşi 2015:59). However, for the purpose of this study, the salience model has been selected for identifying publics because it does address issues relating to critical PR and PR activism, such as power, legitimacy and urgency (Cheng 2016:92).

The next subsection explores how the salience model developed by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) could be used as part of a public identification process.

3.2.3.1 *The salience model*

The definition of the word salience is “the level of priority assigned to competing for public claims” (Bobeica 2009:4; James & Gifford 2010:79; Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997:854; Winkler 2009:5). The salience model can be used to detect online groups and to identify public perspectives (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:226). It is useful in identifying and prioritising the publics’ relevance in new environments such as social media (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:221). It can also be used to analyse which social media participants are valuable or worth monitoring, which gives a PR activist the in-depth insight that enables strategic decision-making when building relevant relationships (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:226). A key point of interest in salience is that it can assist PR activists in understanding relationships better and their relevance in developing social movements (Mylykangas et al 2010:66).

The salience model has power, legitimacy and urgency dimensions, which are divided into latent public, moderately salient public and expectant public classes (James & Gifford 2010:79; Marin, Mitchell & Lee 2015:274; Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:225). These predominant classes are the core of public group analysis (Mitchell & Agle 2011:239). The “power” dimension refers to the degree to which publics’ power can influence the organisation’s policies and strategies (Mitchell et al 1997:854). The “legitimacy” dimension refers to the level of the public’s relationship with the organisation as defined by its values and beliefs (Wosahlo 2014:345); it includes the public’s socially accepted and expected behaviour (Mitchell et al 1997:866; Mylykangas et al 2010:66). The “urgency” dimension refers to the timing and

criticality of the attention called for by the publics' claims (Myllykangas et al 2010:66). When a public possesses top scores in more than one of these three core features, it is perceived to have a higher salience (Winkler 2009:5).

Salience is further formed by categorising groups into three classes: (a) a low salient class (refers to a latent public, with a one-dimensional attribute, that has a weak influence on the organisation); (b) a moderately salient class (refers to an expectant public, with two-dimensional attributes, that requires increased responsiveness by the organisation); and (c) a highly salient class (refers to a definitive public, with three-dimensional attributes, that provides input into organisational decisions) (Bobeica 2009:4; Myllykangas et al 2010:66). Each of these salient classes has subclasses (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:225). The salience model represents seven potential public groups, the eighth being a non-public (Wosahlo 2014:345).

PR activists give attention to certain public groups based on their relevance to the social movement's objectives (Mitchell et al 1997:872) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The salience of public groups is determined by the PR activists' perception and the number of relationship features they possess (Winkler 2009:5). The definition of each public group relative to its class is given in Table 3.2 (Bobeica 2009:5; Mitchell et al 1997:874-6).

Table 3.2: Definitions of public groups categorised by salient classes and attributes

Public group	Public group definition
Dormant public (Low salient class, latent public, possession of power)	A dormant public possesses the power to enforce its will on the dominant structure; power is unused without a legitimate relationship and urgent claim. Dormant publics have limited or no interaction with the dominant structure and become more salient by acquiring legitimacy or urgency.
Discretionary public (Low salient class, latent public, possession of legitimacy)	A discretionary public possesses legitimacy but is without power to influence the dominant structure and has no urgent claims. Discretionary publics are often related to CSR groups as dominant structures have no real pressure for engagement.
Demanding public (Low salient class, latent public, possession of urgency)	A demanding public possesses urgency but is without power and legitimacy to seek attention from the dominant structure. The noise produced by a demanding public is not dangerous and is not sufficient to project a public claim.
Dominant public (Moderately salient class, expectant public, possession of power and legitimacy)	A dominant public possesses both power and legitimacy, which confirms influence over the dominant structure. Generally, dominant publics form part of the dominant coalition and have a communication mechanism in place with the dominant structure that acknowledges the importance of their relationship. Even though dominant publics have power, it is not always clear whether the legitimate claim is acted on.
Dependent public (Moderately salient class, expectant public, possession of legitimacy and urgency)	A dependent public possesses both legitimacy and urgency but, due to its lack of power, depends on other players to exercise the necessary power to carry out its claims. Dependent publics require power and are, therefore, governed through advocacy or guardianship. They can move into the highly salient class by having their urgent claims implemented by dominant players.
Dangerous public (Moderately salient class, expectant public, possession of urgency and power)	A dangerous public possesses both urgency and power. Due to the lack of legitimacy, this public is coercive and potentially violent in pursuing its claims. The actions of dangerous publics using coercive tactics are outside the borders of legitimacy and pose a threat to the dominant structure, society and people in general.
Definitive public (Highly salient class, definitive public, possession of power, legitimacy and urgency)	A definitive public possesses all three attributes: power, legitimacy and urgency. When PR activists perceive that all features are present, the public's salience is high. Definitive publics are generally formed when a dominant player requires urgent action; the dominant structure then acts immediately by prioritising the public's claims.

From Table 3.2, it can be deduced that the manner in which publics gain and lose salience is dependent on each attribute that is constructed by reality based on perception (Mitchell et al 1997:868). Each attribute is a variable that has the potential to change (gain or lose) the salience of a particular public group, thereby altering its relationship with the organisation (Mitchell et al 1997:868). Public features are not autonomous but rather interconnected (Winkler 2009:10). Publics and players (individuals) may not be aware of possessing certain features (Mitchell et al 1997:868).

The limitations of this salience model are that it does not support quantifiable measurement of the attributes and that priority is given to one public group over another (Bobeica 2009:4). Other limitations are that it is validated by rational perception, which has the potential for interfering bias towards a particular public (Bobeica 2009:6).

The salience model was selected for this study to support the research that was done with PR professionals from the largest 100 listed organisations in the Middle East and to determine what processes they used to conduct public identification and whether they took power, legitimacy and urgency into account.

The next section discusses the three stages of developing OPRs, establishing the antecedents of relationships, the relationship cultivation strategies and the quality outcomes.

3.3 STAGES OF DEVELOPING ORGANISATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

There is a general agreement among PR professionals and scholars that there are three distinct stages of developing OPRs (Mohammed 2017:197). The first stage establishes the antecedents of relationships, the second establishes relationship cultivation strategies, and the third establishes relationship quality outcomes (Aldoory & Grunig 2012:93; Ki & Hon 2009:244, Ki & Hon 2009b:1).

- The antecedents of a relationship are the preconditions that organisations need to develop to build and sustain their public relationships; which are generally established when the PR professional conducts environmental scanning and develops specific PR programmes to communicate with the publics identified (Ki & Hon 2009:244).
- Relationship cultivation strategies are put in place in a process that produces relationship quality outcomes (Ki & Hon 2009:244). Relationship cultivation strategies lead to the presence or absence of specific relationship types; they also mediate OPRs as they evolve (Hung & Chen 2007:28). Ultimately, relationship cultivation strategies formulate the plans to build and sustain quality relationships (Ki & Hon 2009b:2).
- Relationship quality outcomes refer to the results of the relationship cultivation strategies; these outcomes include trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction (Kim & Chan-Olmsted 2005:145). Relationship quality outcomes are also the organisation's relationship goals or objectives, the achievement of which has a strong link to the organisation's image, identity and reputation (Ki & Hon 2009:244; Mohammed 2014:488).

From a critical PR perspective, PR needs to build and sustain OPRs that focuses on benefiting society instead of the organisation (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:2; Ki & Hon 2007:15). In light of this, the critical concept of OPRs has challenged organisations to place more attention on their public's values and needs (Geçikli 2014:53). PR professionals primarily conduct research to analyse the environment and provide insightful information about societies' problems and recommend how the organisation can contribute to resolving these issues (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). For an organisation to have sustainable OPRs, it needs to adapt critical PR practices (Dolea 2017:195; Hashim et al 2014:381), where the PR professional facilitates dissent and encourages debates between the organisation and its publics (Meintjes et al 2012:12045). Ideally, PR professionals need to ensure that the organisation is participating in interactive debates and encourage public input (Bruning & Lambe 2008:143). To do this, they must become PR activists in the organisation (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Bruning & Lambe 2008:143; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:64). One of the factors that hinders PR professionals from sustaining OPRs is that they lack adequate training in handling conflict (Ledingham 2003:184; Verčič & Verčič 2007:288).

The next subsections explore the three stages of developing OPRs.

3.3.1 Antecedents of relationships

Antecedents are defined as the "social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, needs for resources, perceptions of the uncertain environment and legal/voluntary necessity" (Broom, Casey & Ritchey 1997:94; Grunig & Huang 2000:29). They need to be in place before OPRs can be developed (Bruning & Lambe 2008:139). Antecedents are the conditions that allow an organisation to establish relationships with its publics, and they are identified by the PR professional through environmental scanning (Ki & Hon 2009:244). The antecedents stimulate interaction between the organisation and the public, which explains why relationships are developed (Ki & Hon 2009b:2).

It is the responsibility of the PR professional to conduct research to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the relationships between the organisation and its publics (Meng 2007:2). Grunig and Huang (2000:36) propose a concept of situational antecedents, which are understood to be the consequence of behavioural interaction between single and multiple organisations and publics. Seltzer and Zhang (2011:27) suggest that situational antecedents could be identified as links between organisations and publics.

There are various possible relationship antecedents that cause the formation of relationships, and the reason some antecedents differ is because organisations have different types of public relationships (Broom et al 1997:94; Hung 2005:394). Seltzer and Zhang (2011:27) identify three politically relevant antecedents: time, interpersonal trust and party identification. Sohail

(2012:237) identified four relationship antecedents to marketing: trust, commitment, communication and conflict handling. Syafrizal, Wahid and Ismail (2017:132) identify four antecedents for priority banking customers: expectation, prediction, goal and desire.

The four antecedents of OPRs selected for this study are expectations, trustworthiness, interdependency and cultural norms.

- According to Cheng (2018:126), “expectations” are mostly held by the public; they expect the organisation to be dependable and to deliver on its promises. There is an expectation of an exchange or transaction between two parties that require resources from each other (Sohail 2012:237; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:25).
- “Trustworthiness” is the perceived confidence of one party in the other party’s reliability and honesty, which is apparent when an organisation practices interactive communication to promote debate or dialogue (Syafrizal et al 2017:134). Trustworthiness is strongly associated with confidence and individual perception, both of which play a significant role in establishing high levels of trustworthiness (Cheng 2018:126; Sohail 2012:237).
- “Interdependence” refers to the level of mutual dependence between the organisation and its strategic publics, whereby the behaviour of each party can have positive or negative consequences for the other (Hung 2005:396; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:27).
- According to Yeh (2017:97), “cultural norms” reflect on specific normative assumptions that relate to a group of individual values. PR professionals need to be respectful and sensitive to cultural norms when dealing with marginalised or oppressed public groups.

The next subsection discusses relationship cultivation strategies as part of OPRs.

3.3.2 Relationship cultivation strategies

PR practices cultivate relationships, which form OPRs; good PR practices therefore could contribute to the positive attitudes and behaviour of public members (Bruning et al 2004:445; Yang 2007:114). The relationship between the organisation and its public can provide a distinctive and unique power advantage against competing organisations in the business environment (Bruning et al 2006:38). Although not all relationship types are mutually beneficial, the goal of the PR professional is to establish mutual interest between the organisation and its public through practising interactive communication supported by the organisation's behaviour (Bruning et al 2006:38).

The various relationship types that an organisation can have with its public can be contractual, covenantal, exchange, exploitive, manipulative, mutual communal and symbiotic. Table 3.3 defines these relationship types (Hon & Grunig 1999:3,5,22; Hung 2005: 396,407,408; Hung & Chen 2007:3,4,11).

Table 3.3: Definitions of organisation–public relationship types

Relationship types	Definition
Contractual	Contractual relationships refer to a written agreement by both parties in the relationship, which defines the conditions governing the relationship and what transactions need to be created.
Covenantal	Covenantal relationships occur when both parties commit to a common good by their open exchanges; they place a claim between the parties involved.
Exchange	Exchange relationships refer to relationships that have economic exchanges; they occur when members benefit one another in response to comparable value received in the past or future; if a party receives a benefit from another, it incurs a responsibility or debt to return the benefit.
Exploitive	Exploitive relationships refer to one party's taking advantage of another; this occurs when the party does not meet its commitment in an agreement or exchange relationship.
Manipulative	Manipulative relationships occur when an organisation's intentions and behaviours are questionable or unethical; it happens when the organisation manipulates the publics into serving its interests – it proposes a win-win situation to the public as a cover but, in reality, only the organisation's interests are met.
Mutual communal	Mutual communal relationships occur when parties provide benefits to each other without expecting anything in return; this happens when they are concerned about each other's welfare.
Symbiotic	Symbiotic relationships occur when an organisation understands that it requires another party to survive and works with publics that have a common interest in surviving in the environment, with the aim of ensuring longevity and continuing to exist in the environment; a symbiotic relationship does not include expectations of benefit exchanges.

The definitions of relationship types in Table 3.3 are essential to understanding how the nature of relationships can change over time, resulting in a change in attitudes and behaviour between the organisation and its public (Seltzer 2005:6). At any given time, an organisation can have various relationship types with various publics, and these relationship types can be evaluated by the PR professional (Hung 2005:393; Kim & Chan-Olmsted 2005:145). PR professionals can therefore create PR programmes that enhance the relationship type and positively influence the key public's opinion of and behaviour towards the organisation (Bruning & Galloway 2003:310). When there are negative consequences as a result of the organisation's behaviour, PR professionals could address the issue in order for the relationship to continue (Jahansoozi 2007:399). PR professionals need to be careful about any attitudinal or

behavioural changes in the relationships with its publics or key public members, as these triggers provide indications of the degree of OPR health (Bruning et al 2004:436).

Relationship cultivation strategies are the behaviour adopted by an organisation in its attempts to create and maintain quality relationships with key publics (Ki & Hon 2009:245). These strategies require effective relationship management to ensure that OPRs do not dissolve (Mohammed 2017:197). Concerning relationship cultivation, PR professionals need to identify active publics that are more likely to participate by communicating with the organisation (Yang 2007:115). These strategies can also be understood as the PR professionals' day-to-day activity and organisations' behavioural contributions to strategic OPRs (Ki & Hon 2009:244). Relationship cultivation strategies can provide PR professionals with a clear understanding of how to build and maintain relationships with publics (Ki & Hon 2009b:1). Table 3.4 defines several types of OPR strategies for building and sustaining quality relationships (Hon & Grunig 1999:14,15; Hung & Chen 2007:5; Ki & Hon 2009:242,246-8; Ni & Wang 2011:271,275-276).

Table 3.4: Organisation–public relationship cultivation strategies

OPR cultivation strategy	Definition
Access	Access as a relationship cultivation strategy refers to a behavioural effort created by an organisation to allow publics to participate in its decision-making process; it makes information more mutually accessible when communication channels are strategically created for publics to gain access to the organisation.
Positivity	Positivity, as a relationship cultivation strategy, refers to the behavioural effort when an organisation or public does anything to make the relationship more enjoyable, to improve the interaction, cooperation and emotional status of people. Positivity has been observed to be the most useful relationship cultivation strategy for maintaining mutuality and happiness.
Openness	Openness as a relationship cultivation strategy refers to the behavioural effort when an organisation or public discloses thoughts and emotions about specific issues, situations or circumstances.
Sharing of tasks	Sharing of tasks as a relationship cultivation strategy refers to the behavioural effort when an organisation purposefully shares tasks with its key publics to solve issues together; it is mutual involvement by both the organisation and its key publics. Sharing of tasks commonly occurs in CSR programmes, where both parties work together for a common interest.
Networking	Networking as a relationship cultivation strategy refers to the behavioural effort of an organisation to build relationships with the same groups that its key publics are closely related to; this strategy creates networks.
Assurance	Assurance as a relationship cultivation strategy refers to the behavioural effort of an organisation to recognise public issues as legitimate and to acknowledge public participation in the decision-making process; this ensures that publics have entitlement and moral inclusiveness; it also suggests that both parties are committed to sustaining the relationship.

Table 3.4 represented PR strategies that cultivate interpersonal relationships (Ki & Hon 2009:245; Ni & Wang 2011:271; Stafford & Canary 1991:234). They are measures that organisations can use to track the efficiency of the relationship efforts with its publics (Ki & Hon 2009b:20). Organisations use a variety of cultivation strategies simultaneously with their publics; and, as relationships change, behaviour also needs to be modified to sustain mutually-beneficial relationships (Hung & Chen 2007:27).

When an organisation is seen to have disagreements with its public, it produces a negative perception of the organisation and affects the relationships of the public members (Bruning & Lambe 2008:147). PR professionals need to understand the culture of the organisation to cultivate positive relationships and build their OPRs, as they play a significant part in determining boundaries and limitations in developing relationship strategies (Bruning & Galloway 2003:317).

Practising relationship cultivation strategies demonstrates that the organisation values its key publics and would, therefore, devote resources to cultivating these relationships (Bruning & Galloway 2003:317). In light of this, PR professionals acting as PR activists need to challenge and influence the organisation's policies in order to develop long-term OPR strategies that benefit society, which is a crucial aspect of critical PR (Dolea 2017:195; Haigh & Dardis 2008:5; Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Yang 2007:115).

ICTs have provided individuals with the ability to engage in online public debates, where relationships are built, influenced and sustained (Grigoraşi 2015:55). OPR cultivation strategies need to include access to organisational information, which would lead to openness where publics can discuss the shared information (Lycarião 2015:18). Sharing of tasks is another relationship-cultivating strategy that can be used to establish inclusiveness between the organisation and its online publics in resolving specific societal issues (Lycarião 2015:18).

The next subsection discusses the measurement of relationship quality outcomes as part of developing OPRs.

3.3.3 Relationship quality outcomes

Relationship quality outcomes, which are mostly the organisation's relational goals with its publics, are measured throughout the process of conducting effective relationship cultivation strategies (Ki & Hon 2009:244; Ki & Hon 2009b:2; Ni & Wang 2011:269). OPR measurement is a vital component of PR for establishing quality relational outcomes (Yang 2007:116). Relationship outcomes are apparent immediately after an organisation conducts PR activities (Mohammed 2017:199).

There has been much debate among PR scholars and PR professionals about which outcomes are the most important for measuring the quality of interpersonal relationships (Mohammed 2017:200). However, the most widely used are trust, commitment, control mutuality and satisfaction (Kim & Chan-Olmsted 2005:147; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder & Lacobucci 2001:36; Grunig & Huang 2000:47).

Table 3.5 provides definitions of relationship quality outcomes, which was part of the research with the PR professionals from the largest 100 listed organisations in the Middle East, primarily to provide insight into the quality outcomes that these PR professionals measured (Bruning & Galloway 2003:311,317; Hon & Grunig 1999:3; Huang 2001:65-67; Jahansoozi 2007:399; Jo 2006:229; Kazlauskienė & Bartuševičienė 2013:498-503; Ki & Hon 2007:5-15; Kim & Chan-Olmsted 2005:147-148; Mohammed 2017:201-202; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:27; Yang & Mallabo 2003:9).

Table 3.5: Dimensions of relationship quality outcomes

Relationship quality outcome	Definition
Commitment	Commitment refers to the level to which the parties believe that the relationship is worth developing and maintaining; a high level ensures that the parties put forward maximum effort to sustain a long-term relationship. PR professionals who are managing OPRs need to understand the factors that affect the level of commitment between the organisation and its publics. The two dimensions of commitment are continuance of actions or behaviour, and emotional alignment.
Control mutuality	Control mutuality refers to understanding between the parties as to who has the rightful power. It is essential that the two parties agree about the control in the relationship, as it influences the process of final decision-making. Although an imbalance of power between two parties is natural, it is vital that both parties maintain a level of control over the other. Control mutuality plays a central role in conflict resolution.
Satisfaction	Satisfaction refers to the level of positive affection and emotion experienced, meaning that the organisation and its publics feel positive towards each other. Satisfied publics have a positive financial effect on the organisation; however, a satisfying relationship is one where the benefits outweigh the costs. Satisfaction is the outcome when positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced; each party feels favourable and believes that the other is trying to maintain the relationship. Satisfied publics can lead to positive attitudes and a more deep-seated desire to support the organisation.
Trust	Trust refers to the levels of integrity of the organisation and its publics, and the confidence of each in the reliability of the other. If trust degrades over time, transparency becomes a critical relational characteristic, as the organisation would need to rebuild its trust through countermeasures. The three levels of trust are: (a) integrity (the belief that the party is fair and just); (b) dependability (consistency in behaviour and verbal commitments); and (c) competence (belief that the other party can do what it says).

With regard to the relationship quality outcomes discussed in Table 3.5, PR can be understood to have contributed value to the organisation when these outcomes are positively present (Grunig 2011:25). PR practice therefore enhances OPRs through increasing the level of trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction (Mohammed 2017:209). These four relational outcomes provide the organisation with a scale to determine whether the organisation's behavioural efforts are practical (Bruning & Ledingham 1999:164). OPR outcomes can provide critical information to the PR professional, enabling adjustments to relational strategies that allow the organisation to move closer to achieving its relational goals (Men & Hung 2012:151).

The next section discusses how ICTs have contributed to PR, and social media is explored as a strategic tool for online OPRs. Digital activism is examined, with a specific focus on how digital technology has contributed to the development of online social movements. The section concludes with a summary of techniques PR professionals could consider when practising digital activism.

3.4 INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

ICTs are defined as any form of technology (either physical or virtual) that enables communication through “capturing, processing and transmitting information electronically” (Oluwatayo 2014:67; Ugoani & Ugoani 2017:862). ICTs have contributed to PR practices' evolving from monologue to dialogue and from control to engagement (Appleby 2015:28). ICTs have shifted the PR profession from timed, controlled communication to a critical, interactive, integrated and dynamic approach, where online publics play a dominant role in influencing the organisation's agenda (Fox 2015:49). The rapid development of ICTs has speeded the evolution of PR practices to accommodate new collaborative and social channels of communication (Sohail 2012:237). Access to and sharing of information are critical requirements for sustainable development in a digital society (Ngozi et al 2016:287), and ICTs can be used as drivers for economic growth (Koutroumpis, Leiponen & Thomas 2017:1).

ICTs have evolved radically and have transformed communication processes (Arrow 2015:55; Diakou 2015:283; Swart & Verwey 2003:82). Various physical devices (hardware) transfer data (information) over a network (internet) from one physical location to another (Ugoani & Ugoani 2017:862). ICTs are therefore an enabler of communication and contribute to the PR tools required for transmission, exchange and storage of information (Menshikov, Lavrinenko, Sinica & Simakhova 2017:586). ICTs have removed the barriers of geographical borders and distances and contributed to the development of social collaboration and the formation of networks (Menshikov et al 2017:586; Carboni 2013:193). These networks contributed to the formation of the global village, virtual organisations and virtual communities (Ngozi et al 2016:289; Prasad 2011:54). The internet is a network of networks (Ugoani & Ugoani

2017:851), which has become a necessary application for online publics to communicate in a virtual space also known as “cyberspace” or the “digital environment” (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). ICT tools include computers, smartphones, different electronic applications, digital media, broadband technology and social networks, in addition to traditional ICTs, such as radio, television and print media (Ngozi et al 2016:289; Oluwatayo 2014:67).

ICTs have shifted the idea of public space from a physical location to a virtual (online) environment (Zeri 2014:1581). It has created a critical public sphere, which is a dynamic space where individuals can communicate through social networks (Ndlovu & Mbenga 2013:172). This has ultimately formed online forums where public debates are occurring (Al-Shamsi 2015:483). The popular understanding of the public sphere has changed, particularly during the past decade, with the increasingly important role of ICTs, which have brought about radical development and marginalised major public media (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015:44).

PR cannot be separated from ICTs, as they play a significant role in managing online OPRs (Sriramesh 2009:7). They have challenged PR by redistributing power from the organisation to the public, as can be observed in the shift from traditional one-way communication to interactive communication (Prasad 2011:55).

PR activists utilise ICTs to conduct research and to identify any potential issues and problems that may pose a risk to society (Shamsan & Otieno 2015:1). PR activists ultimately need to identify societal problems and solve them through constant communication, using reliable technological devices (Ngozi et al 2016:290). ICT tools have given public citizens the ability to be heard; they have empowered oppressed individuals to be active content creators and to disseminate information regionally and globally as citizen journalists (Titifanue et al 2017:145). PR activists are required to scan and monitor this digital environment, in order to understand what societal problems or issues are prominent (Logan & Tindall 2014:166).

The next subsection discusses how social media can be used as a strategic PR tool to develop online relationships.

3.4.1 Social media

For this study, social media has been researched as a critical component in online relationships, as it plays a significant role in the industry of PR, and has challenged PR professionals to attain new knowledge of how to build meaningful online OPRs (Luo & Jiang 2012:60). PR professionals can use social communication channels, known as social media, to build strategic online relationships (Grunig 2009:1). Since the relational dynamics of social media are driven by a combination of language, images and discourse, PR professionals should use them to build in online relationships (Vanlentini et al 2016:4055).

Social media platforms are not merely transmission channels, but communicatively constituted arenas (Vanlentini et al 2016:4067) that enable instant interaction, which facilitates the process of building online relationships (Douai & Nofal 2012:269; Mantovani 2001:147; Tandazo, Galarza & Benavides 2016:214). It is in these computer-mediated arenas that negotiation of meaning is taking place, and previously silenced voices have joined discussions across continents (Douai & Nofal 2012:279; Helms 2009:1; Mantovani 2001:147). They have transformed the way people represent their identities and communicate their political positions (Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb & Schossböck 2015:145). Social media platforms generally permit users to connect their profiles to other profiles, and this interconnectivity establishes social networks (Stefanone, Lackaff & Rosen 2010:511).

The challenge from a PR perspective is that social media has decentralised communication practice and that, in this online environment, an organisation can only engage or participate in the discourse (Appleby 2015:28; Dolea 2017:195; Navarro et al 2017:1). The flow of information cannot be controlled, unlike traditional media, so organisation-centric approaches to PR on social media cannot function (Grunig 2009:4). Social media allows members of the society to contribute to debates about and dissent to dominant structures of power as it intrinsically motivates the idea of an online democratic society (Asghar 2013:3123).

Social media has created a complicated environment where public opinions are continuously influencing online relationships and shaping cultural norms (Vanlentini et al 2016:4061). One of the complications of social media is that messages can become viral (Grunig 2009:7). This viral aspect of social media has been referred to as “contagion”, whereby a contemporary-topic (message) disseminates uncontrollably through the social network (across interconnected populations) (Murphy 2015:237). Opinions are the driving force behind contagion (Richardson, Surmitis & Hyldahl 2012:121; Treaster, Conner, Gupta & Nahrstedt 2005:1). Contagion is also a network concept where players, or users of the network, have connections linked to their level of attractiveness, and other players seek to associate with those attractive characteristics or personalities (Murphy 2015:250). Contagion theory is associated metaphorically with a contagious disease, where direct contact with the message (issue) in the social network leads to contamination or exposure to specific information (Monge & Contractor 2002:4).

PR professionals have difficulty managing a contagion message in social media (threatening or promoting) because attempting to use strategic online PR to make a target change or alter the meaning of the message is nearly impossible and extremely difficult (Murphy 2015:250). An example of this is when activists inflame public opinion through social media, resulting in people’s mobilising to stage a public protest for a specific societal cause (Browning 2013:64).

PR practice has been expanded by the inclusion of managing digital media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and blogs (Waters 2014:32). There are many social media channels that offer similar content to users (text, visual and audio) (Vanlentini et al 2016:4057). These popular communication channels include social sharing sites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Saxton & Guo 2014:297; Vanlentini et al 2016:4057). YouTube has gained a great deal of legitimacy over traditional mass media as it offers users autonomous videos that are not agenda-driven like the mainstream media outlets (Douai & Nofal 2012:269).

In an environment where competition is fierce, organisations are making use of online PR to enhance their online relationships (Luo & Jiang 2012:63). The most popular social communication channels, which are gaining the attention of online PR, are social media platforms (Saxton & Guo 2014:297). Organisations therefore need to invest resources into optimising their online PR activities through the inclusion of social media channels, as they help the organisation develop active online publics that participate in public discussions (Navarro et al 2017:1; Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:33; Sütçü & Erdal 2014:84). PR professionals who spearhead the organisation's online PR activities need to contribute to the evolving discourse with the right online groups, and promote the right conversations at the right time (Tankosic et al 2016:291).

Organisations have taken an innovative approach to social media, as they have integrated it as a social channel to direct public support, and employees play a crucial role by handling sporadic online inquiries (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:223). The fact that other members of the organisation are contributing to the organisation's PR practices through social media confirms claims of a shift to decentralised PR practice (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:223; Uwalaka 2019:24). Members of the organisation instigate discussions and participate in online debates about various issues relating to the organisation's products and services or ethical behaviour (Tankosic et al 2016:291).

The next subsection discusses how digital activism has contributed to the development of social movements and has inspired social change.

3.4.2 Digital activism

Mitu and Vega (2014:109) define "digital activism" as "the use of the Internet or any other Internet-based application in support of a political or social cause". George and Leidner (2017:4) argue that digital activism motivates social activism, which uses digital technologies to inspire social change and promote social movements. George and Leidner (2018:2299) underline that digital activism is not merely political action, but an opportunity to take immediate action against unethical behaviour directed at dominant power structures or leaders of the

coalition. Kakungulu-Mayambala and Rukundo (2019:169) explain that digital activism can only occur with the support of digital tools; it is generally used for mobilisation or to advocate reform with the aim of transforming or improving society. Bostanci (2019:2086) highlighted that PR activists who used ICT to communicate their cause had extended the concept of the social movement to include the concept of digital activism. According to Uwalaka (2019:15), digital activism is noticed by the social media, which “impacts collective and connective action, including providing mobilising information and news not available in other media, assisting in the coordination of protests, helping users to join political causes, creating opportunities for debate, spreading enthusiasm and enabling emotional contagion”. Dumitrica and Felt (2019:1) believe that digital activism is an empowering movement that gives individuals the opportunity to participate in online social movements. Common digital activism activities in which society involves itself are donations, listening to online podcasts or videos, posting or sharing messages, and signing online petitions (Mitu & Vega 2014:109).

Several new terms have emerged. George and Leidner (2018:2301) condemn digital activism for requiring minimal effort or action from society, a lackadaisical approach that has been termed “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”, which refers to action taken through merely “liking” or “sharing” a specific message posted on social media. George and Leidner (2018:2299) stress that “social media has turned into a battleground” where users are continually reacting to each other’s opinions. It has also inspired and been used to mobilise “civic hackathons”. Wang (2015:31) explained that a “civic hackathon” is when citizens and developers (those who are software programmers and interactive design programmers) mobilise to solve social problems through collaborative efforts and expertise.

Digital activism first creates social awareness or advocacy of a specific campaign; secondly, it encouraged online participation for users to debate, discuss and provide input about the specific cause; thirdly, if there is sufficient support, the PR activist calls for and mobilises off-line action such as protests; and lastly, the PR activist may also call for performative actions, which include “defacing of websites, e-mail bombs and other forms of hacktivism” (Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo 2019:169).

The use of digital communication has become routine practice during activism (Allagui 2014:984), as activists share videos and photos of the protests with the international community (George & Leidner 2018:2305). Each moment in activism events can be categorised using digital communication (Allagui 2014:984). Activists use ICTs to bring situations and causes directly to the attention of the international public (Alfoory 2014:5). It allows the activists’ voices to be heard and events to be witnessed instantaneously through live streaming (Alfoory 2014:5).

Developments in ICTs have provided individuals, citizens and activists with the hardware and software to confront organisations, governments and hegemonic monarchs (Jones 2013:75). As indicated in Chapter 2, female activists in the Middle East are using digital activism to represent their gender-focused demands in advocating for improved human rights and democratisation (Anderson 2019:191; Satterfield 2013:22).

The Middle Eastern governments are also known to use social networks as a tool for surveillance, censorship, propaganda and social control (Jones 2013:69). It is worth mentioning that Middle Eastern governments with strict laws governing public expression of dissent block users accounts and even arrest citizens if they insult the ruling monarchs or inspire any ideology that opposes the government (Diwan 2017:21; George & Leidner 2018:2301; Jones 2013:82; Katzman 2017c:14). Furthermore, Wang (2015:18) stressed that digital activism is especially crucial in authoritarian countries where the government controls the media. It enables those who are oppressed, especially in rural regions, to gain support and have their voices heard.

As not every person has access to the internet and not every person is interested in participating on social media discussions, Mitu and Vega (2014:103) condemn digital activism, saying the “promise of digital democracy and digital activism is still far from fulfilling”.

The next subsection explores techniques that the PR professional can consider when practising digital activism.

3.4.3 Public relations professionals practising digital activism

Digital activism is practised when PR activists investigate and create opportunities for debate so that social players can contribute to co-creating new meanings and values through social media. (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Invernizzi & Romenti 2015:426). This practise motivates the PR professional to use social media to encourage public input and facilitate debate, dialogue and even dissent (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Reber & Berger 2006:3; Verwey et al 2017:70).

Dumitrica and Felt (2019:13) admit that PR professionals who coordinate online social movements with the skills that they have obtained from their professional PR experience tend to have an advantage in developing complex solutions through the use of technology. ICTs have deconstructed the traditional ways of communication, enabling interactive communication in which citizens can add to the dissent and debate issues with each other, which has further contributed to the digital activism movement (Hurvitz 2011). ICTs in the form of interactive social communication networks (social media) reflect the nature of critical theory by allowing public dissent and debate (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40). This online

engagement enables publics to challenge traditional paradigms and therefore call for action on societal issues and unethical practices (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40).

Social media channels have become a popular tool for PR professionals as they provide cost-effective ways to distribute information, facilitate debate, dialogue and dissent, encourage public input, and mobilise and coordinate the public around a specific agenda (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Reber & Berger 2006:3; Titifanue et al 2017:136; Verwey et al 2017:70). Social media channels have contributed to the efficiency of disseminating information on various societal issues; and it is worth mentioning that democracy and freedom of information are closely connected (Fox 2015:43).

There is a divergence of power between the dominant power structures and society, and this is where the PR professional can facilitate or instigate a debate between the two parties (McCown 2007:55). The relationship between knowledge and power is a crucial focus in digital activism as it uses dissensus to promote discourse that challenges the power of the authorities (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:57). Digital activism is fundamentally a strategy used in contrast to the dominant alliance of power and reason (Hicks 2004:3). It aims to disclose breaches and inconsistencies of knowledge, thereby opening opportunities for new ways of thinking (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:35).

PR professionals practising digital activism use digital technologies to create opportunities for dissent, such as mobilising other supporters, whistle-blowing or leaking information (Reber & Berger 2006:3; Sen 2014:48). These PR change agents share information online that exposes corruption or unethical practices in power structures, and encourages resistance to their agendas and projects (Grunig 2009:9; Radford 2012:50). They establish active social media groups that challenge the dominant power structures' truths and meanings (Steerman 1989:51) and attempt to educate society about new ways of critical thinking (Friis 2013:6). Such PR professionals would discourage marginalised groups from accepting the dominant structures' totalising claims (Butler 2002:15) or metanarratives (Karim 2013:115; Stoddart 2007:218). Moreover, they would use deconstructive discourse (Brown 1995:1) and form alliances with subordinated or marginalised online publics (Butler 2002:15).

PR professionals have gained an understanding of the power of digital activism that is implemented on social media channels, as it has been successfully used to disseminate information about a specific claim against an organisation or to force an organisation to be more transparent (Nasser & Jenaibi 2015:22). PR professionals use social media to enable and empower citizens to be content generators, resulting in individuals' speaking out against political reforms, which has emerged as a powerful force against government-controlled media and has allowed digital activism around the world to act against specific causes (Al-Shamsi

2015:483). Although social media has provided a public communication channel for voices to be heard, it has also gained the attention of government authorities, who have attempted to control the discourse through surveillance and fear-mongering (Jones 2013:74).

A PR professional who practises digital activism constantly walks a thin line between the principle of empowering the human rights aspect of free speech, and the temptation to control and manipulate the public (Jones 2013:85). PR professionals working on online OPRs are extremely challenged when attempting to build online relations (Appleby 2015:31). McCorkindale (2014:95) argued that the reason might be due to the role that PR professionals take on when they encourage ethical decision-making and promote trustfulness, openness and transparency. Logan and Tindall (2014:176) claim that PR professionals need to provide guidance simultaneously to the organisation and to its public. Hayes et al (2017:263) further argued that PR professionals need to lead organisations in uncharted public debate, where criticism and blame are abundant.

The next section explores online OPRs and identifies ideal conditions for online OPRs to occur; it also provides a discussion of cultivating online OPRs through social media.

3.5 ONLINE ORGANISATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

This study aimed to explore the role that critical PR plays in online OPRs in the Middle East. In Chapter 2, it was discovered that critical PR encouraged PR professionals to take on a more social role and operate as a PR activist in the organisation (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Invernizzi & Romenti 2015:426), which enabled the PR professional to act as the facilitator of debate, dialogue and dissent and encourage public input (Meintjes et al 2012:12045; Ngozi et al 2016:289; Reber & Berger 2006:3; Verwey et al 2017:70).

Furthermore, it was learnt that PR professionals who practised critical PR would challenge mainstream PR strategies and investigate the intentions of the dominant power structures that implement them (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Ciszek 2015:447; Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:48; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40). These PR professionals would also form alliances with subordinated or marginalised online publics (Butler 2002:15), and place issues of power and truth at the core of all their inquiries, as this would enable PR to have more influence in the organisation's decision-making process (Motion & Weaver 2005:65).

An example of PR professionals taking on a more social role can be observed when various organisations around the Middle East contributed to and supported the digital activism campaign, #Women2Drive and #SaudiWomen, which was a social movement for government reform to allow women to drive in Saudi Arabia (George & Leidner 2018:2301).

Online OPRs can be defined as progressive networks where mutual expectations are created through the process of interactive communication (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059). PR professionals use ICTs to cultivate OPRs in the form of computer-mediated platforms that provide strategies to participate with interactive online relationships (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman & Kannan 2016:7; Maxwell & Carboni 2014:303; Sütçü & Erdal 2014:84). Online OPRs can be seen when members of the organisation participate in online discussions and debate issues about the organisations with its publics (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059).

PR professionals may use social media to contribute to improving the quality of the organisation's online relationships (Luo & Jiang 2012:57; Tankosic et al 2016:290). Conversations on social media channels that build online OPRs manifest through specific societal issues that attract the public's attention (Vanlentini et al 2016:4059). Social media has changed the landscape of the relationship between organisations and their public as it has given the public the power to influence the organisation's behaviour, reputation and decision-making (Navarro et al 2017:1). Social media channels encapsulate today's communication environment where individuals and organisations can participate in online dissent and debates (Cunningham 2010:114). Although social media provides a variety of online communication channels whereby organisations can communicate with its publics, it also has the potential for organisations to positively nurture their online OPRs (Men & Tsai 2014:418).

The next subsections explore the ideal conditions for online OPRs, as well as various techniques to cultivate online OPRs through social media.

3.5.1 Ideal conditions for online organisation–public relationships

The public sphere, also known as the “communicative sphere”, has shifted from a physical state to a virtual one due to developments in ICTs (Constantinescu 2012:95; Mitu & Vega 2014:106; Ndlovu & Mbenga 2013:172). The ideal public sphere is a space where freedom of speech, political participation and deliberative democracy occurs (Tian & Chao 2012:460). These ideals can be observed in discussions on the internet, which has further contributed to the development of online social networks (Himmelboim et al 2014:363; Constantinescu 2012:96). These networks can be described as social players (individuals and organisations) that interact with each other, creating online social relationships or symbolic relations (Himmelboim et al 2014:363). Table 3.6 defines six conditions for an ideal online public sphere to exist (Dahlberg 2001:3; Shaw 2014:154; Tian & Chao 2012:460).

Table 3.6: Conditions for an ideal online public sphere to exist

Condition	Definition
Autonomy from state and economic power	Autonomy from state and economic power refers to the discourse of public citizens that is not determined by the agendas of governments, organisations, media or administrative powers. These discourses occur through non-commercial online forums that facilitate the global culture of resistance.
Exchange and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims	Exchange and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims refer to rational and critical discourse that enables individuals to critique topics and statements deliberately. This allows reasoning and justification to occur and excludes assertive assumptions; participants openly exchange and challenge the validity of claims made.
Reflexivity	Reflexivity refers to the awareness and transformation of an individual's state, particularly in considering a better argument that challenges the individual's values, traditions and interests.
Ideal role-taking	Ideal role-taking refers to participants' listening to others involved in the dialogue and considering their perspectives. This practice demonstrates the participant's commitment to understanding different viewpoints, developing a respectful and meaningful relationship.
Sincerity	Sincerity refers to discursive participants making known their true intentions, needs and interests through disclosing information about the relevant problem being considered. It is the practice of making a sincere effort to reveal the true nature of their identity and reason for participating.
Discursive inclusion and equality	Discursive inclusion and equality refer to the equal entitlement of participants to challenge any claim or assertion made; inclusiveness can be limited through the restraint of access and dominant players preventing voices from being heard.

As outlined in Table 3.6, when all the conditions are present, an ideal online public sphere will exist (Shaw 2014:154), where members of the organisation can participate in building online OPRs on behalf of an organisation (Dahlberg 2001:3).

The following subsection explores techniques to cultivate online OPRs through social media.

3.5.2 Cultivating online organisation–public relationships through social media

PR professionals who manage online OPRs activities have to understand two PR concepts, namely: being a social mediator or facilitator between the organisation and its online public, and being able to sustain mutually-beneficial online OPRs (Himmelboim et al 2014:364).

Establishing online OPRs is a multifaceted, complicated operation and sustaining them requires continual examination of the expectations involved (Vanlentini et al 2016:4060). Online OPRs strategies are unsuccessful if the PR professional fails to identify critical online groups that can support the organisation's goals (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:33). Therefore, an organisation's approach to online OPRs is influenced by what its principal focus

is; for example, its identification of its online public is based on prioritising contemporary topics, issues or rhetoric (Valentini et al 2016:4059). From a social network perspective, organisations need to focus on connecting with online groups that are adjoining to them in the network; in other words, those in their clusters (Himmelboim et al 2014:364).

It takes time to gain popularity and attain a wide social network of online OPRs before the organisation can effectively influence its online publics' purchasing behaviour and build meaningful relationships (Kumar et al 2016:9). Organisations cannot merely observe online social networks but need to be actively involved in creating them. Online groups (known and unknown) can influence the organisation's behaviour, and interaction with known OPRs can positively impact the opinion of the general public in online public debates (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:222).

It is worth mentioning that online public discourse is often not constructive and involves conflicting opinions, rumours and unreliable information (Zeri 2014:1581). The limitations and concerns of online OPRs therefore include overcoming management's anxiety about and negative perceptions of social media (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:221). Online OPRs require continuous commitment from management to integrate the issues raised into the internal decision-making process (Navarro et al 2017:3). PR professionals cannot use traditional methods to manage online OPRs because their usefulness as a PR tool lies in the opportunity they afford for spontaneous engagement and online dialogue to take place (Grunig 2009:6). Organisational management perceives social media interactions as an invitation to open criticism; however, PR professionals can use these discourses to correct misinformation and generate support for a specific cause (Tankosic et al 2016:293). Organisations tend to be slow in responding to online OPR queries, as managing active online OPRs conversations in the network is time-consuming, and engaging in numerous conversations concurrently places a considerable demand on the organisation's human resources (Kang 2013:186; Cunningham 2010:112).

PR professionals who develop content to sustain online OPRs can integrate public values into online messages in order to invoke consistent relevance or familiarity in the public's thoughts (Kang 2013:186). Organisations and players in the online social network can gain more legitimacy when the content seems relevant to the public in the network (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:222). PR professionals need to focus on designing relevant messages that involve individuals in conversations (Cunningham 2010:113).

PR professionals should not make individual decisions based on their subjective perceptions of what messages to publish and what online activities to perform; instead, they need to establish objective justification attained from research and understanding the public's needs

(Navarro et al 2017:7). Monitoring behavioural patterns in social networks is critical in forming online advocacy strategies; this includes monitoring the nature and frequency of organisational messages that prompt users to promote certain values in their network (Luo & Jiang 2012:64). In relation to the evaluation and measuring of online OPRs, PR professionals need to use quantitative methods to prove that their efforts are accomplishing the organisation's relational objectives, as well as using rationale profiling to analyse online groups' cognitive behaviour and determine the reasoning behind their intentions or expectations (Luo & Jiang 2012:70).

If the quality of online OPRs is measured through online PR activities, then mechanisms need to be established to identify online group salience and involvement in the decision-making process so that the activities are justified (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:224). Social media analytics monitor various criteria of online OPRs, namely the number of followers, impressions, re-posts, clicks, comments, visits and views (Luo & Jiang 2012:62).

The next section provides a brief summary of this chapter.

3.6 SUMMARY

OPRs are a significant theoretical foundation for understanding how organisations interact with and engage in sustained communication with their public. The literature proposed that an organisation enhances its license to operate by establishing meaningful communication that builds quality relationships with its public. OPRs are developed in three stages: the first stage is to identify the antecedents of relationships or, in other words, the pre-conditions that stimulate the development of specific OPRs; the antecedents selected for this study are expectation, trustworthiness, interdependency and cultural norms. The second stage of developing OPRs is to construct relationship cultivation strategies, which are the organisation's behavioural efforts to create and sustain mutually beneficial relationships with its key publics. The third stage of developing OPRs is to measure the level of the relationship quality outcomes that result from the relationship cultivation strategies (the ultimate relational goals of the organisation). The outcomes measured should include trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction.

The literature ascertained that PR professionals use ICTs to cultivate active online OPRs by using social media as a strategic interaction tool. It was discovered that critical PR encourages PR professionals to become PR activists in their organisations. These PR activists would use social media as a tool to facilitate debates, encourage both dialogue and dissent, and call for input from the online public. PR professionals practising digital activism are radical change agents, motivated to address and resolve societal issues through collaborative efforts on social networks. These PR professionals would share information online to expose corruption or unethical practice in power structures, and would encourage resistance to corrupt or unethical

agendas and projects. They would establish active online OPRs on social media to challenge the initiatives dominant power structures and would attempt to educate marginalised online societies on new ways of critical thinking.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the research methodology that was used to explore the role of critical PR in online OPRs in the Middle East (Coombs & Holladay 2012:880; Dolea 2017:176; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40; Luo & Jiang 2012:57; Tankosic et al 2016:290).

Research methodology is the application of scientific methods that the researcher uses systematically to obtain relevant knowledge, in this case, about building online OPRs in the Middle East (Pandey & Pandey 2015:8). The research took a predominantly explorative approach as empirical research was conducted with PR professionals in the Middle Eastern region (Habib et al 2014:7; Marshall 2011:1). It was assumed that PR professionals from the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) and from leading listed Middle Eastern organisations had adequate knowledge about critical PR and online OPRs (Marshall 2011:1). It was also presumed that these PR professionals played a vital role in building online relationships in the region (Yousef 2004:1).

This chapter addresses the practical nature of the study's methodology and how it pertained to the interpretative research paradigm. It justifies the use of quantitative and qualitative research approaches in order to adopt triangulation as a preferred research design for this study. According to Dawson (2002:20), triangulation identifies potential weaknesses in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The sampling design of the research is explained through specific focus on the unit of analysis, population, sampling frame and sampling methods. Next, the chapter records how data was collected from three sources: existing literature, a quantitative web-based survey questionnaire, and qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed in order to show that a moral standard was upheld to protect the participants' interests in this study.

4.2 METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Methodological orientation is a crucial process that utilises relevant concepts and practices to outline specific guidelines for planning the direction of the research study (Velásquez, Granada & Marin 2016:53). Methodological orientation can also be described as both a set of techniques that support a research study and how best to use them (Walliman 2011:1). Methodological orientations involve a complex mixture of methods, measures and perspectives to orientate a meaningful research study (Neale & Strang 2015:123).

As this study is explorative in nature, the next subsections discuss this concept and elaborate on the interpretative research paradigm.

4.2.1 Exploratory study

The researcher takes the view that research is a scientific process that expands familiarity with a phenomenon, or discovers new understandings of it, and its purpose is to plan a procedure whereby hidden truth is discovered through exploration (Pandey & Pandey 2015:9). The term “exploratory study” refers to a procedure whereby new ideas and concepts are explored according to models, hypotheses and empirical evidence (Habib et al 2014:7). The purpose of an exploratory study is to engage in a topic so that the researcher becomes familiar with the topic and determines what type of questions to ask in order to select the appropriate type of measurement (Donley 2012:48). The point of an exploratory study is to attain relevant information to help the researcher to form a hypothesis about the topic being researched, which is transformed into the research problem (Habib et al 2014:7). The principal objective of an exploratory study is to construct contributing relationships between variables, allowing the researcher to explain the relationship between them (Mayer 2015:53).

An exploratory study is also referred to as “empirical research”, whereby the research is understood as an application to solve problems (Pandey & Pandey 2015:8). The evidence that is generated from empirical research is “data” (facts or things that are used as a foundation for reckoning) based on observation or experience (Habib et al 2014:7). The nature of empirical research is that it is a goal-oriented technique that utilises systematic and formal processes to conduct scientific analysis (Pandey & Pandey 2015:8). Careful and systematic observation is essentially the guiding principle for an empirical approach, and experimentation provides the researcher with data that can be used as evidence to obtain new knowledge (Godwill 2015:12).

This research explored the role of critical PR and how it contributed to online OPRs in the Middle East. The study measured the degree to which critical PR supported PR professionals in building online relationships via social media.

The next subsection elaborates on the interpretative research paradigm.

4.2.2 Interpretative research paradigm

According to Faris (2015:186), “paradigms” are “all-encompassing systems of interrelated practice and thinking that define the nature of their enquiry”. Mayer (2015:54) acknowledges that a researcher’s philosophical paradigm can be determined along three dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology. In this regard, “ontology” signifies assumptions about the nature of the truth that is to be investigated, as well as the existing knowledge of it (Faris 2015:186). The term “epistemology” to the expectations that exist in the relationship between the researcher (knower) and what knowledge is understood (Mayer 2015:54). The

term “methodology” is described as how the researcher researches what is accepted and known (Faris 2015:186).

Anney (2014:272) mentions that there is a variety of philosophical paradigms, including positivist paradigms (objectivistic stance), critical paradigms (criticising current beliefs) and interpretative paradigms (multiple realities). Quantitative research is primarily linked to the positivist paradigm, which accepts that the enquiry findings are based on a single reality (Anney 2014:276; Kielmann, Cataldo & Seeley 2012:7).

The positivist paradigm proposes that reality is something tangible that can be objectively measured (Grosu 2014:492; Kielmann et al 2012:7). Knowledge from the perspective of the positivist paradigm is derived from scientific methods (experiments or comparative analysis); knowledge is therefore built on the accumulation of scientific facts (Walliman 2011:21). The positivist paradigm can be understood to be a detached epistemology that focuses on stable realities, such as external laws and mechanisms that govern social situations (Faris 2015:186; Morrow 2005:251).

Qualitative research is linked to the critical and interpretive paradigm, also known as “critical reality”, as it utilises analytical reasoning techniques (Walliman 2011:24). Like the positive paradigm, critical reasoning recognises the existence of natural order, suggesting that the order cannot be detected only through observation but needs to be discovered through the process of interpretation (Walliman 2011:24). The critical theory paradigm aims to increase consciousness about subjects like power and oppression, with a specific focus on the potential to create change (Morrow 2005:253). The critical paradigm embraces subjectivity and rejects universal theories (Grünig 2011:13). The characteristic of the critical paradigm is to denounce meta-narratives and existing beliefs, meanings, knowledge and truths (Walliman 2011:23; Butler 2002:15).

The interpretive paradigm is based on interactional epistemology, relating to subjective experiences of the world (Faris 2015:186). The ontological acceptance of the interpretive paradigm is that there are multiple realities that can be partially identified through bias and sentimental approaches (Kielmann et al 2012:7). The interpretive paradigm maintains that an individual’s view of the world is based on a creation of the mind, and that experiences are shaped through perceptions that are influenced by preconditions, beliefs and values (Walliman 2011:22). The investigator discovers a realm that has been explained previously and is therefore required, first, to reveal the meaning that has already been created (Walliman 2011:22). Hence, the interpretive paradigm upholds the perspective that there are multiple explanations for any given incident (Walliman 2011:22).

Qualitative research attempts to explain rather than to describe, that is, has an interpretive approach to understanding what is going on (Kielmann et al 2012:7). This study's philosophical position leans towards an interpretive paradigm (Mayer 2015:54). The literature was interpreted to form a foundation of knowledge for the study and the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research methods were also interpreted (Mayer 2015:54).

The next section discusses the research design and provides insight into quantitative and qualitative research methods. It explores the differences between these two research methods and discusses triangulation as the critical research strategy for this study.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

"Research" is defined as a systematic investigation to acquire new knowledge of existing truths (Pandey and Pandey 2015:7; Walliman 2011:7). Godwill (2015:48) suggests that "research design" can be described as a conceptual construction extracted from the research hypothesis on how research is conducted. The research design is recognised as the master plan of the research (Kuada 2012:49). It is the blueprint that acts as a guide (Habib et al 2014:16), it is also perceived to be an action plan for the research (Kuada 2012:57) or a type of framework that acts as a systematic procedure guiding the process of gathering and examining evidence (Pandey & Pandey 2015:18). There are a variety of research designs available to the researcher; ultimately, the nature or issues of the research influence the decision in selecting which design is most suitable (Walliman 2011:9). The research design establishes a logical order that connects the research questions to the approach adopted to address the questions (Godwill 2015:48), it also provides a clear direction on how the data was collected, analysed and presented (Kuada 2012:57; Vogt et al 2012:9).

According to Mligo (2016:144) and Walliman (2011:1), the research design needs to answer four key questions:

- a. What approach was used in the research and why?
- b. What theoretical framework was used?
- c. From whom was data collected and how?
- d. What ethical issues were taken into consideration when collecting the data?

A good research design minimises bias, maximises reliability and the generalisation of information, and gives the smallest experimental error (Pandey & Pandey 2015:120).

The next section focuses explicitly on both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. After that, the differences between these two approaches are explained as a foundation to triangulation, which was the preferred research design for this study.

4.3.1 Quantitative research

Mayer (2015:56) proposes that the term “quantity” refers to an approach that measures and counts, which underscores the purpose of quantification, specifically in the area of data collection and analysis. Researchers who seek to produce generalisable knowledge from their research tend to use quantitative data collection methods and techniques (Kuada 2012:115). Researchers who uphold a philosophical position, who view reality objectively and have a positivist epistemology, generally subscribe to utilising quantitative data collection methods (Kuada 2012:115). In the paradigm of quantitative research, the investigator attains new information and truth about the issue under investigation (Mayer 2015:56).

“Quantitative research” can be defined as an approach that makes use of methodical observations to record and generalise about a phenomenon (Allen, Titsworth & Hunt 2009:6). Quantitative research means that the measurements need to be objective and statistically valid (Habib et al 2014:8). Researchers utilising quantitative research are generally concerned with the methods of generalisation, where an occurrence or circumstance can be extrapolated to a larger population (Allen et al 2009:3). It is essentially an enquiry into a recognised issue and is based on challenging theory, measuring numbers, and analysis using statistical techniques (Habib et al 2014:8). Researchers may use quantitative research to scientifically quantify the world in which they live (Donley 2012:17). Quantitative research asks the questions, how long, how many or to what degree (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:8).

With regard to quantitative research conducting systematic observation, this observation needs to be intentional, replicable and valid (Allen et al 2009:6). “Intentionality” refers to the researcher being able to focus on the observation; “replicability” is a unique aspect of arguments advanced by quantitative researchers as it refers to the credibility of the findings, in other words, a different investigator needs to be able to use comparable or precisely the same methods, and detect comparable or precisely the same results (Allen et al 2009:6); “validity” refers to the credibility of interpreting the data so that the findings represent the actual world that was studied (Yin 2016:88).

Two commonly used quantitative methods are conducting experiments and administering surveys (Donley 2012:17). Both these methods ultimately produce data that can be stored, classified or measured (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:11). Quantitative research uses structured techniques that anticipate a restricted set of responses (standardised scales) and produce data that can be quantified (Bekhet & Zauszniewski 2012:40; Kielmann et al 2012:13). Quantitative research is the process of collecting and converting data into numbers that can be analysed using mathematical procedures and statistical methods (Habib et al 2014:8; Walliman 2011:72).

It is worth mentioning that most valuable information cannot be reduced to numbers, as researchers utilising quantitative research may seek to measure the incidence of various views and opinions in a chosen sample or aggregate results (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:8; Walliman 2011:71).

The next subsection explores aspects of qualitative research.

4.3.2 Qualitative research

According to Walliman (2011:24), researchers who subscribe to qualitative research have a critical position and interpretive epistemology. Qualitative researchers interpret the world through a series of representations; they attempt to interpret or describe a shifting social phenomenon where individuals are continuously producing different meanings (Habib et al 2014:9; Mayer 2015:56). As qualitative research is linked to the critical paradigm, researchers utilising this methodology have increased awareness of the subjects of power and oppression with a specific focus on creating change (Morrow 2005:253). According to Mayer (2015:58), the area of qualitative research is continually developing and is becoming more sophisticated and less structured.

In contrast to quantitative research, which attempts to produce a broad generalisation of a phenomenon, qualitative research focuses on describing the details to understand the social phenomenon (Vito, Tewksbury & Kunselman 2014:171). The term “qualitative” relates to the quality or character of something (Hales 2010:38). Qualitative research methods are interested in asking “why” questions that aim to describe a topic rather than measure it (Allen et al 2009:3). Qualitative research is interested in understanding people’s attitudes, behaviour, beliefs, experiences, motivations, opinions, perceptions, reactions, social situations and values (Godwill 2015:15; Hales 2010:38). Qualitative research aims to understand how an individual interprets a particular incident (Vito et al 2014:172). Qualitative research places a significant focus on the individual's personal experience of the issue being studied (Habib et al 2014:9). Qualitative research methods are particularly interested in gaining in-depth knowledge about the reasoning and motivations of an individual’s actions (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:8; Vito et al 2014:172). Qualitative research methods attempt to understand what it is like to be somebody in a specific situation, and therefore provide insights into the setting of a problem that creates specific ideas (Donley 2012:52; Kielmann et al 2012:13; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:8). A qualitative research method requires fewer individuals than a quantitative method as it focuses more on attaining in-depth opinions of participants, which tends to require more time for the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Godwill 2015:15).

Qualitative research methods are typically expressed in words or pictures that produce textual data (Kielmann et al 2012:13; Pandey & Pandey 2015:11) that are not intended to be measured

or expressed in numbers (Bekhet & Zauszniewski 2012:40; Hales 2010:38). The qualitative data are human interpretations of specific observations generated through interviews or analysis (Bekhet & Zauszniewski 2012:40; Walliman 2011:73). An individual's credo, experiences, senses and thoughts are best explained through syntax, therefore interpretation of situations is a form of qualitative data that is descriptive (Walliman 2011:72). Qualitative research methods provide the researcher with a rich and subtle insight into human society as they are mainly inductive in nature (Donley 2012:107; Walliman 2011:72).

Researchers start with data collection, which guides them to theory formulation, which occurs only after the research (Donley 2012:107). Examples of qualitative data include reflective notes, manuscripts, written stories, summaries, ancient archives, letters and reality shows (Walliman 2011:73). These qualitative data require a specific type of coding, which needs to be conducted in a valid and reliable manner (Elo et al 2014:5).

Qualitative methods do have specific negative issues such as the researcher taking a subjective approach in interpreting the participant's experience, which makes it challenging to differentiate between the facts and interpretations (Mayer 2015:57).

There are five major types of qualitative philosophies (Godwill 2015:15):

- a. Phenomenology (research that attempts to understand how a phenomenon is being experienced).
- b. Ethnography (describes the culture of an ethnic group).
- c. Case study research (a detailed account of one or more cases in society).
- d. Grounded theory (data collected from a researcher are used to generate and develop a theory).
- e. Historical research (events that occurred in the past).

This study aims to understand the role of critical PR in online OPRs in the Middle East, so the phenomenology technique was applied.

The next subsection elaborates on the differences between the quantitative and qualitative research approaches.

4.3.3 Differences between qualitative and quantitative research

According to Morse and Niehaus (2016:66), quantitative and qualitative research have significant differences, including:

- analysis;
- concepts;
- conclusions;
- data produced;
- how the researcher thinks about the project;
- measures;
- procedures;
- purposes;
- question types;
- samples;
- tools; and
- types of rules.

Table 4.1 discusses the significant distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research (Allen et al 2009:4; Anney 2014:273; Habib et al 2014:9; Hales 2010:39; Kielmann et al 2012:19; Kuada 2012:115; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:9; Mayer 2015:56).

Table 4.1: The differences between qualitative and quantitative research

Quantitative research	Qualitative research
The epistemological orientation is positivism; there is only one reality, which can be manipulated and separated into common parts.	The epistemological orientation is both critical and subjective; there are multiple realities, which are created through interpretation and interrelated.
The ontological orientation is objectivism.	The ontological orientation is constructivism.
There is an independent connection between the investigator and the object; the investigator needs to remain separated from the subject matter.	The researcher and participant depend on each other; each is influenced by the other; the researcher's role is to spend time with the subject matter.
Develops nomothetic knowledge; an enquiry produces truth that can be used as a generalised belief.	Develops idiographic knowledge; there is no absolute truth and enquiries cannot produce a generalised belief.
The purpose is generalisation, statistical comparison and evaluation of assumptions.	The purpose is to select rich information and attain relevant opinions.
The testing of theory is largely causal and used deductively; produces, enlarges and improves ideas by methodical examination.	The testing of theory is either causal or noncausal; it is frequently used inductively; the theory is broadened by connecting with individuals or groups in their usual surroundings.
The researcher uses tools such as surveys to collect numerical data; operational variables are created through surveys.	Interviews, reflective observations and other techniques allow the researcher access to individuals' accounts and stories; the researcher is the research data gathering instrument.
The concepts are organised and have unique variables.	The concepts are organised as topics, statements and categories.
The measures are typically mechanical in nature as they are constructed before gathering information.	The measures are typically formulated on demand and are customised to the person and moment.
The selection process consists mainly of identifying a large number of samples that are randomly selected to represent the population of interest.	The selection process consists of identifying a relatively small number of respondents who are purposefully selected for the sample based on their experience.
The questions are mainly structured questions.	The question types include a broad range of questioning.
Data are presented as numerical digits for accurate assessments.	Data are presented as words or pictures.
The research procedures are systematic, and reproduction can be easily conducted.	The research procedures are specific, and reproduction is uncommon.
The analysis develops through the examination of numerical values and by relating them to the hypotheses.	The analysis develops through establishing categories/themes from the manuscripts, which enable the researcher to build a stronger case in presenting a consistent concept.
The conclusions are established by identifying connections among the variables that will most likely not change.	The conclusions are reflective and grounded in the words and behaviours of the participants.

From Table 4.1, it can be inferred that the core purpose of quantitative research is to focus on recognising and statistically relating relationships between variables, whereas qualitative

research is focused on recognising and explaining patterns in situations and individuals (Anney 2014:272; Vito et al 2014:173).

Quantitative research is “nomothetic and etic” (following systematic methods of gaining knowledge from large samples of people), whereas qualitative research is “idiographic and emic” (finding patterns of meaning from a small group of individuals being studied) (Morrow 2005:251).

Quantitative research aims to generate data that consists of numbers, whereas qualitative information is presented as text and pictures; it also attempts to understand the meanings behind the numbers (Donley 2012:39).

Quantitative and qualitative research methods allow the researcher to make different types of claims (Allen et al 2009:5). The methodological assumptions have a distinct difference as the quantitative approach attempts to quantify the phenomena, and the qualitative approach considers the level of abstraction, complexity and scope (Morse & Niehaus 2016:66).

The measurements are also different, as quantitative variables differ in degree or amount (for example, number of social media posts) and qualitative variables vary in type (an example is either nationality or gender) (Godwill 2015:13).

How these two research approaches analyse data is also very different: quantitative data are analysed statistically, and qualitative data are coded and analysed for themes or patterns (Vito et al 2014:172; Donley 2012:39).

Qualitative research has been criticised as not being scientific or objective, and that the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population; it does, however, produce a profound understanding of the social phenomena, which quantitative research cannot produce (Donley 2012:39). Useful qualitative research findings produce clarity so that the reader can clearly and accurately understand what is being described or discussed (Vito et al 2014:172).

In the context of this study, both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in support of the strategic intent for triangulation (Kielmann et al 2012:20).

The next subsection discusses triangulation as a strategic technique to enhance the validity, reliability and credibility of the study.

4.3.4 Triangulation: combining quantitative and qualitative research

According to Kennedy-Clark (2012:6), “triangulation” can be understood to be a technique that utilises multiple data sources. Triangulation refers to a technique of utilising numerous sources in research in order to collect an adequate variety of data on the same topic (Downward & Mearman 2007:80; Kielmann et al 2012:16; Mayer 2015:59; Morse & Niehaus 2016:10;

Walliman 2011:73). Triangulation combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to produce data to gain multiple perspectives (Godwill 2015:15; Hales 2010:38; Kennedy-Clark 2012:6). Triangulation is also sometimes referred to as mixed-method design that produces multiple data sources (Kuada 2012:121; Morrow 2005:255). Each research method utilised in triangulation needs to be continuously conducted and needs to be able to stand alone (Morse & Niehaus 2016:52). By utilising a variety of methods to collect data, the researcher can determine whether a convergent picture emerges (Baarends & Van der Klink 2017:4).

The purpose of triangulation is to:

- capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon (Kielmann et al 2012:16);
- enhance the interpretive status of the evidence (Morrow 2005:256);
- enhance the reliability of the analysis and research findings (Hales 2010:13; Mayer 2015:59);
- produce a multifaceted set of data (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:71);
- promote rigour and develop a deeper meaning of the data (Brown, Ryan, Thorpe, Markle, Hutchison & Glazier 2015:194; Morrow 2005:255);
- reduce the weakness of utilising just one method and reinforce the results of the study (Bekhet & Zauszniewski 2012:41; Morse & Niehaus 2016:10);
- tell the full story in an area of enquiry (Vogt et al 2012:14);
- test for consistency (Kuada 2012:120); and
- test for validity by identifying certain phenomena where the information is similar from the various sources (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville 2014:545; Kielmann et al 2012:16).

Scholars have identified different kinds of triangulation, some of which are data triangulation, investigator triangulation, methodological triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Table 4.2 provides a brief description of these types of triangulation (Anney 2014:277; Bekhet & Zauszniewski 2012:40; Carter et al 2014:545; Downward & Mearman 2007:81; Guion et al 2011:1; Hales 2010:13-16; Kennedy-Clark 2012:6; Mayer 2015:59; Pitre & Kushner 2015:284-5).

Table 4.2: Different types of triangulation

Triangulation type	Description
Data triangulation	Data triangulation is when the researcher makes use of numerous data sources in one study. Different sampling approaches are used to collect data from various people at different times. It makes use of a diverse group of informants to improve the standard of the data collected in the study. It provides multiple perspectives and supports the validation of data. Any vulnerability in the data can potentially be balanced by the vigour of the other data sources; this improves the validity and reliability of the findings. It decreases the threat of incorrect explanations and improves deductions about the results.
Investigator triangulation	Investigator triangulation is when several researchers undertake a study on a specific occurrence. Other researchers participate in collecting and interpreting data. Collectively, the researchers offer a wealth of viewpoints and results. Another example is when scientific experimenters attempt to replicate each other's work. The credibility of findings is significantly increased, especially when researchers conduct independent studies and do not work together before confirming similar findings. It strengthens the integrity of the findings and decreases bias.
Methodological triangulation	Methodological triangulation means that several methods are used in a single study. It may also combine quantitative and qualitative research methods, also known as mixed-methods research. It is beneficial in establishing validation of findings, inclusive information, improved validity and enhanced understanding. It reduces insufficiencies and prejudices that are generated through utilising only a single method. The strengths of one research method may benefit the study in comparison to the weaknesses of the other. The findings from one method are utilised to improve, supplement and explain the findings of the other.
Theory triangulation	Theory triangulation is when several theories are utilised to explain the results of a study. It implies that there are multiple theoretical viewpoints when explaining the data. It makes use of a variety of theories to analyse and interpret data. Different theories as analytical frameworks provide a variety of viewpoints about the research phenomena. Different theoretical perspectives generate deeper understandings and explanations. This method permits various disciplinary perspectives.

This study applies the methodological triangulation described in Table 4.2, specifically the between-method approach, whereby both quantitative and qualitative research methods are used to decrease the deficiencies produced from using only a single method (Hales 2010:14). This study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to produce a multifaceted set of data, whereby one method informs the other (Vogt et al 2012:14). A quantitative survey produced numeric data that was utilised to produce specific insights into the population (Vogt et al 2012:14); this frame of knowledge was then used to inform the qualitative research method, which was in the form of semi-structured interviews (Vogt et al 2012:14).

As a strategy for this study, methodological triangulation reinforced validity and credibility in generating new insights from the PR professional's situation (Guion et al 2011:1; Hales

2010:18). Triangulation provides a deeper understanding of the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs in the Middle East, it also increases confidence in the research data and helps the researcher produce rich, insightful data to support PR professionals in developing online OPRs (Hales 2010:18).

The next section describes the sampling design and identifies the unit of analysis, population, sampling frame and sample. It also discusses the two sampling methods used in this study, which were purposive and convenience sampling.

4.4 SAMPLING DESIGN

Sampling design addresses the core concern about selecting an adequate sample from a population that is appropriate for the research question (Vogt et al 2012:6).

The following subsection focuses on identifying the unit of analysis for this study.

4.4.1 Unit of analysis

There is a distinct relationship between the research question and the unit of analysis, as the unit of analysis is identified based on an assessment of the research question (Elo et al 2014:5). The unit of analysis refers to what or who is being researched (Donley 2012:89). It is essential to identify a suitable unit of analysis to ensure credibility, as a broad unit of analysis may have vague meanings and a narrow unit of analysis may result in fragmentation (Elo et al 2014:5). There are different types of analysis unit, such as individuals, groups, specific groups, organisations, institutions, social interaction, social artefacts and events (Donley 2012:89; Kuada 2012:111).

To improve the integrity of this study, it was imperative to describe the unit that was being analysed carefully (Alvi 2016:10; Elo et al 2014:5), as the most suitable unit of analysis needed to have adequate knowledge and understanding of online OPRs (Elo et al 2014:4). This study focused on PR professionals to quantify and explore the role of critical PR in online OPRs; the unit of analysis was therefore PR professionals.

The following subsection describes the population and sampling frame for this study.

4.4.2 Population, sampling frame and sample

According to Ruane (2016:232), a research population can be defined as the whole collection of people, groups, organisations, places or things that the researcher intends to study. The term “population” is also known as the “universe” that represents the entire mass of the observations; it is also understood to be the parent group from which a sample is selected (Pandey & Pandey 2015:40). A population can be described as the overall list of elements or

characteristics from which a sample is derived (Donley 2012:92). The population was carefully considered in order to capture a comprehensive portion of the representatives that were researched (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:12).

For the purpose of this study, the population was PR professionals in the Middle East region, represented by the following countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates (Angrist 2013:2; Freitag & Stokes 2009:163). The study had a heterogeneous population, as it contained a variety of business sectors, which are typically characterised by great diversity (Alvi 2016:10; Ruane 2016:234). As the core focus of this study was on online OPRs, it was assumed that the common characteristic that defined this population was that the PR professionals would have knowledge of managing online OPRs in Middle Eastern organisations (Pandey & Pandey 2015:41; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26).

A sampling frame is defined as a complete index of all the elements in the research population (Donley 2012:92; Ruane 2016:184). It can be understood to be the genuine list of sampling units from which the sample is taken (Vito et al 2014:116). A sampling frame is a smaller group that represents the entire population or universe; identifying it serves as a selection technique that allows the researcher to acquire reliable information about the entire population (Pandey & Pandey 2015:40). A sampling frame is a specific number of units of analysis taken from the specified population as a depiction of the population (Pandey & Pandey 2015:41). The sampling frame is identified in a manner that maximises the amount of relevant information required from the population (Chen, Lu, Dong, Wu, Zhu, Li, Chen & Li 2016:1480).

For this study, two sampling frames were used; the first was PR professionals from MEPRA for the quantitative web-based questionnaire, and the second sampling frame was PR professionals from leading listed Middle Eastern organisations taken from the Middle East Business Intelligence index (see Addendum A) for the qualitative one-on-one interviews (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37).

A sample is defined as the members of the sampling frame that was selected to be surveyed (Fricker 2008:198); in other words, it is the actual sample drawn from the sampling frame (Donley 2012:92; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:12). The sample is also known as a smaller subset of the research population (Bertail, Chautru & Clémenton 2017:97; Ruane 2016:232). The researcher draws data from the sample that represents the larger population (Vito et al 2014:115). The actualised sample must have the required knowledge to represent the broader population that is being studied (Allen et al 2009:7; Cohen et al 2018:202; Morse & Niehaus

2016:65). This allows the researcher to draw conclusions concerning the population on the grounds of the results attained from the selected sample (Habib et al 2014:29; Vito et al 2014:115).

The following were concerns that influenced the sample for this study (Alvi 2016:10; Cohen et al 2018:203; Fricker 2008:202; Morse & Niehaus 2016:64):

- The participants needed to be senior PR professionals who operated in a comparable area, in particular: corporate communication, marketing communication, internal or external communication, digital communication, public affairs, public information, stakeholder relations, media relations or advertising.
- For the quantitative web-based questionnaire, the MEPRA network was utilised; however, the sample was not limited to the association's members but used its network to reach a larger sample of PR professionals in the region.
- Some of the listed organisations identified in the Middle East Business Intelligence index for the qualitative one-on-one interviews did not have in-house PR or communication departments. In this case, the researcher interviewed the senior PR professional in the agency.
- The participant selected to be part of the sample had to be willing to participate and to provide the required information.
- The participant had to have the available time to contribute to the study.
- There had to be a minimum sample size of 100 participants in the quantitative web-based questionnaire, as the literature suggests that this is the minimum number of cases that a researcher needs to conduct some form of statistical analysis.

MEPRA is a non-profit organisation established in Dubai Media City; it represents the interests of the Middle East PR industry; it is the region's leading forum for PR and communication professionals as well as students; and it plays a strategic role in promoting a set of standards for quality and ethical conduct (Freitag & Stokes 2009:171).

Addendum A identifies the Middle East Business Intelligence index and prioritises the largest 100 listed organisations in the Middle East. Taken as a complete snapshot of the Middle East, these organisations from various sectors represent a fair sampling frame of the most influential parts of the region's economy (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36). The index comprises 47 financial service firms, 12 chemical and construction firms, 10 telecom firms and businesses from several other sectors, such as transport, utilities, metals, mining and food. (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:37).

Out of the leading 100 organisations in the Middle East, 80 are located in the GCC, which emphasises the significant leadership role these organisations have in the broader Middle Eastern region (McGregor & Novarese 2016:13; Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37). It can be noted that Saudi Arabia dominates the list with 34 organisations out of the 100 positions (Middle East Financial Investment Company 2018:14).

Saudi Arabia is the largest market in the GCC and the broader Middle Eastern region; it is also one of the most powerful and influential driving forces behind the greater transformational changes in the Middle East (Guastella & Menghi 2016:4; Middle East Financial Investment Company 2018:14; Saif 2009:19; Williams 2016:2).

The following subsection defines the sampling methods used in this study.

4.4.3 Sampling methods

According to Alvi (2016:11), the process whereby a sample is extracted from the population is known as the sampling method. Of the two significant types of sampling method used to recruit participants to a study, the first is probability sampling, and the second is non-probability sampling (Habib et al 2014:29; Sedgwick 2013:1).

Probability sampling methods have their origins in quantitative research, where mathematical theory and statistical regularity is practised; they are used when the researcher selects a group of objects at random from a large group (population or universe) (Kielmann et al 2012:19; Pandey & Pandey 2015:42). Probability sampling is also known as random sampling, because the respondents are selected using some probabilistic mechanism (Habib et al 2014:30). This procedure allows every member in the population to have a similar probability of being chosen for the sample, which allows the researcher to generalise about the larger population, since the sample is a fair example of the entire population (Fricker 2008:198; Kielmann et al 2012:19).

Non-probability sampling methods (also known as purposive sampling) are generally used in qualitative research where the researcher's discretion is used to select people to be in the sample (Cohen et al 2018:225). Non-probability sampling occurs either when the researcher cannot determine the probability that every respondent was included in the sample (Habib et al 2014:31). When the probability of selecting any particular member is unknown or when it is left up to the respondent to choose to participate in the survey (Fricker 2008:198). The selection built into the non-probability sample cannot be generalised into the whole population; it can only represent itself (Cohen et al 2018:217; Alvi 2016:14).

For this study, the researcher selected members from MEPRA for the quantitative sample, and PR professionals from the Middle East Business Intelligence index for the qualitative sample.

These PR professionals in the Middle East did not have an equal opportunity to be selected (Donley 2012:94). The sampling method for this study was therefore a non-probability sample, which means that the results obtained from the selected PR professionals can only represent themselves and not be generalised as representing the whole Middle Eastern population (Cohen et al 2018:217).

The sampling techniques that were used in the non-probability method were purposive and convenience sampling techniques (Elo et al 2014:4). Little or no benefit would be derived from the researcher's utilising random probability sampling techniques if most of the random sample were unaware of the specific issues relating to online OPRs, as they could not provide insightful comments on the matter being researched (Cohen et al 2018:219).

The next subsection discusses the purposive sampling technique that was applied to this study.

4.4.3.1 Purposive sampling

According to Anney (2014:278), purposive sampling is used mainly in naturalistic enquiry studies such as qualitative research. Purposive sampling is also known as expert choice sampling or judgement sampling (Kielmann et al 2012:21; Pandey & Pandey 2015:56). The researcher needs to have specific knowledge about the population in order to conduct purposive sampling, as it takes specialised knowledge to intentionally hand-pick elements for the sample (Ruane 2016:234; Vito et al 2014:123). This sampling technique relies on the researcher's determining specific characteristics associated with the research study questions (Anney 2014:278; Kielmann et al 2012:21). The researcher selects the most productive sample of participants who can answer the researcher's questions; these participants will have sufficient experience and understanding of the topic being researched (Elo et al 2014:4; Donley 2012:96). Participants are intentionally selected because they are knowledgeable people who may provide the most information-rich data possible (Cohen et al 2018:219; Kuada 2012:111; Morrow 2005:255). Purposive sampling is used to obtain representativeness, enable comparisons, pay attention to specific issues, and generate theory through gathering data from different sources (Cohen et al 2018:218).

The purposive non-probability sampling method was applied to this study in two ways: Firstly, because the study is concerned with online OPRs in the Middle East, the researcher specially select a quantitative sample from MEPRA and a qualitative sample from the Middle East Business Intelligence list of the 100 largest organisations in the Middle East (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37). Secondly, the study is primarily based on a PR perspective, so only PR professionals were approached to participate in the study (Donley 2012:96).

The next subsection discusses the sampling technique that was applied to this study.

4.4.3.2 Convenient sampling

According to Sedgwick (2013:1), convenient or convenience sampling institutes non-probability (non-random) sampling techniques. Convenient sampling is also known as accidental, available or opportunity sampling (Habib et al 2014:32). As the name implies, the researcher uses this technique to create a sample based on finding convenient or readily available individuals (Ruane 2016:234). This type of sampling technique is conducive to self-selection (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad 2012:784; Ruane 2016:234).

Convenience sampling is exclusively based on:

- who is convenient (Pandey & Pandey 2015:53);
- available at a particular time (Habib et al 2014:32);
- easily accessible (Sedgwick 2013:1);
- willing to participate in the research (Kielmann et al 2012:21); and
- excludes those who are inconvenient (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad 2012:785).

The researcher advertises for participants to volunteer and invites those who meet the criteria (Morse & Niehaus 2016:64). Since the researcher selects the participants based on their availability and convenience, the overall population does not have an equal opportunity of being selected (Fricker 2008:199; Sedgwick 2013:1). There is an aspect of bias when the researcher conveniently selects the sample at any given time, and this is the major disadvantage of convenience sampling (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad 2012:785). The results acquired from such a sample cannot be generalised for the whole population; they are limited to the sample being studied, which therefore does not represent any group other than itself (Cohen et al 2018:218; Vito et al 2014:122). Although the results cannot be generalised, knowledge is still obtained, and the phenomenon being studied can still be better understood (Donley 2012:95).

Convenience sampling from the perspective of this study can be explained as PR professionals having the choice to volunteer to participate in the web-based survey or in the interviews; therefore the researcher conveniently included PR professionals who were willing to participate in the research in the sample (Pandey & Pandey 2015:54).

The next section discusses the two types of data collection method that were used in this study, a web-based survey and one-on-one interviews.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In exploratory research, there are a variety of instruments for data collection, some of which are case studies, explanations, historical analysis, surveys and interviews (Cohen et al 2018:198; Habib et al 2014:7). For this study, data collection was done in two phases: First, a web-based survey provided quantitative data; and, second, semi-structured one-on-one interviews provided qualitative data (Kuada 2012:114). Both the web-based survey and one-on-one interviews had an exploratory element, whereby new ideas and concepts were explored to define the nature of the problem (Kuada 2012:114).

The qualitative phase of the study followed the quantitative phase to allow the researcher to explore statistical findings from the quantitative phase, which permitted the researcher to encourage and discuss specific issues in more detail in the qualitative phase (Kielmann et al 2012:10).

Phase 1 of the data collection was a self-administered web-based survey, for which the researcher coordinated with MEPRA to distribute an online questionnaire to its members and an invitation to broader networks in the Middle East to participate (Cohen et al 2018:199; Donley 2012:25). Those who accepted the invitation could click on a link that automatically opened their internet browser to the SurveyMonkey webpage where the questionnaire was stored (Donley 2012:25; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18). The respondent was required to click on radio buttons to select the appropriate answers for each question and, at the end of each section, to click "submit" in order to proceed (Issa 2015:28). One of the major concerns in a web-based survey is an adequate response rate as the literature stipulates that, in order to conduct quantitative statistical analysis, at least 100 respondents must complete the web-based survey (Cohen et al 2018:203). The study gave the respondents four weeks to complete the survey and the researcher also conducted systematic follow-ups through emails and telephone calls to achieve the desired response rate (Donley 2012:25; Ruane 2016:183).

Phase 2 of the data collection was in the form of semi-structured one-on-one interviews that were supported by an interview guide. Due to geographical difficulties, PR professionals who had knowledge of online OPRs were interviewed telephonically (Cohen et al 2018:199). For the qualitative interviews, the researcher contacted each of the leading 100 organisations in the Middle East Business Intelligence index telephonically and enquired whether the PR professional would be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview (Cohen et al 2018:199). If the in-house PR professional or contracted PR agency agreed, a date and time were scheduled to conduct the semi-structured interview (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18).

The next subsection explains the quantitative data collection procedures used in this study.

4.5.1 Web-based survey

A web-based survey can produce both quantitative and qualitative information, depending on how it is designed and analysed (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:11). Web-based surveys are also known as self-administered questionnaires, which allow the researcher to distribute a list of questions to respondents (Habib et al 2014:36). A web-based survey can be used when the researcher requires broad representation or a large group of respondents to produce data to answer the research question (Cohen et al 2018:46; Vogt et al 2012:14). For this study, the web-based survey was developed and hosted on an online survey tool known as SurveyMonkey (Mi & Zhang 2017:134). Generally, the researcher distributes the web-based survey through email to invite respondents to participate in filling out the survey (Fricker 2008:202; Fricker 2008:195; Habib et al 2014:36).

A web-based survey was used in this study for the following reasons:

- saves time (Pandey & Pandey 2015:58);
- improves the representativeness of the sample (Issa 2015:26);
- cost-effective tool for conducting research (Kuada 2012:110);
- preserves the anonymity of the respondents (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:11);
- enhances productivity and participation (Shelton & Creghan 2015:93);
- overcomes the geographical difficulties of the respondents' being located in different Middle Eastern countries (Ruane 2016:184); and
- gives respondents sufficient time to think about their ideas during the less busy times of the day (Vogt et al 2012:16).

Assumptions derived from the literature review of critical PR and online OPRs were measured in the web-based survey against PR professionals in the Middle East. The researcher assumed that PR professionals in the Middle East placed value on managing their respective online OPRs and that they had existing strategies in place.

The next subsection discusses the design of the quantitative web-based survey.

4.5.1.1 The design of the web-based survey

The web-based survey was developed on an online platform known as SurveyMonkey, which allowed the researcher to design an online questionnaire (Mi & Zhang 2017:134). It also allowed the researcher to collect and store the respondents' data and to analyse the data in real-time, to produce graphs of the available information, and to download all data for further statistical analysis (Allen et al 2009:11; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18).

The following subsections focus on discussing the question types, response systems, questionnaire categories and methods that were used to heighten the standard of the questionnaire.

- **Question types in the web-based survey questionnaire**

The researcher used various questions in the web-based survey to discover specific patterns and behaviours, and each question measured something (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:15; Allen et al 2009:7). The researchers' aim was for all respondents to interpret each survey question in precisely the same way (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:15). The web-based survey therefore only used statements and closed-ended questions (Ruane 2016:169). Of the 41 items in the online survey, all were statements except for two prequalifying closed-questions.

Statements are used to determine the participant's attitude towards a specific issue being studied, and to allow the participants to judge the concept being presented and rate or measure it against a scale (Vito et al 2014:157). The 39 statements were written in the same sentence structure and the affirmative (Vito et al 2014:164).

Closed-ended questions provide pre-determined response options that reduce the freedom given to the respondents to obtain the respondent's position on a specific issue (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:14; Ruane 2016:169). The closed-ended questions were A1–A6 in the demographic data (Section A) and B1 in the developments of PR in the Middle East (Section B).

- **Response system**

The web-based survey for this study utilised the following response systems (Donley 2012:114; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:15; Ruane 2016:174; Walliman 2011:126):

- dichotomous responses (with only two response options);
- multiple-choice responses (with three or more response options); and
- the Likert scale (with a five-point rating scale).

There were five dichotomous response questions, two in the prequalifying questions section and two in the demographic data (Section A, questions A2–A3) and one in Section B, the developments of PR in the Middle East (question B1). These questions allowed the respondent to select from only two response options (Cohen et al 2018:198).

Multiple-choice responses allow respondents to select either only one or more than one option from the list of options (Walliman 2011:126). There were five multiple-choice response questions in the study, four from Section A, the demographic category (questions A1, A4–A6) and one from Section B, the developments of PR in the Middle East (question B4) (Ruane 2016:174).

The remaining 31 questions in the study utilised Rensis Likert's (1932) measurement known as the Likert scale, which is a closed-ended type of question that involves individuals' responding to a sequence of statements by indicating the intensity of their responses to a specific issue being investigated (Vito et al 2014:156). The Likert scale allows the researcher to measure concepts that are problematic to quantify or difficult to define clearly (Vito et al 2014:163). A five-point Likert scale was applied to evaluate the respondent's attitude to the issue being investigated (Altinay, Jang & Paraskevas 2016:242; Shelton & Creghan 2015:92). The five-point response options of the Likert scale in this web-based survey included "strongly agree", "agree", "undecided", "disagree" and "strongly disagree" (Seetaram, Gill & Dwyer 2012:217). The Likert scale allows the researcher to generate statistical analysis based on the idea that each point in the scale can be assigned a numerical value that can be measured statistically (Altinay et al 2016:248; Seetaram et al 2012:217).

- **Explanation of web-based survey questionnaire categories**

The web-based survey questionnaire was divided into the following five categories: prequalifying questions, demographic data, developments of PR in the Middle East, characteristics of critical PR, and online OPRs. It concluded with an acknowledgement of participation. Table 4.3 outlines and discusses the objectives of the categories, and the questions and statements in the questionnaire can be viewed in Addendum B.

Table 4.3: Outline and objectives of the web-based survey questionnaire categories

Page	Category or Sub-category	Objective of questionnaire category or sub-category
1	Prequalifying questions	<p>This category was for quality purposes, to ensure that the respondent aligned to the criteria of the unit of analysis and had adequate knowledge to answer the questionnaire. There were two prequalifying questions.</p> <p>The first question addressed the respondent's experience in PR. According to Pritchard and Smith (2015:35), there have been countless debates on what to call PR; some of the terms suggested are integrated marketing communications, public affairs, public information and marketing communications. A list of alternative terms for PR was provided in case a different term was used for PR in the respondent's country.</p> <p>The second question dealt with the respondent's experience with online relationships. According to Grunig (2009:1), PR professionals can utilise social communication channels, known as social media, to build online OPRs. The unit of analysis for this study required that the respondents had knowledge of both social media and online OPRs. If the respondent selected these two qualities (or answered Yes to both questions), then the respondent could proceed to Section A on page 2. If the respondent answered No to either of the questions, then the respondent was led to page 6 and could not participate.</p>
2	Section A: Demographic and biographic data	This category focused on measuring the demographic and biographic profile of the PR professional.
	Demographic	<p>This subcategory identified the specific Middle Eastern region where the respondent was located and in which sector (public/government or private) the PR professional was operating. It determined whether the PR professional was based in-house (in the organisation) or in an agency (providing PR services to an organisation). It also determined the PR professionals' current position, qualification and experience.</p> <p>According to Laskin (2012:364), the PR professional's knowledge and ability to act in a managerial role is critical in the effectiveness of the decision-making process. Grunig and Grunig (2008:335) suggested that the PR professional needs to have an empowered role in the organisation in order to raise concerns to the decision-makers' level. The insights from this category allowed the researcher to refer to the issues presented in Section 2.4 and provided more in-depth insight into the various views presented from either the private or government/public sector.</p>
3	Section B: Development of PR in the Middle East	<p>This category measured the impact of contemporary issues in the Middle East, with a specific focus on determining whether the respondent was aware of the country's national vision (transformational programmes) and the efforts to promote its agenda.</p> <p>The category provided the researcher with insight into the impact the country's national vision was having on the PR professionals. It also provided insight into which societal issues the organisation would be willing to discuss during an interview.</p>

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Page	Category or Sub-category	Objective of questionnaire category or sub-category
4	Section C: Characteristics of critical PR	<p>This category measured the characteristics of critical PR.</p> <p>According to Dolea (207:195), critical PR provides PR professionals with “a platform to advocate for a greater, social role for public relations both within organizations and society”. Prasad (2011:56) suggested that PR professionals must focus on social situations as a precondition for economic progress, as well as taking advice from social movements.</p> <p>The category therefore determined the degree to which the PR professionals were motivated to use social problem-solving strategies (Kim et al 2015:406). These insights provided the researcher with an understanding of the extent to which PR professionals were playing more of a social role in their organisations.</p>
	Activism	<p>This subcategory measured issues relating to the characteristics of activism.</p> <p>According to Dolea (2017:195), the PR professional should act as the PR activist in the organisation in order to influence the organisation's behaviour to improve its contribution to society. Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:60) stated that PR activists encourage ethical decision-making even when it causes resistance from the top management of the organisation. According to Werder (2015b:520), PR activists would attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public debates.</p> <p>These characteristics provided the researcher with insight into the extent to which PR activism was involved in building online OPRs.</p>
	Persuasion	<p>This subcategory measured issues relating to the characteristics of persuasion.</p> <p>According to Macagno and Walton (2008:205), PR professionals need to solve deadlocks by dealing with any conflict in the values of the organisation and the public. According to McCown (2007:47), PR activists resolve the conflict between the organisation and the public through initiating interactive communication on social media. Torp (2015:110) advised that trust is the precondition and aim of persuasion and that trust can be formed between the organisation and the public by using social media as a strategic tool.</p> <p>The awareness gained from this subcategory determined the level to which PR professionals were practising persuasion in online OPRs.</p>

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Page	Category or Sub-category	Objective of questionnaire category or sub-category
	Power	<p>This subcategory measured issues relating to the characteristics of power.</p> <p>The researcher gains an understanding of the dynamics involved with knowledge and power (Foucault 1980:52). According to Werder (2015b:512) and Antoniadis (2008:10), PR professionals use power to attain compliance. One way of doing this is through practising the positive coercion strategy of promise and reward (the sender's message controls the outcome desired by the receiver). The positive coercion strategy can occur when the PR professional promises to provide rewards to individuals who participate in their social media campaigns. PR activists are inclined to empower individuals through sharing knowledge on social media (Tankosic et al 2016:292).</p> <p>These characteristics provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the extent to which power and knowledge were used in online OPRs.</p>
5	Section D: Online organisation–public relationships	<p>This category examined online OPRs, which were defined as progressive networks where mutual expectations are created through the process of interactive communication. The category measured relationship-building elements, which included the level at which the organisation/agency developed preconditions as a foundation for build successful online relationships, and the level at which the organisation or agency was using cultivation strategies to online OPRs, as well as challenges in online OPRs.</p> <p>This provided the researcher with further knowledge to understand the efforts involved in OPRs and how PR professionals were utilising social media as a strategic tool to build them.</p>
	Antecedents to online OPRs	<p>This subcategory determined whether the respondent was aware of OPR antecedents.</p> <p>The insight from this subsection provided the researcher with confirmation of whether the pre-conditions that need to be in place to develop OPRs were present, including expectation, trustworthiness, interdependency and cultural norms (Dahlberg 2001:3; Shaw 2014:154; Tian & Chao 2012:460).</p>
	Strategies for online OPRs	<p>This subcategory explored social media as a strategic tool to develop online OPRs; it determined to what extent the PR professional was practising OPR cultivation strategies in order to build online OPRs.</p> <p>These strategies should include assuring public participation in the organisation or agency decision-making process, practising openness, stimulating the public and organisation or agency to discuss issues together, building social networks, allowing access and consent for employees to participate in social media enquiries about the organisation or agency (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:223; Stefanone et al 2010:511).</p> <p>The insight from this subcategory allowed the researcher to measure the OPR strategies being implemented.</p>

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Page	Category or Sub-category	Objective of questionnaire category or sub-category
	<i>Challenges in online OPRs</i>	This subcategory explored various challenges and barriers that affect the PR professional in building online OPRs (Tankosic et al 2016:293; Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:221). The insight from this subcategory allowed the researcher to identify critical areas that hindered the practice of online OPRs.
6	Acknowledgement of participation	This page acknowledged the participation of the PR professional and expressed thanks for making time to complete the questionnaire.

As Table 4.3 shows, the questions in each category were presented on one page in the questionnaire. The meaning of each category was clearly stated in the invitation, as well as at the top of each page, to ensure that the respondent was aware of what was expected (Mi & Zhang 2017:134; Pandey & Pandey 2015:58).

- **Quality of the web-based survey questionnaire**

According to Donley (2012:118) and Ruane (2016:186), a researcher can improve the quality of the web-based survey questionnaire by applying the following subsequent measures as part of the quality control process:

- seek the supervisor's feedback;
- utilise a statistical consultant to evaluate the questionnaire and measure its statistical accuracy;
- translate the questionnaire into the community language;
- conduct a pilot test to ensure the web-based survey links are working correctly; and
- utilise feedback from a panel of experts in the field.

A statistical consultant (view Addendum I for the statistical consultant's profile) evaluated the questionnaire for the following issues (Donley 2012:114; Greasley 2008:6; MacDonald & Headlam 2011:15; Pandey & Pandey 2015:58; Ruane 2016:186) – whether the researcher:

- had written good, easily understood questions and statements;
- had given clear directions;
- had clarified important terms;
- had ordered questions and statements from simple to complex;
- had asked objective questions and made objective statements;
- had asked no leading or loaded questions;
- had included no double negatives;
- had avoided adverbs;
- had avoided double-barrelled questions;
- had used common everyday language;
- had avoided jargon or acronyms;
- had asked brief and unambiguous questions and made brief, unambiguous statements;
- had avoided emotional questions and statements;
- had reviewed the formatting of the entire questionnaire; and
- had related the questions to the literature.

The questionnaire was also translated into Arabic (view the details of the translation services in Addendum K) as Arabic is the primary language in the Middle East (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:12). The questionnaire was displayed in both English and Arabic to improve the respondent's ability to understand each question (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:12). The translation was independently reviewed and scrutinised to ensure consistency and that a high-quality translation was presented to the respondents (Baarends & Van der Klink 2017:8).

A pilot test was conducted with a relevant group of co-workers (who were not a panel of experts), in order to identify any procedural issues and to collect feedback that would reveal any weaknesses in the instrument (Shelton & Creghan 2015:92). The pilot test results showed that there were no issues with the reliability and validity of the web-based survey. Furthermore, the pilot test was conducted on multiple devices to ensure that the web-based survey was working appropriately, all the links were tested and assessments were made to ensure that the text (English and Arabic) was visible to the user.

Lastly, before the survey was distributed to the population sample, the researcher carefully selected a panel of experts in the field of PR and communication (Donley 2012:118). These experts generally informed the researcher that they had a professional experience with the SurveyMonkey questionnaire and only identified minor language modifications.

The next subsection discusses the measurement levels utilised for this study.

4.5.1.2 Measurement levels

According to Donley (2012:89), the term "measurement" can be defined as a "process of assigning numbers to units of analysis to capture variable properties of those units". Measurement can also be referred to as the dimensions or quantity of something. It allows the researcher to translate abstract concepts into real numerical variables (Ruane 2016:103).

For this study, both nominal and ordinal measurement levels were used (Walliman 2011:73; Greasley 2008:7). Nominal measurements can be described as names or labels that are assigned to people or things (Donley 2012:89; Greasley 2008:7; Ruane 2016:105). Nominal measurements are also known as categorical variables because numbers are used to signify names or categories (Allen et al 2009:9; Cohen et al 2018:485; Donley 2012:89; Ruane 2016:256).

Nominal measurement was only utilised for ten items in the questionnaire (Cohen et al 2018:198). These included two prequalifying questions, six in Section A, the demographic data (questions A1–A6) and two in Section B, the developments of PR in the Middle East (questions B1 & B4).

The majority of the questions in the questionnaire used ordinal measurements (Allen et al 2009:9), which can be described as categories that can be prioritised from highest to lowest (Greasley 2008:7). The Likert scale was used as an ordinal level of measurement to rank the values of the variables (Ruane 2016:105; Walliman 2011:75).

The next subsection explains the quantitative data analysis procedures that were used in this study.

4.5.1.3 Quantitative data analysis

Godwill (2015:76) suggests that research is only meaningful once the researcher has analysed the data, which is a significant aspect of the study as it produces an outcome that either validates a hypothesis or refutes it. Quantitative data analysis correctly tests numerical data, using statistical processes to analyse their qualities, and the analysis of the data produced by the sample of the population measures the degree to which variables are comparable or different (Walliman 2011:122). The quantitative examination aims to evaluate, compare, observe relationships, forecast, verify hypotheses, construct ideas, explore, control and explain (Walliman 2011:113). Quantitative data can be described as bits of information that a researcher collects, and these raw materials of the research gain meaning only once they are analysed and interpreted (Walliman 2011:65). Quantitative data needs to be categorised and interpreted according to the requirements of the research to produce meaning (Habib et al 2014:39).

An exploratory factor analysis was used to measure variables from the 41 web-based survey items (Gatignon 2014:46). An exploratory factor analysis determines patterns that could assist in understanding the nature of the unobserved variables (Gatignon 2014:47). The procedure of exploratory factor analysis uses statistics to recognise underlying structures between the items that form the Likert scale (Allen et al 2009:179). This method also detects smaller sets of items that are appropriate to determine the higher-order construct (Weitzl 2017:164). It also tests whether the empirical findings are consistent (Weitzl 2017:211). Exploratory factor analysis is commonly known as a data reduction technique that allows the researcher to group items together to form factors (Hayasbi & Yuan 2010:459).

The following steps were implemented for the exploratory factor analysis (Allen et al 2009:180; Auerswald & Moshagen 2019:1; Forina, Armanino, Lanteri & Leardi 2005:1; Hayasbi & Yuan 2010:459; Kashani, Nikrava & Najafi 2018:1):

- The statistician identified all the 31 items relating to the Likert scale.
- The Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy criterion was used to select the number of factors to retain. Only factors having latent roots or eigenvalues greater than 1 were considered significant, and all factors with eigenvalues less than 1 were considered insignificant and disregarded.
- The Varimax rotation method was used to assist in interpreting the factor loadings. This method helps to identify the different factors and the items that correlate the most with the factors.
- The factor loadings were interrupted using a conservative criterion, where the primary loading was 0.7 and no secondary loadings were higher than 0.3.
- Lastly the factors were named and average values were calculated for the factors that included items for that factor.

Furthermore, the Cronbach alpha coefficient method was used to measure the internal consistency of these sets of items. This measure is founded on the correlations between different items on the same scale, which, in this case, was the Likert scale (Kashani et al 2018:1). As a rule of thumb, an alpha of between 0.6 and 0.7 indicates acceptable reliability and 0.8 or higher indicates good reliability (Kashani et al 2018:1).

The trends from the web-based survey were examined using both descriptive and inferential statistics (Mi & Zhang 2017:134). Habib et al (2014:39) claim that statistical analysis can be categorised into three groups:

- a. uni-variant analysis (where one variable is involved in validating a hypothesis);
- b. bi-variant analysis (where two variables are involved); and
- c. multi-variant analysis (where multiple variables or sets of variables are involved).

Descriptive statistics are similar to uni-variants as the technique is used to summarise data sets (Ruane 2016:259). It also allows the researcher to determine measures of central tendency, which is a single number representing an average score or frequency distribution in the data set (Allen et al 2009:18).

These measures include (Donley 2012:100; Greasley 2008:10; Ruane 2016:259):

- mean (arithmetic average of a set of scores);
- mode (the most common category in the distribution);
- median (the midpoint of an ordered distribution of scores); and
- percentage (of the participants who strongly agreed, agreed, were undecided, disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Inferential statistics refer to the relationship between two variables. In order to determine this, a set of statistical tools known as correlation coefficients is required (Godwill 2015:13; Ruane 2016:263). A correlation coefficient is described as a number that summarises the degree to which two variables move together; in order to obtain the degrees of difference, it is essential to conduct an analysis of variance, which is also known as an ANOVA (Marcos, Viégas, Costa, Freitas & Russo 2016:11; Ruane 2016:260).

The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine whether three or more independent groups were the same or different in some value of interest on an ordinal or nominal level (Allen et al 2009:20; Ruane 2016:260), as this study used ordinal and nominal measurements. The benefit of using non-parametric tests is that they can be used when nominal or ordinal data is used and when the distribution of the population is entirely unknown (Marcos et al 2016:11). A non-parametric test does not rely on specific distributional assumptions or test hypotheses on particular population parameters (Marcos et al 2016:11). The Kruskal-Wallis test is based on analysis of independent random samples from k populations (Ruane 2016:260).

The Kruskal-Wallis procedure tests the following hypotheses (Allen et al 2009:20; Ruane 2016:260):

H_0 : All k populations are identical.

H_a : Not all k populations are identical.

The Kruskal-Wallis test statistic is based on the sum of ranks for each of the samples, and this statistic is used to decide whether the null hypothesis can be rejected or not. The rule of thumb is that, when the p -value $<$ α -value, the null hypothesis is rejected.

If the α -value = 0.05, the level of significance is 5%. Therefore, it can be understood that, if the p -value is lower than the alpha value, the null hypothesis is rejected and there is enough statistical evidence to suggest that the different opinions differ significantly from each other in rating the factor.

However, in contrast, if the p -value is higher than the alpha value, the null hypothesis is not rejected, and therefore there is not enough statistical evidence to suggest that the different opinions differ significantly from each other in rating the factor.

It is essential to highlight that the analysis conducted on the data produced from the web-based survey cannot be generalised for the entire Middle Eastern PR professional population, as non-probability sampling methods were applied; therefore the sample does not represent any group other than itself (Cohen et al 2018:218).

Where there are only two variables in a factor, a Kruskal-Wallis test cannot be used; instead, the Pearson's correlation coefficient test was used to measure the linear correlation between the two variables (Zhiyong, Hongdong, Ruili, Kewen, Qiang & Yuhai 2019:2). Generally, the two items in the factor need to be sufficiently correlated when the p-value < 0.0001 (Marcos et al 2016:11).

The researcher required several closely related operations to analyse the quantitative data because the data needed to be reduced into a few manageable groups in order to manage the process of analysis, which included (Kothari 2004:18):

- coding (categories of data were changed into symbols that could be counted);
- editing (this was the procedure to improve the quality of the data); and
- tabulation (data was put into tables).

When the data was tabulated, computer-aided software (SAS version 9.4) was used to perform descriptive and inferential statistical analysis (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18; Ruane 2016:257). This computer-aided software assisted in providing a general overview of the web-based survey categories (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18), as seen in Addendum B. The data findings are presented in pie charts and tables in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 (Kothari 2004:18). The various hypotheses used in the quantitative data analysis are explained in Chapter 5: Data Reporting and Interpretation of Findings.

The next subsection explains the techniques used to test the reliability and validity of the quantitative web-based survey questionnaire.

4.5.1.4 The reliability and validity of the web-based survey questionnaire

Reliability and validity tests are significant concerns for the researcher as they determine whether the study has yielded sound measurements for quantitative research (Anney 2014:272; Kothari 2004:73-75; Sinkovics, Penz & Ghauri 2008:695).

Reliability can be understood in terms of the measure's consistency (Habib et al 2014:29). When a measure is repeated, it may produce consistently similar results (Donley 2012:88). Therefore, a measure can be considered reliable when it produces consistent results (Habib et al 2014:29; Ruane 2016:124). Reliability is tested by recognising the level of error when comparing observations from repeated tests by two or more investigators (Kothari 2004:73-75).

The reliability of the web-based survey questionnaire was assessed based on the level to which the variables were measured consistently (Kuada 2012:115). The Cronbach alpha coefficient method was used to measure internal consistency (Kashani et al 2018:1). From a stability perspective, the web-based survey questionnaire was conducted with various individuals, and the consistency of the results was observed and compared to the repeated measurements to ensure that there was a degree of stability (Ruane 2016:126; Kothari 2004:75).

Validity can be explained by asking whether the researcher is using the correct methodology for the specific type of research (Walliman 2011:7). Validity refers to the accuracy or soundness with which conclusions are drawn and how it is reflected through the correct techniques used in the research (Kielmann et al 2012:22). Although no study is able to acquire a comprehensive validity, there are several methods that the researcher could utilise to improve the overall validity of the web-based survey questionnaire (Yin 2016:88). The methods of validity used were face, content, criterion and construct validity (Donley 2012:88; Kothari 2004:73-75; Mi & Zhang 2017:133; Ruane 2016:124).

Face validity is defined as the measurement level of validity based only on the face value; it assesses whether the correct measurement techniques were utilised (Donley 2012:88). To improve the level of face validity, the researcher utilised the professional insights of the instructor and a statistical consultant (Donley 2012:88).

Content validity refers to whether the questionnaire adequately addresses the key concepts being studied (Kothari 2004:73-75). For this study, a panel of PR experts (Addendum J) with specific PR experience was consulted to critique how well the questionnaire addressed vital concepts in the PR profession (Donley 2012:88; Mi & Zhang 2017:133; Ruane 2016:120).

Criterion validity is also known as empirical validity as it uses empirical evidence or specific criteria to prove the validity of the measures (Donley 2012:89; Ruane 2016:122). Kothari (2004:74) recommends that the criterion validity be measured on the following qualities:

- relevance (that the correct measures were used);
- freedom from bias (each respondent has the opportunity to score well); and
- availability (the information required is clearly explained to each respondent).

Construct validity represents the level to which the scores from the questionnaire correlate with the literature review (Kothari 2004:73-75). For this study, the construct validity was measured by testing the relationship between the literature (theoretical constructs) and the specific variable (question) (Ruane 2016:124). More specifically, each item (statement or question) in the questionnaire was generated from theoretical constructs in the literature review (Ruane 2016:124). Kothari (2004:75) claims that, if the score proves a predicted relationship between

the variable and the theoretical construct, then the researcher may claim that construct validity exists for the specific measure being evaluated.

The next subsection explores the qualitative data collection procedures used in this study.

4.5.2 One-on-one interviews

The interview was used as the research methodology to collect data for qualitative research (Kielmann et al 2012:24; Walliman 2011:131). According to Ruane (2016:192), the term “interview” can be defined as a personal encounter between the interviewer and a participant where informational transactions take place. The purpose of the interview is to develop idiographic knowledge, which refers to finding patterns of meaning from individuals or a small group being studied (Anney 2014:273; Morrow 2005:251). The interview was conducted verbally and consisted of the interviewer asking a participant a series of questions (Donley 2012:26). Unlike a conversation, an interview has a specific agenda (Kielmann et al 2012:25). Some of the assistance that the interview offers the researcher is that of gaining valuable information and attaining a deeper understanding of human beings as a subjective experience (Carter et al 2014:545). Roulston (2014:298), reflects that it also provides a deeper understanding of people’s attitudes and beliefs, which are predominately explored through the specific topics of people’s explanations (Vito et al 2014:202). One-on-one interviews allow the researcher to guide the flow of the conversation to elicit emic information from the participant (Kielmann et al 2012:13). The researcher needs to encourage the participants to elaborate on specific issues to provide a deeper understanding of some aspects under study (Kielmann et al 2012:13).

There are two categories of interview: the first category refers to standardised interviews that are used to gather data for quantitative analysis; the second category refers to non-standardised interviews, either semi-structured or in-depth interviews, that are used to gather data for qualitative analysis (Kuada 2012:112).

For this explorative study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to provide access to a more in-depth consideration of the subject being explored, which theoretical knowledge and a quantitative survey questionnaire cannot capture (Kuada 2012:114). In semi-structured one-on-one interviews, the researcher takes on a more flexible conversational style of interviewing, whereby a series of questions acts as a causal guide to assist the interview (Vito et al 2014:206). The series of questions is known as the interview guide, which is a list of themes and questions the researcher intends to address (Vito et al 2014:206). The researcher does not need to follow the list of questions in order, as semi-structured interviews intend to optimise the extraction of information through making the participant more conversational through being comfortable (Vito et al 2014:206). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher

uses open-ended questions supplemented with the 'why?' question to encourage the participants to deliver more in-depth explanations (Cohen et al 2018:199). One-on-one interviews are utilised during exploratory studies or when the study comprises an exploratory component (Kuada 2012:114).

As this study aimed to explore the role of critical PR and how it might contribute to online OPRs in the Middle East, one-on-one interviews were conducted with PR professionals from the Middle East Intelligence Index who were willing and available to participate (Vogt et al 2012:14). The participants in this study were interviewed because they were specialists who were individuals assumed to have expertise in the field of PR and communications (Vito et al 2014:210). Furthermore, the aim of conducting one-on-one interviews with PR professionals was to explore the information discovered in the web-based survey questionnaire, as well as to delve deeper into discussing critical PR and online OPRs. The researcher made a good rapport with the participants through creating a pleasant social experience (Ruane 2016:192).

There are a number of issues that influence the relationship between the interviewer and participant, and the following issues were considered for this study:

- The researcher attempted to be aware of and sensitive to social and cultural differences (Pandey & Pandey 2015:60).
- In order to reduce the impact of the language barrier between the researcher and the participants, questions were asked slowly and clearly, and any questions that were not understood were repeated (Habib et al 2014:35).
- The researcher attempted to be aware of the characteristics of the participant, specifically whether there might be a power and control issue between them (Kielmann et al 2012:26).
- The researcher attempted to be aware that a participant might not always be willing to disclose certain information (Cohen et al 2018:243).
- The researcher was cautious in asking about sensitive matters, as a participant could feel vulnerable in providing information that might act against the interests of the organisation or its people (Cohen et al 2018:243).
- Due to the geographical problem of interviewing PR professionals in different countries, telephonic interviews were conducted (Habib et al 2014:35).
- As non-probability sampling methods were applied in this study, the researcher's findings cannot be generalised to the entire population (Anney 2014:273).

Table 4.4 identifies a variety of advantages and disadvantages that were considered for the one-on-one interview method (Pandey & Pandey 2015:61-62; Ruane 2016:205).

Table 4.4: Advantages and disadvantages of a one-on-one interview

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a form of direct research. • The participants have knowledge of the topic being studied (past, future, emotional causes or special features). • The participants can provide in-depth explanations about a specific phenomenon being studied. • Audio recordings can be created from the interview to reduce potential errors when transcribing the conversation and to help the researcher focus on conducting the interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is an art and not necessarily a science. • The participants may provide biased and misleading information. • The participants may be reluctant to provide sensitive information. • Results may be influenced by the inability of the interviewer or participants to cooperate or generate in-depth conversations. • The researcher may not interpret the participant's perception accurately.

As outlined in Table 4.4, one-on-one interviews have a variety of advantages and disadvantages (Pandey & Pandey 2015:61-62). A key advantage is that the researcher can encourage the participants to provide more extensive and in-depth explanations of specific topics, which could not be attained in the quantitative web-based survey (Vito et al 2014:206). The participants need to feel that they are actually having a conversation and not merely responding with short and direct answers to the questions (Vito et al 2014:206). Conducting the one-on-one interviews by telephone solves the geographical challenge and allows the participants to feel as though their answers are being given anonymously (Ruane 2016:199; Kuada 2012:110).

If a researcher does not record the conversation, the interview will in all likelihood provide very little useful data (Vito et al 2014:213). However, the audio recording of one-on-one interviews is an advantage for the researcher as it allows for easy transcribing of the conversations for data analysis (Cohen et al 2018:387). The audio recordings can only be conducted if the participant agrees to the conversation's being recorded (Donley 2012:45; Ruane 2016:205).

The researcher needs to apply active listening practices, that act as a verbal mirror of what the participant is saying, so the researcher needs to provide paraphrases in a non-evaluative manner to concur with what the participant has said (Ruane 2016:196).

A significant disadvantage of one-on-one interviews is that the researcher might not interpret the participant's position on a topic accurately, as a result of losing meaning when the researcher simplifies the transcripts (Walliman 2011:48). Further distortion of meaning could occur as a result of the participant's personal experience and assumptions on particular matters (Vito et al 2014:203; Walliman 2011:48). The researcher needs to be aware that the participant could either altogether avoid the issue or provide misleading information about sensitive matters (Kuada 2012:113).

The next subsection discusses the design of the qualitative semi-structured one-on-one interview guide.

4.5.2.1 *The design of the interview guide*

Non-standardised one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with PR professionals from organisations listed in the Middle East Business Intelligence index (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37). An interview guide was, therefore, the preferred tool to encourage spontaneous and vibrant explanations about the specific topics being investigated (Morrow 2005:255). The researcher's qualitative research goals were facilitated by the interview guide, which can also be described as a list of general questions and topics that the researcher aimed to cover during the interview (Ruane 2016:192). The interview guide provided the participant with considerable leeway in discussing various issues of the topics being investigated (Ruane 2016:192). The researcher did not necessarily ask the interview guide questions in any specific order; instead, the researcher could coordinate specific questions at the most appropriate time to encourage natural conversation (Kuada 2012:111; Spring et al 2013:69).

The next subsections concentrate on explaining the tasks and question types associated with semi-structured interviews. An outline of the interview guide and its objectives is provided, as well as the procedures undertaken to improve its quality.

- **Question types associated with semi-structured interviews**

An interview guide consists of a variety of themes and questions to help the researcher conduct semi-structured interviews (Kielmann et al 2012:27). Semi-structured interviews are generally described as interviews that have a given agenda and are guided by open-ended questions (Cohen et al 2018:199). The researcher prioritises the questions in the interview guide because not all the questions carry the same weight of importance (Kielmann et al 2012:27). If the researcher observes that there is limited time remaining in the interview, only the most essential questions are asked in the remaining part of the interview (Ruane 2016:195). The interview guide's questions are predominately open-ended so most likely start with what, why, when, how or who (Kielmann et al 2012:27).

Open-ended questions encourage discussion and allow the participant to provide more in-depth explanations of specific themes or issues (Vito et al 2014:222). When the researcher feels that the participant does not provide adequate information for a specific area being investigated, a follow-up question can be asked to encourage the participant to elaborate (Ruane 2016:195). Follow-up questions are designed to obtain additional information from the participant; the interviewer may also use a technique known as probing which, when used

strategically, allows the researcher to clarify specific answers and encourage more in-depth conversation (Donley 2012:26; Ruane 2016:195). The researcher avoids asking leading questions that suggest a correct answer, or asking closed questions unless they are followed up with why or how (Kielmann et al 2012:30).

- **Explanation of the interview guide categories**

An interview guide provides a researcher with predefined guidelines for identifying specific categories and questions to conduct semi-structured interviews (Kuada 2012:112). The semi-structured one-on-one interviews with PR professionals allowed the researcher to address the results from the web-based survey questionnaire. The trends identified inspired the researcher's analysis of the role of critical PR in online OPRs in leading Middle Eastern organisations (Vito et al 2014:206). The interview guide was segmented into three categories, similar to the categories in the web-based survey questionnaire, which was convenient when coding and analysing the data (Habib et al 2014:39). These categories included demographic data, characteristics of critical PR, and online OPRs.

Table 4.5 outlines the objectives of the interview guide categories (the questions can be viewed in Addendum G).

Table 4.5: Outline and objectives of the interview guide categories

Category or Sub-category	Objective of questionnaire category or sub-category
Section A: Demographic data	This category asked easy questions that were familiar to the participant. The questions focused on enquiring about the position and experience of the participant.
Section B: Characteristics of critical PR	This category addressed the characteristics of critical PR and its role in online OPRs.
<i>Characteristics of persuasive dialogue</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which the participant demonstrated the characteristics to obtain a shared understanding between communicative parties. The subcategory focused on discussing shared information, trust, mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions and interactive communication.
<i>Characteristics of persuasion in activism</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which the participant demonstrated the characteristics to persuade one party to accept the message creator's viewpoint. The subcategory focused on discussing societal issues, resolving conflict, creating active groups and positive coercion.
<i>Characteristics of an activist</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which the participant was taking on a moral social role in the organisation to resolve social problems. The subcategory focus on discussing the social role and social responsibility.
Section C: Online organisation–public relationships	This category captured the participant's understanding of online OPRs by utilising social media.
<i>Challenges in online OPRs</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which the participant was challenged in building online OPRs. The subcategory focused on discussing the participant's perception of social media, restrictions on free-speech, training and content and timing.
<i>Antecedents to online OPRs</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which certain antecedents were evident in online OPRs. The subcategory focused on discussing expectations and interdependency.
<i>Strategies for online OPRs</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which certain strategies were evident in online OPRs. The subcategory therefore focused on discussing access, assurance and openness.
<i>Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs</i>	This subcategory measured the degree to which the participant regarded cultural sensitivity in online OPRs. This subcategory focused on discussing networks and cultural norms.

- **Quality of interview guide**

To improve the quality of the interview guide, a pilot interview was conducted with one of the same individuals who participated in the pilot test for the web-based survey questionnaire (Flick, Scott, & Metzler 2014:179; Kielmann et al 2012:29). This preliminary interview was used to evaluate the experience of the one-on-one interview, which was also audio-recorded to enhance the general quality of the interview guide (Flick et al 2014:178). During the process of conducting the preliminary semi-structured interview pilot study, the researcher learnt that a few of the terminologies used were not clearly understood and therefore it was noted that more explanation will be required (some of these terminologies included: co-creation of solution's, positive coercion and interdependency).

The tasks that were managed concurrently during the interview included (Ruane 2016:195–205; Vito et al 2014:210–213):

- asking and responding to questions (listening and observing when to ask the right questions);
- determining whether the information was adequate to answer the research question (if the information was not adequate, the researcher would ask the participant to elaborate on specific answers through follow-up or clarification questions);
- directing the conversation (guiding it towards the next topic/question in the interview guide);
- recognising the non-verbal communication of the participant (based on psychology, humans tend to behave uncomfortably or distractedly when not being completely honest);
- being aware of the time (if the interview took longer than expected, the researcher needed to move more quickly or only focus on the most important questions);
- making an audio recording of the interview so that the data could be thoroughly analysed to maximise the quality of the interview guide.

The next subsection discusses the quantitative data analysis procedures that were used in this study.

4.5.2.2 *Qualitative data analysis*

Qualitative data maintain an interpretive epistemology, whereby the interviewer needs to explain or interpret a series of observations predominantly projected by the participant (Mayer 2015:56; Walliman 2011:24). Qualitative data are typically presented as textual data, which are mostly words, and the interviewer often needs to create this textual data in stages during

the process of interviewing an individual or group of people (Hales 2010:38; Pandey & Pandey 2015:11). A researcher spends time in the qualitative textual data to gain a deeper awareness of the context under investigation; for this study, the quantitative web-based survey questionnaire results provided specific trends that were discussed with the interview participants (Anney 2014:276). This allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding for interpreting how these trends were contributing to the practice of online OPRs (Ruane 2016:192).

According to Mayer (2015:58), there are a variety of approaches in conducting qualitative data analysis: Some scholars argue that data analysis should begin after the data collection and preparation has been completed; others believe that collection and analysis are intertwined and should be conducted in parallel (Mayer 2015:58). It is generally agreed that three core functions are required to analyse interview data; these are data deduction, data reconstruction and data representation (Roulston 2014:301). Thematic and content analysis were used as the approach to analysing the qualitative data, and the approaches were segmented into three main stages, each of which had its specific processes (Roulston 2014:301).

The next subsections explain these three stages.

- **Stage 1: Preparing the qualitative interview data**

The researcher transformed the interview conversation into usable data for the analysis stage (Vito et al 2014:213). During the interview, the researcher captured information by taking notes as well as audio recording the conversation (Cohen et al 2018:383). The researcher also converted the preliminary information into usable qualitative data by generating interview transcripts (Kielmann et al 2012:60). Once the researcher completed an interview, the raw data was converted into transcripts on the same day (Vito et al 2014:213). The process of transcribing essentially involved listening to the audio recordings and typing out the conversations (Walliman 2011:132).

The following information needed to be included in the transcripts: a summary of all the contacts interviewed, sequential description of conversations between the interviewer and the participant, and reflections of the notes taken by the researcher during the interview (Morrow 2005:256; Vito et al 2014:196; Walliman 2011:132).

- **Stage 2: Coding themes and patterns using thematic analysis**

After the researcher had transcribed the interviews, the next stage was to code the data for themes and patterns. It is worth mentioning that, although this process was sequential, it was also a continuous procedure that was done in parallel with the other stages (Donley 2012:119; Walliman 2011:132). A qualitative method of thematic analysis was undertaken to analyse the

interview data. Thematic analysis refers to the process whereby the researcher searches for themes and patterns that are consistent in the transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006:16).

The literature identifies and discusses six thematic analysis phases that are considered for coding themes and patterns:

- a. **Familiarisation with the data.** The verbatim transcripts are the data sets that the researcher needs to become familiar with (Ruane 2016:205). The transcripts are the exact responses between the interviewer and the participant, and the researcher needs to become confident and familiar with them by reading, re-reading, comparing and scrutinising the data (Vito et al 2014:214). It is through this process of data familiarity that the researcher is led to a deeper understanding of the whole data corpus and how the various elements interrelate (Braun & Clarke 2006:17).
- b. **Developing a preliminary coding scheme.** After the researcher has become familiar with the transcripts, the researcher compiles a list of preliminary codes for the predetermined concepts that are relevant to answering the research question (Donley 2012:33). It is these preliminary codes that form the preliminary coding scheme, but the coding scheme is further developed as the researcher intensifies the interaction with the transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006:18). The coding scheme is essentially a type of guide for the researcher to identify data that is meaningful (Vito et al 2014:215).
- c. **Coding transcripts.** Once a preliminary coding scheme is identified, the researcher conducts an analytical process that includes a more detailed, thorough and focused coding session on the transcripts (Ruane 2016:205). New codes are generated in this phase as unexpected ideas are discovered (Vito et al 2014:216). The process creates detailed individualised labels (codes) to mark each significant statement (text section) that is relevant to each specific concept (Thornberg & Charmaz 2014:156). This process allows the researcher to categorise various segments of data across all the transcripts in a systematic process that allows the researcher to break down the qualitative data into meaningful segments (Braun & Clarke 2006:23). For this study, the method of coding was a mnemonic form of abbreviation (Morrow 2005:256). This researcher ensured that the codes simulated recurring ideas/concepts, and that code definitions were not too broad or too narrow (Thornberg & Charmaz 2014:156).
- d. **Searching for themes.** This is the start of the interpretive analysis, which is an inductive process, during which the researcher organises and constructs the meaningful themes that become apparent from all the coded data and the various patterns (relations between the various codes) (Vito et al 2014:217). Collective codes are then sorted according to predominant themes; these themes are data reduced to the form of a statement (Morrow 2005:256). These statements represent a collection

or string of particular codes; and the themes are essentially evidence that certain concepts are repeated across the various transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006:22). There are two types of theme: descriptive themes (which do not require interpretation and are straightforwardly discernible) and analytical themes (which are abstract and require inference and interpretation) (Ruane 2016:205).

- e. **Reviewing themes.** The process of reviewing themes provides the researcher with the opportunity to improve, combine, eliminate or separate themes (Braun & Clarke 2006:22). Here the researcher ensures that each theme is clearly and distinctly defined, and focuses on establishing a central meaning for each theme (Vito et al 2014:218). Each theme is a collection of specific codes and the researcher should validate that each code is logically associated with and relevant to that specific theme (Thornberg & Charmaz 2014:156).
- f. **Defining and naming themes.** Once the researcher has finalised and reviewed all the themes, each theme needs to be named and appropriately defined; the theme's name must be informative and brief; it must also be appropriate and define the essence of the theme (Donley 2012:33). The researcher needs to prepare a detailed analysis or definition for each theme, outlining the story of each theme and explaining how it fits into the broader story of the study (Braun & Clarke 2006:20).

The benefits of thematic analysis are that it can be applied to large and small data-sets, that it is suitable to analyse transcripts of interviews, that it can be used for data-driven or theory-driven analysis, and that it applies to a wide range of research questions involving individual experiences (Braun & Clarke 2013:120). Another advantage of thematic analysis is that the process produces a wealth of collected data that can be interpreted validly and reliably (Braun & Clarke 2013:120; Ruane 2016:205).

- **Stage 3: Writing and presenting the findings using content analysis**

Writing-up is the final stage of the qualitative data analysis and a vital part of the analytical process; it requires the researcher to narrate an original and persuasive story about the data and contextualise it with the literature (Braun & Clarke 2013:123). This stage utilises content analysis to interpret and describe the meaning in the transcripts (Flick et al 2014:170).

Content analysis is a systematic process that further reduces the data. The researcher needs to focus on specific features of meaning related to the general research question (Flick et al 2014:170). Content analysis is also known as "meaning coding" and "meaning interpretation" because it requires the researcher to interpret the meanings in the interview transcripts (Roulston 2014:301). The content analysis process involves assigning parts of content to the themes coded in the previous stage; the researcher then analyses the content for patterns and

co-occurrences of specific themes (Flick et al 2014:180). Content analysis allows the researcher to discover relations between the different themes (Flick et al 2014:180).

The researcher can then present an argument that is backed up by vivid sets of qualitative data that bring the research question to life (Vito et al 2014:218). The researcher presents a balanced write-up that showcases valid interpretations and reliable quotations from the participants (Morrow 2005:256). Morrow (2005:256) acknowledges that it is crucial to find a balance: Putting too much emphasis on the researcher's interpretations makes the reader doubtful about where the interpretations originated. The interpretations presented by the researcher need to be grounded in the participants' experiences and characterised by thick descriptions that are supported by tables and figures (Flick et al 2014:180; Morrow 2005:256).

The next subsection discusses the procedures that were applied to ensure the highest level of trustworthiness in this study.

4.5.2.3 Trustworthiness

According to Yin (2016:86), it must be the researcher's objective to ensure that trustworthiness is apparent in the whole data analysis process: in the data collection methods, in the adequacy of interpreting the data and in how the findings are presented (Yin 2016:86). Trustworthiness comes from having sound evidence for the findings presented in the study (Morrow 2005:256). The researcher needs to establish a relationship of trust with the participants, in the sense that their personal experiences need to be interpreted and presented in the most accurate way possible (Kielmann et al 2012:55).

Qualitative researchers promote four criteria to be considered in order to warrant trustworthiness in a study; these are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Anney 2014:272; Shenton 2004:64; Sinkovics et al 2008:691). These four criteria are discussed in the following section as strategies that were used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

- **Credibility**

Credibility can be understood as the rigour in the research process (Morrow 2005:252). It is the assurance that can be associated with the truth of the research findings (Anney 2014:276). It is also the accuracy of matching the realities between the participants' meaning and the researcher's interpretation (Sinkovics et al 2008:699). It can also be understood as whether the researcher measures what is intended (Kennedy-Clark 2012:6).

The following strategies were considered in this study to enhance its credibility. Triangulation was used to gather data from multiple data sources such as the existing literature, a quantitative survey and qualitative one-on-one interviews (Shelton & Creghan 2015:92); the

supervisor's constructive feedback on methodology and techniques (Anney 2014:276); the consultant's evaluation of the statistical data (Kennedy-Clark 2012:6); and criticism from a panel of experts in the field of PR (Morrow 2005:252; Shenton 2004:64).

- **Transferability**

According to Anney (2014:277), transferability is similar to quantitative generalisability. Transferability therefore relates to the extent to which results can be transferred to other contexts (Sinkovics et al 2008:699). In other words, transferability indicates how far the researcher can generalise the findings of the study, or the extent to which findings can be applied to another (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5; Morrow 2005:252). The researcher acknowledges that the qualitative data for this study could not be generalised to other populations as non-probability sampling methods were applied (Morrow 2005:252).

To enhance the transferability of this study, thick description was used; this means a detailed description of the enquiry was done in order to help other researchers to replicate the study under comparable conditions (Anney 2014:277; Shenton 2004:64). Thick description can also be understood as a deep and extensive set of information concerning the methodology and research process (Anney 2014:278).

- **Dependability**

According to Kennedy-Clark (2012:5), the term "dependability" refers to work that can produce similar results when repeated or replicated in various phases with the same methods and participants. Dependability can be addressed by conducting an audit of the study to determine issues that may impact the consistency of the findings if replicated (Shenton 2004:64). Dependability is similar to the quantitative reliability measure; it emphasises the measure's consistency in producing similar results (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5; Sinkovics et al 2008:699). In other words, dependability is about the stability of data under various conditions over time (Elo et al 2014:4).

An audit trail in the form of a detailed chronology of research activities was produced to validate the researcher's account of collecting the data; the audit trail reinforces the credibility of the enquiry and supports peer examination by allowing a deeper understanding of how themes and categories emerged (Anney 2014:279; Morrow 2005:252). This ensures that early closure did not occur and reduces the researcher's bias (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5).

The quantitative stage of this study also informed the researcher about trends that were integrated into the qualitative interview guide to enhance its dependability (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5).

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to how accurately the findings of the research related to the raw data collected (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5). Confirmability addresses the researcher's shortcomings in the study methods and the likelihood that they will impact the study (Elo et al 2014:6). To ensure confirmability, the researcher needs to include an in-depth methodological description explaining the various weaknesses of the study (Kennedy-Clark 2012:5; Shenton 2004:64). Confirmability is similar to objectivity in the sense that steps must be taken to illustrate that the findings of the research are linked to the experiences of the participants (Sinkovics et al 2008:699). The findings should furthermore not be based on characteristics of the researcher; which is why this study provides an in-depth description of its methodology to enhance its confirmability (Morrow 2005:252). This ensures that, during peer examination, the integrity of research results is thoroughly scrutinised (Kennedy-Clark 2012:7).

The next subsection explains how the researcher improved the ethical practice of this study.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For this study, the researcher upheld a standard of ethical considerations that ensured the participants in the study were not in any way harmed or negatively impacted (Baarends & Van der Klink 2017:5). As individuals in this study participated of their own free will, the researcher aimed to build a trusting relationship by protecting their identity and interests (Kielmann et al 2012:55). The researcher also utilised peer examination and a professional panel that interacted with the research to form part of an external body, whose members scrutinised the study for any unethical behaviour or bias towards manipulation of any data (Kielmann et al 2012:55). The research focused explicitly on PR professional in the Middle East and did not interact with any vulnerable group, such as children, females in reliant relationships, marginalised groups or any ethnic group (Kielmann et al 2012:55).

To enhance the ethical practice of this study, the following were implemented:

- The participants were informed about the academic nature of the study and its purposes (Kielmann et al 2012:53).
- Copies of the report (interview interpretations) were provided to participants if they requested it (Cohen et al 2018:199).
- As the study probed into sensitive information, participants may have felt that the information could damage their organisation's reputation, so anonymity was maintained (Kuada 2012:112). Anonymity refers to the practice whereby the study does not collect identifying data from the participant, to ensure that the participant remains anonymous (Spring et al 2013:71; Walliman 2011:49).
- Confidentiality about the data collected from the participants was also considered and the researcher made every effort to prevent individuals' outside of the project acquiring information that could identify the participants and their respective interview responses (Kielmann et al 2012:54; Spring et al 2013:71).
- There was no requirement to utilise an informed consent form for the online questionnaire as the interviews' anonymity and confidentiality ensured that the participants remained anonymous (Ruane 2016:225; Spring et al 2013:71). No personal information was disclosed (Ruane 2016:225).
- For the interviews, an email was sent to the PR professionals informing them that the conversation was recorded for academic purposes of transcribing (Spring et al 2013:71). The PR professionals also had the right to challenge the request by raising their concern or acknowledging that there was no concern, which was done before undertaking the interview (Spring et al 2013:71).
- The ethical considerations in this study were also supported in parallel by the UNISA Research Ethics Policy (Addendum L), which was the highest level of institutional approval required to conduct this research (Hales 2010:44).

The next section provides a brief summary of the research methodology that was applied to this study.

4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter outlined the research methodology chosen to explore the role of critical PR in online OPRs in the Middle East. As the researcher aimed to discover new understandings of the dynamics between critical PR and online OPRs, the overall nature of the study was predominantly explorative.

Triangulation was selected as the preferred research design technique, which means that multiple data sources were consulted and both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were utilised. The quantitative research approach was realised through the construction of a structured self-administered web-based survey that provided objective data and statistical trends. A qualitative research approach was also used to support further investigation into the trends presented from the quantitative findings. The triangulation technique enhanced the study's reliability and validity by identifying converging information from the two research methods.

The sampling design for the study identified its key elements. The unit of analysis was PR professionals, and the population was PR professionals in the Middle East. Two sampling frames were also identified; the first sampling frame of PR professionals was taken from MEPRA for a quantitative web-based questionnaire, and the second sampling frame was PR professionals from the Middle East Business Intelligence index for qualitative one-on-one interviews.

An exploratory factor analysis was applied to measure the variables from the 41 web-based survey questions, to recognise underlying structures between items, and to group these items together to form factors. The Cronbach alpha coefficient and Pearson's correlation coefficient tests were used to measure the internal consistency of these factored items. As the study used ordinal and nominal measurements, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine whether three or more independent groups were the same or different in some valuable way on the ordinal or nominal level. Non-probability sampling methods were used, which means that the results attained from the selected organisations could only represent themselves and not be generalised to the whole population of Middle Eastern PR professionals.

Purposive sampling methods were applied, as the researcher purposefully selected a sample frame comprised of PR professionals working in the Middle East. Convenient sampling was implemented with PR professionals. Because they did not have the choice to volunteer, the researcher conveniently only included PR professionals who were willing to participate in the research into the sample. This ensured a moral commitment to the participant's integrity; and the researcher informed participants that the research was for academic purposes only.

Anonymity was achieved because the researcher did not request any personal information that could identify the participant. Confidentiality was achieved because the researcher made every possible effort to prevent individuals outside of the project from acquiring any information that could identify the participants or their respective interview responses.

The following chapter reports the results of analysing and interpreting the data.

CHAPTER 5: DATA REPORTING AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed the methodological strategy that was used to analyse the data from the web-based survey, as well as the process implemented for the one-on-one interviews. This chapter focuses on addressing the following research subproblems and questions to answer the main research problem, which was to explore the practice of critical PR and to understand how it could play a role in online OPRs in the Middle East.

Subproblems	Research questions
To determine the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR are practised in the Middle East.	Are the characteristics of critical PR acknowledged and practised in the Middle East?
To determine the role that critical PR plays in building online OPRs in the Middle East.	What role does critical PR play in building online OPRs in the Middle East?

This chapter reports the results of the analysis of the web-based survey that was distributed to PR professionals in the Middle East. This is followed by reporting the findings from interviews of PR professionals from the largest listed companies in the Middle East Intelligence Index. Thereafter, the differences between the quantitative results and qualitative findings are outlined and a summary of the main findings is provided.

5.2 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

A self-administered web-based survey was developed based on theoretical findings from the literature review. It was designed as a self-administered online questionnaire in order to overcome the geographical challenge in targeting PR professionals in the Middle Eastern region. The survey was created using various types of questions, which included statements and closed-ended questions. It made use of dichotomous responses (with only two response options), multiple-choice responses (with three or more response options) and the Likert scale (with a five-point rating scale). The web-based survey had a total of 41 questions presented in both English and Arabic. The survey was conducted between 10 January and 27 February 2019 and 233 PR professionals from the Middle East completed the survey (the responses to all the questions are reported in Addendum C).

This section presents the results from the survey. First is a graphical representation of the demographic information; after that, the results from the exploratory factor analysis recognise how the underlying structures between items form factors. This is followed by the results of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient and Pearson correlations coefficient, which indicate the statistical

significance of each factor. Thereafter, the descriptive statistics for each factor are discussed by geographic region, and the results from the Kruskal-Wallis test are provided to indicate significant differences between the response group ratings for each factor. This is followed by a discussion and interpretation of the significant factors from the web-based survey that had evidence of significant value to the study. To conclude, the key findings are summarised.

5.2.1 Demographic information

A purposive, non-probabilistic sampling method was applied in this study, where the researcher conveniently selected PR professionals working in the Middle East. These PR professionals were identified through MEPRA membership, as well as researching individual profiles on LinkedIn. The realised sample for the web-based survey was 233 PR professionals from the Middle East. Because a purposive sampling technique was used, the results acquired from this realised sample cannot be generalised: They do not represent the whole Middle Eastern population, as not all members of the population had an equal chance of being selected.

The following items are reported in the demographic subsection: the region in which the respondents resided, the sector in which the respondents worked, whether the respondents worked in-house or in an agency environment, as well as their managerial level, qualifications and PR/communication experience.

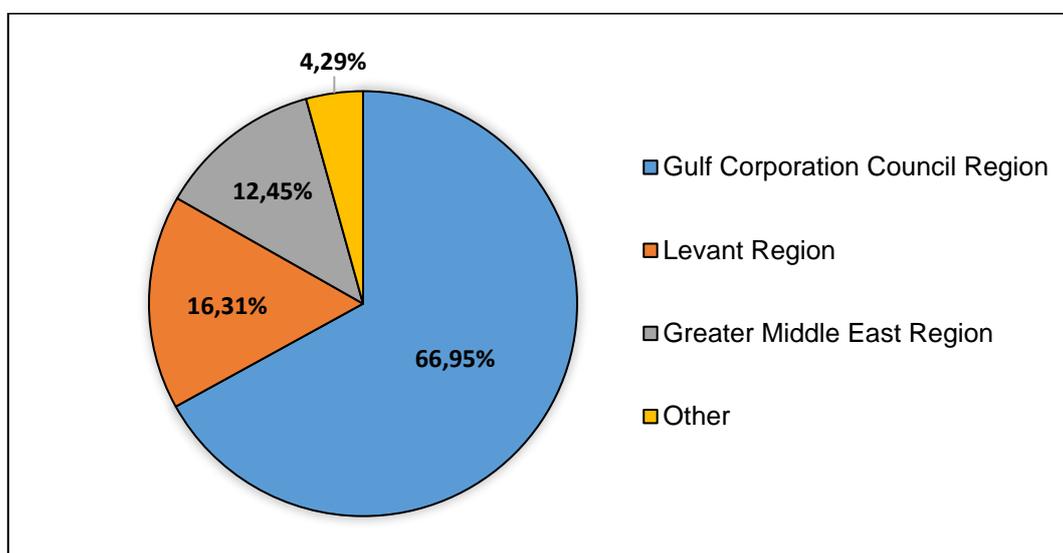


Figure 5.1: Respondents' residential regions

Figure 5.1 illustrates the regionalisation of the response groups for reporting and interpretation. The main three regions in the Middle East are the Gulf Corporation Council Region (GCCR), the Levant Region (LR) and the Greater Middle East Region (GMER). The GCCR consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE; the LR consists of Egypt, Iraq,

Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey; and the GMER consists of Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Djibouti, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Yemen.

The segment of Figure 5.1 labelled “Other” consists of residential areas that could not be assigned to one of the three main groups, and includes the Middle East, Africa, Southern Europe and Asia Pacific. It is worth mentioning that the individuals who were invited to participate in the research were identified by their membership of the Middle East Public Relations Association and their LinkedIn profiles, which showed that they were working in a Middle Eastern country. Therefore, the respondents who came from the “other” regions belong in the realised sample.

Figure 5.1 shows that 66.95% of the respondents resided in the GCCR, 16.31% were from the LR, 12.45% from the GMER and 4.29% resided in “other” regions. Previous authors from the literature reviewed have observed that the GCCR countries are the fastest developing in the world, due to strategic investments from oil revenues. From the top 100 listed organisations on the Middle East Intelligence Index, 80 organisations were located in the GCCR (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37). This emphasises the significant leadership role these organisations have in the broader Middle Eastern region.

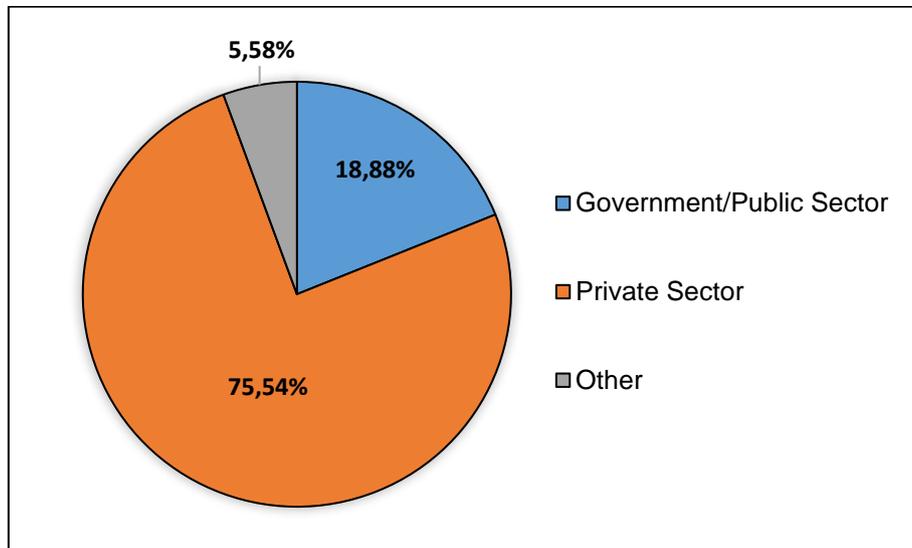


Figure 5.2: Respondents' work sectors

Figure 5.2 shows that 75.54% of the respondents worked in the private sector and 18.88% in the government/public sector. The segment labelled “Other” represents 5.58% of the respondents and consists of responses such as diplomatic mission, philanthropic or non-profit, semi-government and international humanitarian organisation.

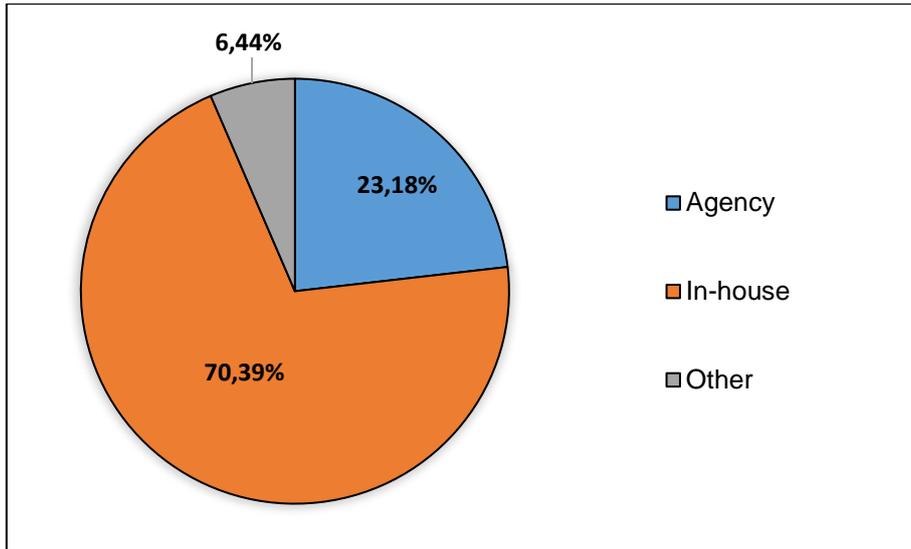


Figure 5.3: Respondents' work environment

Figure 5.3 demonstrates that 70.39% of respondents worked in an in-house environment (a department in an organisation), and 23.18% worked in an agency environment. The option labelled "Other" represents 6.44% of the respondents and includes journalists and consultants that worked both in-house and in an agency.

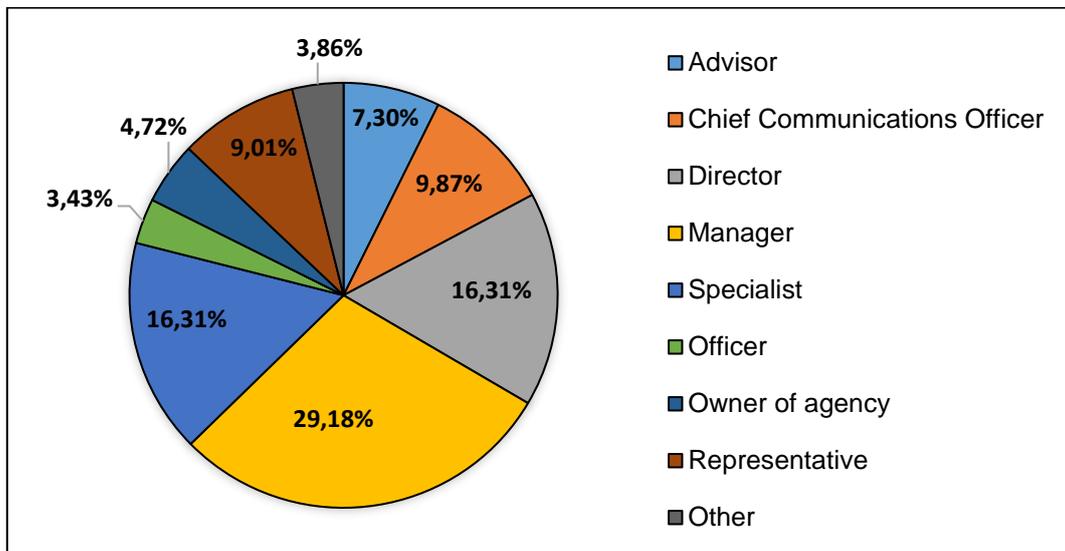


Figure 5.4: Managerial level of respondents

Figure 5.4 demonstrates that 29.18% of the respondents were managers, followed by 16.31% who were directors, and 16.31% who were specialists, while 9.87% were chief communications officers, 9.01% were representatives, 7.30% were advisors, 3.43% were owners of an agency and 4.72% were officers. The group labelled "Other" represents the 3.86% who were chief executive officers, vice presidents and editors. The results indicate that 48.92% of the respondents worked in a managerial role.

It is worth stating that critical PR rejects the manager as a rational person and suggests that a manager cannot determine the organisational outcomes through strategy (Holtzhausen 2002:251). Critical PR also condemns managerialism, centralisation and functionalism (Tyma 2008:201), although critical theorists are not opposed to management but rather against the concept of managerialism, which is the practice of suppressing workers in workplaces that benefit the manager more than the worker (L'Etang 2005:522; Holtzhausen 2002:251; Tyma 2008:201).

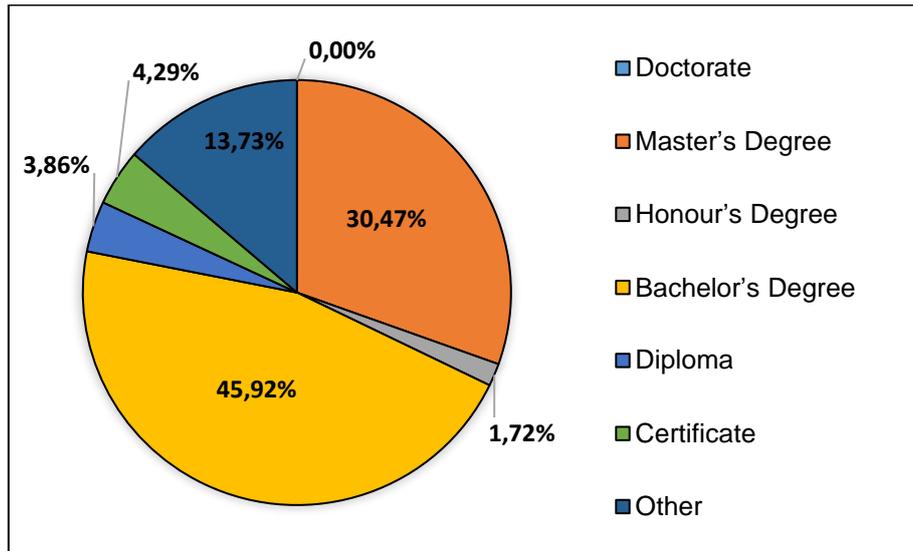


Figure 5.5: The respondents' PR- and communications-related qualification levels

Figure 5.5 illustrates the respondents' level of qualifications in the disciplines of PR and communications. Most of the respondents (45.92%) held a bachelor's degree, 30.47% had a master's degree, and 1.72% had an honours degree. This shows that 78.11% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, or higher, in PR or communications. Only 3.86% of respondents held a diploma and 4.29% held a certificate. It is noteworthy that none of the respondents had a doctoral qualification and the group labelled "Other" represents the 13.73% of respondents who had qualifications in other disciplines.

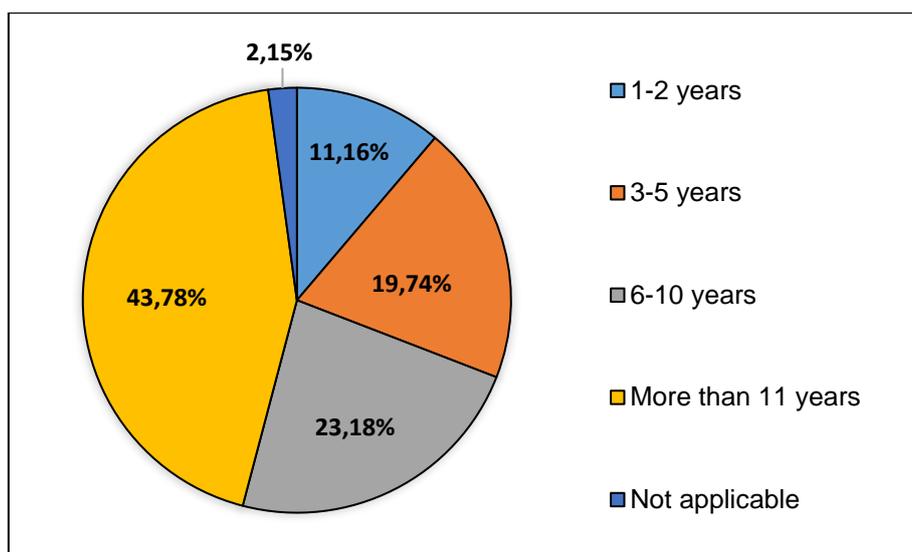


Figure 5.6: The respondents' years of experience in PR and communications

Figure 5.6 illustrates that 43.78% of respondents, which is the majority, had more than 11 years of PR and communication experience, and 23.18% had 6–10 years' experience, giving a total of 66.96% of respondents with more than six years' experience. Of the remainder, 19.74% had 3–5 years' experience, 11.16% had 1–2 years' experience and 2.15% reported “not applicable”, which suggests that those respondents might have just started their career in PR and did not have the minimum one year of experience.

The next subsection elaborates on the results from the exploratory factor analysis, which was used to group items together to form factors.

5.2.2 Exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the statistical data from the web-based survey. SAS version 9.4 was used to analyse the data and calculate which items grouped together to form a specific factor. By rule of thumb, factor analysis is validated when there is enough data to be analysed. The exploratory factor analysis condensed the information into sets of new factors with nominal loss of any information, and all items used for the factor analysis were sufficiently correlated using Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA). According to the MSA, the closer the index measure is to 1, the higher the correlation between the different items. The factor analysis resulted in two distinct categories: the first category refers to Section C of the survey (characteristics of critical PR), for which the overall MSA is 0.7879; and the second category refers to section D (online OPRs), for which the overall MSA is 0.7006.

The factors and individual items for these two sections are explored further in the tables below.

Table 5.1: Exploratory factor analysis results for characteristics of critical PR

Items identified from survey questions	Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue	Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism	Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist
Information sharing (C14)	0.75641	-0.08448	-0.01953
Trust (C10)	0.67920	0.14912	0.05858
Mutual understanding (C12)	0.63743	0.42289	0.14582
Co-creation of solutions (C13)	0.62191	0.10435	0.20126
Interactive communication (C11)	0.59780	0.36464	0.13482
Debating societal issues (C6)	0.03535	0.71789	0.11691
Resolving conflict (C9)	0.19539	0.67633	0.05759
Creating active groups (C8)	0.19177	0.64700	0.24107
Positive coercion (C15)	0.20256	0.57659	-0.08269
Advice from social movements (C2)	-0.19924	0.43734	0.30070
Social role (C1)	0.05014	-0.00476	0.76569
Social responsibility (C4)	0.13308	0.26362	0.62807
Opportunity to be heard (C3)	0.43043	0.07755	0.47426
Advocate for social cause (C5)	0.30637	0.24160	0.41145
Barriers to posting content on social media (C16)	-0.02227	-0.09476	-0.08028
Ethical decision-making (C7)	0.33807	0.01665	0.35665

From Table 5.1, it can be inferred that three factors were identified as having latent roots or eigenvalues greater than 1. These three factors were considered significant, and all factors with eigenvalues less than 1 were considered insignificant and disregarded. The motivation for this is that any individual factor should account for the variance of at least a single variable if it is to be retained for interpretation. The Varimax rotation method was used to identify the different factors and the items that correlated the most with the factors are highlighted in grey in Table 5.1.

Questions C3, C5, C7 and C16 (view these questions in Addendum B) did not correlate with the factors and were therefore excluded from the analysis. These questions need to be revised for future research.

Table 5.2 summarises each of the three new factors for the characteristics of critical PR. Factor 3 only has two items loading onto the factor and is regarded as a weak factor, therefore future research needs to focus on developing a stronger factor.

Table 5.2: New factor descriptions for characteristics of critical PR

Factor	Factor Label	Factor description	Factor items
Factor 1	Characteristics of persuasive dialogue	It measures the degree to which the respondents demonstrated the characteristics to obtain a shared understanding between communicating parties.	Sharing information (C14) trust (C10) mutual understanding (C12) co-creation of solutions (C13) interactive communication (C11).
Factor 2	Characteristics of persuasion in activism	It measures the degree to which the respondents demonstrated the characteristics to persuade one party to accept the message creator's viewpoint.	Debating societal issues (C6) resolving conflict (C9) creating active groups (C8) positive coercion (C15).
Factor 3	Characteristics of an activist	It measures the degree to which the respondents were taking on a more social role in the organisation to resolve societal problems.	Social role (C1) social responsibility (C4).

Table 5.2 identifies the factors that were calculated based on the Varimax rotation method. These factors and the individual items were further reported and interpreted later on in this chapter.

Table 5.3: Exploratory factor analysis for online organisation–public relationships

Items identified from survey questions	Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs	Factor 5: Antecedents for online OPRs	Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs	Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs
Perception of social media (D12)	0.84598	-0.00394	0.03235	0.07903
Restrictions on free-speech (D11)	0.69557	0.01149	0.19212	-0.10515
Training (D13)	0.59734	0.08695	0.23076	-0.03758
Content and timing (D10)	0.59727	-0.07421	-0.16793	0.13768
Expectations (D1)	-0.02057	0.85228	0.11647	-0.01592
Interdependency (D3)	-0.01992	0.75454	-0.02545	0.17504
Encourage discourse (D7)	0.08620	0.57299	0.22975	0.41164
Access (D9)	-0.00881	0.05620	0.78137	0.01220
Assurance (D5)	0.05107	0.23895	0.69517	0.25320
Openness (D2)	0.20846	0.00753	0.64543	0.00382
Networks (D8)	-0.08184	0.01208	0.27771	0.78431
Cultural norms (D4)	0.10998	0.14636	-0.21392	0.65915
Organisational involvement (D6)	0.02389	0.41125	0.24323	0.57595

Table 5.3 demonstrates four factors that were identified using the Varimax rotation method. These four factors have eigenvalues higher than 1 and were retained in the analysis. The items that correlate the most with the factors are highlighted in grey.

Questions 6 and 7 (refer to Addendum B) are weak factors, regarded as double loaders, since they correlate highly with more than one factor, and were therefore removed from the analysis.

Table 5.4: New factor descriptions for online organisation–public relationships

Factor	Factor Label	Factor description	Factor items
Factor 4	Challenges in online OPRs	It measures the degree of difficulty the respondents had with online OPRs.	Perception of social media (D12) restrictions on free speech (D11) training (D13) content and timing (D10).
Factor 5	Antecedents for online OPRs	It measures the degree to which certain antecedents were evident in online OPRs.	Expectations (D1) interdependency (D3).
Factor 6	Strategies for online OPRs	It measures the degree to which certain strategies were evident in online OPRs.	Access (D9) assurance (D5) openness (D2).
Factor 7	Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs	It measures the degree to which the respondents took cultural sensitivity into account in online OPRs.	Cultural norms (D4) networks (D8).

Table 5.4 presents the factors and individual items that are reported and interpreted later in this chapter.

The next subsection reports the results of the Cronbach alpha coefficient calculations that were used to identify the statistical significance of each factor.

5.2.2.1 Cronbach alpha coefficient

To measure the reliability and internal consistency of three or more items in each factor, a Cronbach alpha was calculated. The Cronbach alpha method determines whether there is a correlation between the different items in each factor. The Cronbach alpha is a measure based on the correlations between different items on the same scale, which, in this case, was a Likert scale. As a rule of thumb, an alpha between 0.6 and 0.7 would illustrate acceptable reliability and 0.8 or higher would demonstrate good reliability.

Table 5.5 provides the Cronbach alphas for Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue, Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism, Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs and Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs.

Table 5.5: Cronbach Alphas for factors 1, 2, 4 and 6

Factors	Alpha
Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue	0.75
Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism	0.66
Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs	0.64
Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs	0.62

Table 5.5 shows that the Cronbach alpha is 0.75 for Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue, 0.66 for Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism, 0.64 for Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs and 0.62 for Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs. These very low Cronbach alpha correlations demonstrate an acceptable internal consistency between the items used to measure each factor and they provide sufficient statistical justification that the items in each factor correlate.

An item analysis was conducted to determine how the Cronbach alpha was affected when one of the items was removed from the factor. If the Cronbach alpha improved significantly when an item was removed, it would be advisable to remove that item. In all the analyses, it was found that all the items are correctly identified in the factors and that no items should be removed (view the Cronbach alpha correlations with the deleted variable in Addendum D).

The next subsection reports the results of the Pearson correlation coefficient calculations that were used to identify the statistical significance of factors with only two items.

5.2.2.2 *Pearson correlation coefficient*

The exploratory factor analysis in Section 5.2.2 calculated that there were three factors with two correlating items. The Cronbach alpha method could not be used as it requires three or more items to be correlated in a factor. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated instead, and this method provided a linear correlation between two items in Factors 3, 5 and 7. The correlation determined the strength of the relationship between the two items on the same scale, which, in this case, was a Likert scale. As a rule of thumb, a Pearson correlation coefficient between 0.1 and 0.3 demonstrates a weak linear correlation and, from 0.3 to 0.5, a moderate linear correlation. Table 5.6 provides the Pearson correlation coefficients for the items that constitute each factor.

Table 5.6: Pearson correlation coefficient for factors 3, 5 and 7

Factors	Items involved	Correlation coefficient	p-value
Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist	Social role (C1) social responsibility (C4).	0.26	0.26946
Factor 5: Antecedents in online OPRs	Expectations (D1) interdependency (D3).	0.40	0.40907
Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs	Cultural norms (D4) networks (D8).	0.22	0.22918

Table 5.6 demonstrates that the Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.40 for factor 5 relates to a moderate linear correlation between the items involved. The Pearson correlation coefficients of 0.26 in factor 3 and 0.22 in factor 7 show a weak linear correlation between the items that constitute each factor.

Future research needs to focus on revising the questions in the survey to measure these factors more accurately. Despite the weak and moderate correlations in these three factors, there is still sufficient statistical evidence that the two items in each factor do correlate (view Pearson correlation coefficient in Addendum E).

The next subsection provides descriptive statistics for each geographical region.

5.2.2.3 Descriptive statistics for each factor by geographical response group

Descriptive statistics are used to summarise data sets. The trends from the web-based survey were examined using descriptive statistics for each factor represented by the various geographical response groups. This allowed the researcher to determine measures of central tendency as a single number representing an average score, or frequency distribution, in the data set.

Before the descriptive statistical procedure was conducted to determine the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR were practised in the Middle East, various checks of normality were done on the data, as well as a standardised skewness coefficient. Descriptive statistics for each factor were determined by calculating the average of the mean scores from each response group on the same scale, in this case, a Likert scale. As seen in Table 5.7, all the values are outside the boundaries of the normal distributed data (i.e., -3 to +3) therefore, a nonparametric analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure could be conducted.

The mean scores are shown in the grey column of Table 5.7. Their interpretation corresponds directly with the Likert scale that was used in the survey. The mean score was calculated for each factor to give the arithmetic average of the sets of scores for the response groups.

Table 5.7: Descriptive statistics by demographics

Response group	n	mean*	sd	25 th pctl	median	75 th pctl
Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	1.88	0.61	1.40	1.80	2.20
Levant Region	38	1.76	0.54	1.40	1.70	2.00
Greater Middle East Region	29	1.62	0.39	1.40	1.60	1.80
Other	10	1.78	0.29	1.80	1.80	2.00
Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	2.51	0.76	2.00	2.50	3.00
Levant Region	38	2.43	0.78	2.00	2.50	2.75
Greater Middle East Region	29	2.21	0.77	1.75	2.00	2.50
Other	10	2.35	0.64	2.00	2.50	3.00
Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	1.77	0.61	1.50	1.50	2.00
Levant Region	38	1.63	0.62	1.00	1.50	2.00
Greater Middle East Region	29	1.43	0.26	1.50	1.50	1.50
Other	10	1.95	0.90	1.50	1.50	3.00
Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	3.06	0.83	2.50	3.00	3.75
Levant Region	38	3.07	0.87	2.50	2.75	3.75
Greater Middle East Region	29	3.20	0.95	2.50	3.00	3.75
Other	10	3.13	0.63	3.00	3.25	3.25
Factor 5: Antecedents for online OPRs						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	2.03	0.82	1.50	2.00	2.50
Levant Region	38	1.99	0.78	1.50	2.00	2.00
Greater Middle East Region	29	1.67	0.62	1.00	1.50	2.00
Other	10	2.50	0.75	2.00	2.50	2.50
Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	2.49	0.85	2.00	2.33	3.00
Levant Region	38	2.87	1.01	2.00	2.67	3.67
Greater Middle East Region	29	2.47	1.22	1.67	2.33	2.67
Other	10	2.43	0.65	2.00	2.33	3.00
Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs						
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	1.66	0.58	1.00	1.50	2.00
Levant Region	38	1.68	0.53	1.50	1.50	2.00
Greater Middle East Region	29	1.47	0.42	1.00	1.50	1.50
Other	10	1.55	0.44	1.00	1.50	2.00

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

Table 5.7 illustrates that the respondents generally agreed with the items in four of the factors, namely Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue, Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist, Factor 5: Antecedents for online OPRs, and Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs.

With reference to Factor 1, all four response groups indicated that the respondents supported the characteristics of persuasive dialogue. GMER scored the lowest mean score, which indicated that the respondents from this region were in stronger agreement with Factor 1 than respondents from the other regions.

Similarly, Factor 3 showed that all the response groups supported the characteristics of activism. The respondents from the GMER actually indicated that they strongly agreed with this factor.

Referring to Factor 5, Antecedents for online OPRs, it can be seen that three of the regions (GCCR, GMER and LR) agreed with the items in the factor, and these three response groups collectively comprised 96% of all the respondents from the realised sample. Although “Other” was undecided, this group only makes up 4% of the total respondents. For this reason, the typical response for Factor 5 was taken to be “agree”, as the majority of the response groups did support this factor.

Regarding Factor 7, all the response groups generally supported cultural sensitivity in online OPRs. GMER had the strongest agreement with this factor compared to the other response groups.

The mean scores for Factors 1, 3, 5 and 7 suggest that the respondents typically agreed with each factor, which implies that there is significant evidence that the respondents supported the items in these factors. For this study, these four factors are interpreted and related to the literature in Section 5.3 below.

As Table 5.7 demonstrates, there were also respondents who were undecided about three of the factors, namely Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism, Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs and Factor 6: Strategies for online OPRs. It can therefore be seen that the mean scores of the response groups were near 3, which suggests that the respondents were uncertain about the items in these factors. These three factors are excluded from the discussion in Section 5.3, as there is not enough statistical evidence to suggest that the respondents supported or agreed to these factors. Future research needs to focus on revising the questions in the survey to measure these factors more accurately.

The next subsection reports on the results from the Kruskal-Wallis test that was used to ascertain significant differences in the way the response groups perceived the various factors.

5.2.2.4 Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance

The Middle Eastern regions were selected as the response groups (GCCR, LR, GMER and other) because the literature review showed that the GCCR is one of the fastest developing regions in the world. The GCCR has some of boldest national visions and transformational programmes in the region and plays a significant leadership role in the broader Middle East region.

A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test, also known as an ANOVA (analysis of variance), was used to determine whether there were significant differences in the way the different Middle Eastern regions perceived each factor.

The Kruskal-Wallis test is based on the sum of ranks for each of the samples and is used to decide whether the null hypothesis can be rejected or not. The rule of thumb is that the null hypothesis is not rejected when the p-value of each factor is greater than the alpha-value of 0.05, which would imply that there is not enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differ significantly from each other. The null hypothesis is rejected when the p-value of each factor is less than the alpha-value of 0.05. This shows that there is enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differ significantly from each other.

The nonparametric ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in the way the geographical regions perceived Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist, $p < 0.0252$. The effect size related with this variance is small, according to Cohen's (1988:216) criteria, which indicates that there is enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differ significantly from each other in rating this factor. It can be seen in Addendum F that the GMER mean score was 87.37, compared to 124.26 for GCCR, 106.68 for LR and 128.70 for Other. GMER rated this factor the lowest of all the regions, this, on the measurement scale, suggested that the GMER generally agrees more with the characteristics of an activist compared to the other regions.

Similarly, the nonparametric ANOVA indicated that there was a statistically significant difference amongst the geographical regions, showing that the response groups have different opinions about Factor 5: Antecedents for online OPRs, $p < 0.0240$. This effect size indicates that there is enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differed significantly from each other in rating this factor. Furthermore, the GMER had the lowest mean score of 90.17, compared to 119.46 for GCCR, 115.81 for LR and 160.85 for "Other". This indicates that, generally, the GMER supported the antecedents for online OPRs more than the other regions did.

The next section interprets the four significant factors where the response groups collectively supported the items in each factor.

5.3 SIGNIFICANT FACTORS IN THE SURVEY

This section addresses the following significant factors, namely Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue, Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist, Factor 5: Antecedents for online OPRs, and Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs.

5.3.1 Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue

The characteristics of persuasive dialogue in this factor are co-creation of solutions, information sharing, interactive communication, mutual understanding and trust.

The Cronbach alpha for this factor was 0.75, which relates to an acceptable internal consistency between the characteristic items used to form this factor. The items that correlated in this factor were covered by Questions C10 to C14, as seen in Addendum B. There is therefore statistical justification for combining these items into one factor. The typical responses for Factor 1 show that the response groups from all four regions agreed with the items comprising the characteristics of persuasive dialogue.

The Kruskal-Wallis test specifically considered whether there were significant differences in how the different regions perceived this factor. Since the p-value is greater than the alpha-value, the null hypothesis is not rejected, which demonstrates that there is not enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differed significantly from each other in rating Factor 1. It can be concluded that all four response groups equally supported practising the characteristics of persuasive dialogue.

In order to contextualise this factor, it should be explained that the researcher's purpose was to determine the degree to which the respondents demonstrated the characteristics of persuasive dialogue in order to obtain shared understanding between communicating parties. Based on the above results, it can be inferred that the respondents found the characteristics of persuasive dialogue relevant.

This finding aligns with the literature, as the opinions of the respondents imply that they were engaged in persuasive dialogue as rhetoric to change attitudes, beliefs or values. This is an essential feature of the role that critical PR plays in online OPRs. The items that formed this factor were co-creation of solutions, information sharing, interactive communication, mutual understanding and trust, in line with the literature on persuasion.

It is worth mentioning that 91.84% of the respondents agreed to Question C10, which indicates that they used social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities. Similarly, 89.27% of the respondents agreed to Question C11, which indicates that respondents shared specific information on social media to obtain a shared understanding between communicating parties.

The fact that 81.12% of respondents agreed with Question C12 indicates that they intentionally attempted to find common ground during an online debate between their organisation or agency and its publics.

These results suggest that the respondents supported the characteristics of persuasive dialogue. Table 5.7 demonstrated that GMER had the lowest mean score of 1.62, which suggested that it had a stronger agreement with the practice of the characteristics of persuasive dialogue than the other groups. It is worth mentioning that the literature demonstrates that countries in GMER are faced with more conflict and uncertainty than the other countries. Furthermore, GMER is suffering from an economic crisis due to the persistent conflicts, wars and protests within its borders.

Factor 1 was a crucial issue in the study as it explored the characteristics of persuasive dialogue in the role played by critical PR in obtaining a shared understanding between communicating parties when building online OPRs.

5.3.2 Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist

The items that fell under this factor are a social role, social responsibility, societal issues that can be discussed online and respondents' views on their national vision.

5.3.2.1 *A social role and social responsibility*

The Pearson correlation coefficient for Factor 3 was 0.26, which indicates a weak positive association. Despite this weak correlation, there is sufficient statistical evidence to show that the two items correlated. Future research should still focus on revising these two questions in the survey to measure these factors more accurately.

The two items that correlated in this factor were Questions C1 and C4. The typical response for Factor 3 demonstrates that all four response groups agreed with the two items that determined the characteristics of an activist.

The Kruskal-Wallis test, as seen in Addendum F, determined that there were significant differences in how the GCCR, GMER, LR and Other regions perceived this factor. Since the p-value is less than the alpha value, the null hypothesis was rejected, which indicates that there is enough statistical evidence to suggest that the regions differ significantly from each other in rating the items in Factor 3. In this case, GMER had the lowest mean score, which indicates that it agreed more about the characteristics of activism than the other response groups.

In order to contextualise this factor, it should be explained that the researcher's purpose was to investigate the claims in the literature reviewed that PR activism could be regarded as a

mainstream PR element that challenges organisation-centric PR approaches (Benecke & Oksiutycz 2015:2; Ciszek 2015:447; Dolea 2017:175). The results indicate that the respondents accepted the characteristics of an activist and that acceptance was more prominent in regions, such as LR and GMER, that had more social unrest, compared to regions that had stronger economic growth, such as the GCCR.

This was confirmed by the Kruskal-Wallis test, which showed that the GMER had a significantly stronger position towards the characteristics of activism.

It is worth mentioning that activism is illegal in the majority of Middle Eastern countries. The two items that correlated in this factor were the social role and social responsibility, which aligns with the literature on activism. Prasad (2011:56) suggested that PR professionals must focus on social situations as a precondition for economic progress. They should also take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, the environment and social equality. In support of this, Verwey et al (2017:69), as well as Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:64), argue that PR professionals need to act as the organisation's conscience and that they need to take on a more social role in the organisation.

The majority of respondents (92.71%) agreed with Question C1, which demonstrates that the respondents recognised attention to societal issues as necessary in their respective organisations or agencies. This aligns with the literature, which points out that respondents who practice critical PR are motivated to initiate and facilitate dialogue about societal issues (McCown 2007:47). The literature further emphasises that PR professionals, as the conscience of the organisation, are inclined to redefine organisational strategies. In light of this, Middle Eastern PR professionals find themselves in an environment where they can contribute to society by presenting arguments that are in the public interest, mainly relating to the wellbeing of society (Holtzhausen & Zerfass 2015:45; Verwey et al 2017:69).

Most of the respondents (81.97%) agreed with Question C4, which illustrates that the respondents encouraged social responsibility efforts in their organisations or agencies, which is characteristic of a PR activist.

5.3.2.2 Societal issues to discuss online

A PR activist can be described as a person who uses communication for ethical purposes to empower marginalised social groups (Grünig 2006:165; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63; Sommerfeldt 2013:350). The literature emphasises that PR professionals, as PR activists, are driven towards social problem-solving strategies that encourage their organisation or agency to participate in resolving societal issues (Kim et al 2015:406; Prasad 2011:56).

Figure 5.7 identifies societal issues that respondents considered acceptable for their respective organisations or agencies to discuss online.

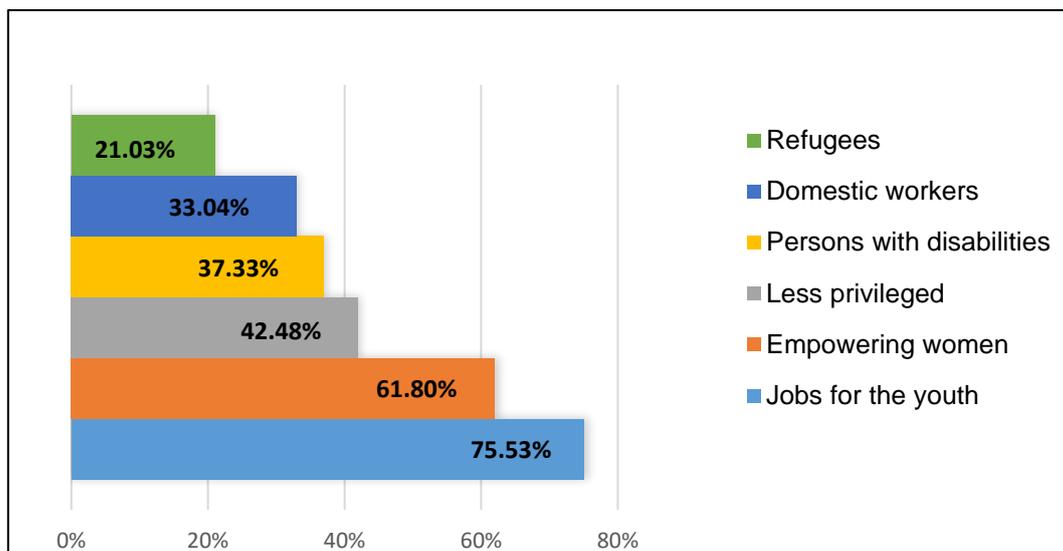


Figure 5.7: Social issues of engagement

Figure 5.7 represents social issues that respondents agreed they would encounter in social problem-solving discussions on social media.

For 75.53% of respondents, jobs for the youth were the most prominent social issue to engage the public. The literature review showed that the Middle East youth expressed genuine anxiety about their lack of opportunities and jobs. There has been an epidemic of emigration by Middle East youth, and unemployment and poverty are important factors motivating the youth to emigrate. Many graduates have claimed that they cannot obtain jobs with the skills they have acquired.

For 61.80% of the respondents, empowering females was a critical topic to engage their publics. The literature highlights that females in the region have been extremely oppressed. The PR industry in the Middle East has been significantly affected by the attention of the female's rights crusade and female's contribution to social networks.

The less privileged were a key social issue for engagement for 42.48% of the respondents; while 37.33% rated persons with disabilities, 33.04% rated domestic workers, and 21.03% rated refugees. There was also an "Other" option, where respondents could provide alternative issues, and these included social and environmental responsibility, human rights and diversity in the workplace.

5.3.2.3 The national vision

The literature review showed that the GCCR is leading the wider Middle East in developing a national vision and transformational plan. National visions and plans have focused on safeguarding future generations against the oil crisis. Generally, they have concentrated on post-oil preparations, transformation, economic growth and reform, diversification of revenue sources and job creation. It is worth stating again that the critical PR strategies used by PR activists are fundamentally in conflict with the dominant structures of power (Hicks 2004:3). However, Figure 5.8 demonstrates that the respondents had a positive perception of their country's national visions and believed they would benefit their society.

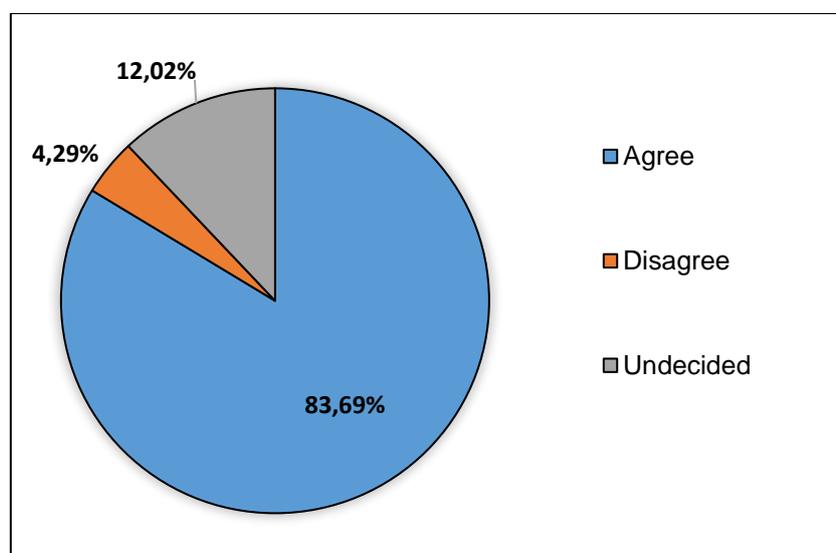


Figure 5.8: The respondents' perception of the country's national vision

According to the literature review, PR professionals practising critical PR would be sceptical of the government's or monarch's agenda in their ambitious national vision to support society. However, Figure 5.8 demonstrates that 83.69% of the respondents believed that the national vision of their country would benefit society, compared to 12.02% who believed that it would not, and 4.29% who were indecisive on the matter. This implies that, although the respondents supported the characteristics of activism, they were slow to take up critical PR.

5.3.3 Factor 5: Antecedents to online organisation–public relationships

The Pearson correlation coefficient for Factor 5 was 0.40, relating to an acceptable internal consistency between the two items in this factor, clear expectations and interdependency, so there was statistical justification for combining these two items into one factor. The two items that correlated in this factor were responses to Questions D1 and D3. The typical response for Factor 5 displayed that all respondents agreed that clarification of expectations and interdependency are essential antecedents to online OPRs.

However, the Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistical evidence that there were some differences of opinion amongst the four response groups about the antecedents of online OPRs. The GMER had the lowest mean score of 90.17, which shows that it supported these two antecedents more strongly than the other regions.

In order to contextualise Factor 5, it should be explained that the researcher's purpose was to measure respondents' opinion about the specific antecedents that should be in place to build online OPRs in the Middle East.

5.3.3.1 Expectations

There was agreement by 75.10% of the respondents that there should be clear expectations between the organisation or agency and its publics before online OPRs can be built. In line with this argument, it was discovered that the respondents felt they would need to conduct research to distinguish specific online publics who had identifiable expectations and who held symbiotic relationships with the organisation. As part of this process, the PR professionals would determine what exchange, transaction or promise was expected by the two parties (Seltzer & Zhang 2011:25; Sohail 2012:237).

5.3.3.2 Interdependency

There was agreement by 78.12% of the respondents that there should be interdependency in place between the organisation or agency and its publics to build online OPRs. The literature states that the level of interdependency between the organisation or agency and its publics is exaggerated through the behaviour of each party (Seltzer & Zhang 2011:27; Hung 2005:396).

To conclude, all the respondents supported the idea that there are conditions an organisation or agency needs to have in place before it can establish online OPRs. The literature claims that antecedents stimulate interaction between the organisation and the public. This may be why relationships develop between the organisation or agency and specific publics. The results confirm that the respondents placed value on clear expectations and interdependency as two significant antecedents that need to be developed and in place before fruitful online OPRs can be built.

5.3.4 Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in online organisation–public relationships

To contextualise Factor 7, the purpose was to measure the degree to which PR professionals in the Middle East took cultural sensitivity into account when building online OPRs.

The two items that correlated in this factor were responses to Questions D4 and D8 about cultural norms and networks (Addendum B). The typical responses for Factor 7 demonstrate

that all respondents agreed that these two items are relevant and must be considered to show cultural sensitivity in online OPRs.

The Kruskal-Wallis test as seen in Addendum F showed that there is not enough statistical evidence to indicate that the respondents had different opinions about this factor, which implies that the response groups supported the consideration of cultural norms and networks equally.

5.3.4.1 Cultural norms

The fact that 97.87% of the respondents agreed with Question D4 indicates that the respondents acknowledged distinct differences in cultural values in different publics. This notion is aligned with the literature, which shows that PR professionals need to identify and understand the cultural norms of their organisation or agency in order to cultivate positive online OPRs. The cultural norms of the organisation play a significant part in determining its boundaries and limitations when practising cultural sensitivity in online OPRs (Bruning & Galloway 2003:317).

5.3.4.2 Networks

Most of the respondents (84.97%) agreed with Question D8, which implies that they acknowledged that practising cultural sensitivity in online OPRs involves networking.

To conclude this subsection, let it be said that all the respondents endorsed the idea that cultural norms and networking are essential elements in practising cultural sensitivity when building online OPRs in the Middle East. It is worth mentioning that the culture of an organisation or agency cannot be in complete opposition to the culture of the country or region in which it operates, or it would be indifferent to its surrounding society. During the process of identifying strategic publics, PR professionals need to evaluate the cultural norms. Based on these cultural assumptions, strategic networks can be recognised for building appropriate online OPRs. The literature emphasises that PR professionals should develop online OPRs networks by paying close attention to the public's values, which assists in building relevance or familiarity consistent with public thoughts (Kang 2013:186). In conclusion, it was discovered that organisations, agencies and other participants in the online OPRs network gained more legitimacy when the network promoted aspects of the public culture (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:222).

The next section presents the key findings of the web-based survey and discusses how they relate to the literature.

5.4 KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Four factors were selected as significant to this study, as the respondents agreed with and supported the items in each factor. The first factor, the characteristics of persuasive dialogue, had the strongest acceptable internal consistency. Although the other three factors, the characteristics of activism, the antecedents of online OPRs and cultural sensitivity in online OPRs, had weak correlations, there was still enough statistical evidence to add value to the study.

Three factors were excluded as the typical responses for the characteristics of persuasion in activism, the challenges in online OPRs and the strategies in online OPRs were undecided. This suggests that the respondents were uncertain about the items in these factors, and that future research needs to focus on revising the questions in the survey to measure these factors more accurately.

The first purpose of the web-based survey was to explore the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR were practised among respondents in the Middle East. The literature recognises that persuasion and activism are elements that support PR activism, which is aligned with the results from the survey. There is statistical evidence to correlate specific items with the characteristics of persuasive dialogue and activism.

5.4.1 Persuasive dialogue

The results from the statistical analysis show that the respondents acknowledged and supported information sharing, trust, mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions and interactive communication items as characteristics of persuasive dialogue. These results are in line with the literature review and confirm that the respondents agree that they purposefully attempted to obtain a shared understanding between communicating parties in online OPRs. This shared understanding, according to the literature, can be obtained through the practice of persuasive dialogue. The results further indicate that the characteristics of persuasive dialogue are evident among the respondents in the Middle East.

The results also indicate that the GMER supported the characteristics of persuasive dialogue the most. Since the literature mentions that the GMER is faced with more conflicts and economic crises than the GCCR and LR regions, this may explain why the respondents from the GMER were more interested in the characteristics of persuasive dialogue.

5.4.2 Public relations activism

The literature states that PR professionals who practice critical PR, specifically PR activism, play a more social role in their organisation or agency and place more focus on societal issues

than on the organisation or agency. This claim was supported statistically by the results of the web-based survey, which identified that social roles and social responsibility correlated with each other to form the factor characteristics of an activist. This was further motivated by literature that stated that the tactics and strategies employed by activists are centred in PR. The results show that the respondents agreed with and supported the characteristics of an activist, which confirms the claims in the literature that there are similarities in the tactics and strategies of activism and PR.

The Kruskal-Wallis tests showed that there were significant differences in how the regions perceived the characteristics of an activist, and that the GMER supported the characteristics the most strongly. This is supported by the literature that claimed respondents in the GMER were engaged with a more complex social, economic and political climate.

The most notable discovery was a conflict with the literature that claimed that PR professionals practising critical PR rejected strategies formed by the hegemonic authorities and autocratic structures. This claim was not supported by the results of this study, as 83.69% of the respondents believed that the national vision of their country would benefit their respective societies, which implies that, although the respondents supported the characteristics of activism, they did not apply them to critical PR.

5.4.3 Antecedents of online organisation–public relationships

The second purpose of the web-based survey was to explore the stages in online OPRs. The statistical analysis found sufficient evidence that specific antecedents were necessary, and that clear expectations, recognised interdependency, and cultural sensitivity were essential when building online OPRs.

5.4.3.1 *Expectations and interdependency*

The statistical calculations correlated expectations and interdependency as necessary antecedents to online OPRs in the Middle East. These results are aligned with the literature review, which established that PR professionals need to determine what exchange, transaction or promise is expected between the organisation or agency and its strategic publics.

The literature maintains that interdependency between the organisation or agency and its public stimulate interaction and provide more reason for the relationship to develop. The study found statistical evidence that respondents from the GMER supported expectations and interdependency as necessary antecedents to online OPRs the most. The literature intimated that the on-going political unrest and economic crises in the GMER could be why this region placed more value than the others on establishing expectations and interdependency before building online OPRs.

5.4.3.2 Cultural norms and networking

The literature claims that PR professionals needed to identify and understand cultural norms to cultivate positive relationships in online OPRs networks. The statistical analysis confirmed that cultural norms and networks correlated, which indicates that the respondents did take into account cultural sensitivity in online OPRs networks.

The literature review revealed that cultural sensitivity played a part in determining boundaries and limitations in online OPRs networks. The literature paints a disturbing picture of the extreme level of cultural sensitivity that PR professionals face in the Middle East. There was a distinct cultural difference between men and women in the Middle East, which PR professionals need to recognise. An example of this cultural norm is the male dominance over females. The persecution of female activists is severe: females who resist the misogynistic laws encounter extreme harassment, repression and detention, and are even violently beaten by the moral police or their male guardians. This suggests that a PR professional in the Middle East requires a clear understanding of how the culture influences the ways in which the organisation or agency can approach online OPRs networks with the males and females in the region.

The next section provides the findings from the one-on-one interviews.

5.5 QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the semi-structured one-on-one interviews was to explore the trends revealed by the quantitative web-based survey. The quantitative results informed the semi-structured qualitative interview guide, which can be viewed in Addendum G. It is worth repeating that the results obtained from the interviews can only represent themselves and not be generalised to the whole Middle Eastern PR population.

The most suitable unit of analysis for this study required adequate knowledge and understanding of online OPR. The study focused on PR professionals in the Middle East to quantify and explore the role of critical PR in online OPR in the region. The sample selected for the one-on-one interviews was taken from the 100 largest listed organisations from the Middle East Business Intelligence index (see Addendum A). They represented a fair sampling frame of the most influential parts of the region's economy (Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36). This sample was selected as it was assumed that the top 100 listed organisations played a significant leadership role in online OPRs in the Middle Eastern region (McGregor & Novarese 2016:13; Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37).

The researcher collected the contact details of the PR professionals from 31 of the top 100 listed organisations in the Middle East. The details of PR professionals from the other top 100

listed organisations were not available. Emails were also sent to the PR professionals (see Addendum G), inviting them to participate in the interviews. During April 2019, nine participants were interviewed from eight of the top 100 listed companies in the Middle East (view the one-on-one interview transcripts in Addendum H).

It should be noted that, since activism is illegal in the majority of the Middle Eastern countries, to ensure the security of the participant and researcher, the word “activism” was not used at all during the interviews. It is recommended that more research be done in the future with a specific focus on addressing activism in more detail.

The next subsection discusses the qualitative data analysis method used for this study.

5.5.1 Thematic analysis

All telephonic interviews were recorded and transcribed (view Addendum H). A qualitative method of thematic analysis was then applied to the transcribed interview data. The thematic analysis process required the researcher to become familiar with the interview transcripts and to identify consistent patterns. The findings are summarised in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8: Thematic analysis findings for qualitative interview transcripts

Theme	Category	Pattern
Characteristics of critical PR	Characteristics of persuasive dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing • Interactive communication • Mutual understanding
	Characteristics of persuasion in activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating active groups • Resolving conflict
	Characteristics of an activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social responsibility • Social role
Online OPRs	Challenges in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content and timing • Managing negative sentiment • Perception of social media • Restrictions on free-speech • Social commitment • Social media noise • Targeting influencers
	Antecedents in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations • Interdependency • Trust
	Strategies in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • Assurance • Networking • Openness • Positivity • Sharing of tasks
	Cultural sensitivity in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural norms

Table 5.8 shows that the thematic analysis recognised consistent patterns to determine specific themes and categories from the interview transcripts. The two themes and seven categories identified in Table 5.8 are consistent with the results of the quantitative factor analysis of the web-based survey. However, some topics in the interview guide in Addendum G did not receive sufficient attention during the interviews and were excluded from this section. From here on, these topics are referred to as patterns.

The following subsections report on each category in the same order as the interview guideline and identify patterns that were excluded and new patterns that emerged.

5.5.2 Characteristics of critical PR

This theme aimed to explore three categories relating to the characteristics of critical PR: The first category is the characteristics of persuasive dialogue, which focused on understanding whether the participants demonstrated characteristics that would enable them to obtain shared understanding between communicating parties. The second category explored the characteristics of persuasion in activism, which aimed to develop an understanding of whether the participants demonstrated characteristics that would enable them to persuade the message receiver to accept the message creator's viewpoint. The third category focused on the characteristics of an activist, aiming to understand whether, and how, the participants had taken on a more social role in online OPRs on social media.

The insights from this theme shaped the researcher's understanding of the role that critical PR could play in contributing to online OPRs.

5.5.2.1 Characteristics of persuasive dialogue

The interview guide explored information sharing, trust, mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions and interactive communication as five characteristics of persuasive dialogue. Figure 5.9 identifies four specific characteristics that emerged during the thematic analysis. It was learned that trust was regarded as an antecedent and, for this reason, it was excluded from this section and is reported in Section 5.5.3.2 instead.

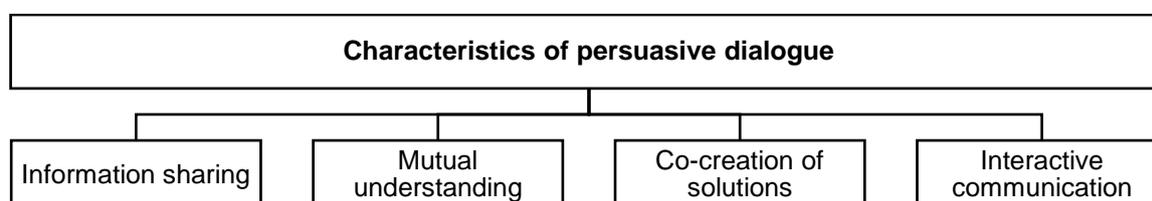


Figure 5.9: Thematic patterns for the characteristics of persuasive dialogue

The majority of the participants believed that social media is a strategic tool that can be used to obtain a shared understanding between the organisation and its online publics. Most of them were also cautious in using social media to develop particular persuasive rhetoric, and the type of business determined whether the organisation would engage with persuasive dialogue on social media.

The majority of the participants supported the arguments from the literature that social media is a strategic online tool that organisations or agencies can use to interact with specific online publics. One participant confirmed that “the proper channel right now is social media, to be in touch with your clients, with your shareholders and with all your stakeholders”. Another participant mentioned that “social media has become a good tool that can be utilised to deliver

the right message that these managers want to share with the right target audience". This implies that organisations could use social media as a tool to initiate online discussions with specific publics.

One participant warned that social media is a "sensitive platform; the mistakes on social media is not like the mistakes on face-to-face interviews or face-to-face meetings". Another participant also stressed that an organisation should be cautious in using social media, "particularly in this part of the world where you have strict social media rules".

Although social media is a strategic tool, the literature also emphasises the disadvantages of using social media: It requires a remarkable degree of sensitivity, especially when conducting persuasive dialogue. The literature acknowledges that people had been punished for attempting to persuade others of a specific viewpoint or even for giving their opinion on prevailing social issues. Governments in the Middle East monitor social media closely to identify any forms of misconduct. There are alarming levels of surveillance of organisations, agencies and the public who are using social media to develop persuasive dialogue, dissent or rhetoric relating to certain attitudes, beliefs or values.

It was also noticed that different types of businesses had diverging reasons for using social media: One participant stated that "we are B2B [business-to-business] and B2G [business-to-government]; we do not engage at all". This suggests that certain types of businesses do not consider that they should converse with their online publics on social media. This was further explained by another participant, who said that "our accounts are speaking only [one-way]; we are just posting; we avoid replying to comments or interfering in any online discussions". The participant also mentioned that "we are not targeting society; that is why we do not feel that we have to respond or participate in online discussions". In contrast, another participant, who worked in a B2C (business-to-consumer) organisation, displayed a significant need to have "conversations with the customers and clients through social media, as these are very important things". This suggests that the business type influences what communication activities are required, and that not all business types practise persuasive dialogue on social media.

Four characteristics of persuasive dialogue are discussed below: information sharing, mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions and interactive communication.

- **Information sharing**

The literature emphasises that a PR professional needs to share specific information about the organisation or agency with its publics in order to build or sustain its online OPRs. In support of this, one participant mentioned that "one of the responsibilities of PR ... is sharing news,

financial statements, annual reports and also the organisation or agency activities; for example, safety and environment, or any security campaigns, or any kind of activity”.

It was learned that the participants were very cautious in sharing information on social media that would persuade individuals to accept a specific position. One participant stated that “we are very careful in what we release; there is a lot of things that we don’t release”. This may suggest that participants do not want to divulge confidential organisation or agency information.

Another finding that is consistent with the literature review is that organisation or agency information sharing needs to be governed by clear policies and procedures, in terms of the type of information that can be shared publicly. One participant asserted that “you should have a policy, as sometimes there was confidential information; if they are employees, they do not know if it is confidential or not confidential”.

The findings show that the participants acknowledged information sharing as an essential task in building and maintaining online OPRs. The participants also suggested that policies and procedures generally help to guide the process of generating specific information that can be used to persuade targeted online publics.

- **Mutual understanding**

The literature highlights that PR is a process that generates mutual understanding in online OPRs. It also emphasised that interactive communication in the form of dialogue or debate is crucial to forming an understanding with various publics, as it helps to overcome issues and create real understanding.

One of the participants stressed that it is not enough to focus only on the external publics but also to develop a dialogue with the employees, to ensure that there is a unified mutual understanding or standard message, both internally and externally. The participant stated that “in terms of communicating your advertisements and your brand, we need the feedback of the employees so that, when we create customer success stories, when we create brochures about who we are as a company, we need to be accurate about communicating who we are”.

The findings recognised that mutual understanding is rooted in the organisation's efforts to have constructive discussions with both external and internal publics, which would build mutual understanding, as well as sustain a real understanding between the communicating parties.

- **Co-creation of solutions**

The literature states that, when a PR professional practises critical PR, that person would be motivated to act as a PR activist who would facilitate debates on behalf of the organisation or agency and encourage the communicating parties to generate solutions to common societal

issues. In doing this, a PR activist brings alternative issues and solutions to the attention of the organisation's strategic decision-makers.

It was noted that the participants referred to the leadership of their organisation or agency when questioned about the co-creation of solutions. One participant claimed that "top management does not have time to listen to the discussions of social media, as they rarely take social media discussions seriously".

The findings suggest that participants did attempt to gain their leaders' interest in societal issues to initiate the process of co-creation of solutions. The literature states that PR activists whose efforts to resolve societal issues through interactive communication are unsuccessful would be compelled to administer asymmetrical tactics to persuade the organisation or agency to address the issue. Such tactics include dissent, lobbying, litigation and media advocacy.

The findings suggest that, even though the participants were part of the dominant coalition, they did not resist the dominant power structures, in contrast to critical PR practice.

- **Interactive communication**

The literature explains that the process of persuasion involves interactive communication. One participant explained that persuading individuals on social media may harm the organisation or agency image, especially when there is negative sentiment involved. An example of this was when an individual or customer makes a public complaint on social media, and the organisation or agency cannot alter the individual's perception.

One participant pointed out that "you need to be quite careful; anything contentious you need to take offline as quickly as possible". This illustrates that the organisation or agency needs to have clear guidelines in place to interact with its publics. Participants acknowledged that they had social media strategies to provide guidelines on protocols for interacting with publics on social media.

One participant added that "we are not going to post anything that will ruin the brand, identity or image of the organisation or agency, they [the decision-makers in the organisation or agency] have to be assured that there is a clear strategy to follow on social media and that nothing will go wrong". This suggests that the participants used strategies to alter public perceptions in favour of the cause or the organisation's agenda.

It was also seen that social media monitoring was a vital practice to track developments of discussions on social media. A participant confirmed that social media monitoring tools were used to "see how others are responding to our actions".

The findings reveal that not all the participants engaged in interactive communication to persuade individuals or the public towards a specific position, as some of these participants

worked in B2B and B2G organisations and only used social media as a one-way communication tool.

5.5.2.2 *Characteristics of persuasion in activism*

The interview guide explored four characteristics of persuasion in activism: debating societal issues, resolving conflict, creating active groups and positive coercion. However, Figure 5.10 shows that the thematic analysis revealed that the two most prominent characteristics for persuasion in activism were resolving conflict and creating active groups.

It was noticeable that participants did not debate societal issues on social media. One participant clarified that “I am against this idea”; another participant explained that, “in the Middle East, it is a lot more difficult to engage in debating, exchanging ideas, disagreeing with one another, without taking things personally”.

It was also revealed that participants did not conduct positive coercion on social media. The literature defines “positive coercion” as a coercive strategy that uses power to attain compliance. Generally, participants did not support practising positive coercion; one stated that “we have not done this”. For this reason, debating societal issues and positive coercion were excluded in this section.

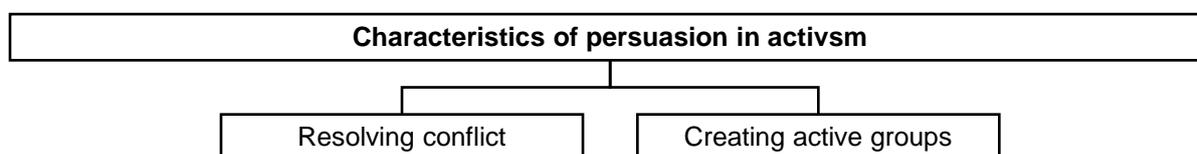


Figure 5.10: Thematic patterns for the characteristics of persuasion in activism

The researcher learned that the majority of the participants were extremely cautious in how they used social media to persuade a party to accept the viewpoint of the organisation or agency.

The literature reviewed in Section 2.4 showed that freedom of expression, such as inciting action for a cause, transmitting perceived criticism of leadership, and any dissent from religious topics, is an offence. Considering this, one participant counselled that an organisation or agency should be careful in using social media as a platform to persuade online publics, “I think that it is risky for a number of reasons, that you don’t want to say anything that you might regret; I think that you always need to have in your mind that you are not just speaking to yourself, you are representing your organisation”. This shows that the organisation or agency needs to be selective about which issues it wants to pursue on social media, as it faces the risk of being caught up in a web of negative sentiment.

Participants acknowledged that the organisation or agency required them to address customer complaints directed to the organisation or agency on social media. In this regard, a participant raised a concern about how easily people are offended on social media. The participant raised questions about “how conservative is your organisation? How open to criticism is the organisation?” It was also asked, “what happens when they start facing criticism? How do you engage with that in an online public forum? That is a challenge for sure, because it leads to your communications’ being largely one-way, which obviously is not conducive to a genuine conversation”.

This suggests that there needs to be a predetermined level of understanding of which conflicts the organisation or agency is prepared to engage in. It was also seen that participants used social media influencers to help the organisation or agency create active groups to persuade certain online groups to a specific viewpoint.

The following characteristics of persuasion in activism are discussed below: resolving conflict and creating active groups.

- **Resolving conflict**

The literature emphasises that the tactics and strategies employed by activists are PR-related tasks. A PR activist attempts to mediate conflict between the organisation or agency and its publics.

The interviewees agreed that the majority of the organisation or agency conflicts are associated with customer complaints on social media. In support of this, a participant stated that “people, when they want to complain, they come and complain online; we receive thousands of complaints every day on social media. I think that human nature is, when something bad happens to you, you will go and be loud about it”. This notion is consistent with the literature, which states that PR professionals need to be able to manage conflict as it is essential to sustain a relationship.

The literature also mentions that online public discourse is often not constructive and involves conflicting opinions, rumours and unreliable information. In support of this, a participant stated that it is crucial that we identify “what type of issues we should respond to and what type of issues we should neglect”. It was further argued that “sometimes, if you respond to small issues, it was big and people will start noticing them, so things need to be neglected; and sometimes there are issues that we need to respond to, and we have to take action”.

This implies that there needs to be a predetermined understanding or policy in place for managing conflict on social media. One participant said, “we have a social media crisis

management plan with a clear crisis management team” to handle these types of conflict, which confirmed that participants had plans in place to manage conflicts on social media.

It was also noticed that participants had used online conflicts to alter the public’s perceptions to favour the organisation or agency image. In support of this, a participant stated that “we resolve the customer’s online issue then we go back to the comment and we tell the online public that it was resolved”. Furthermore, it was stated that “we try to prompt this person to mention that everything was handled okay, so we turn negative into positive”.

Another participant stated that “if you resolved it and left the conversation open, anyone seeing this would think that you did not do a positive action”. This suggested that there are strategies related to the conflict that uses the negative sentiment as a catalyst to influence the public’s perception to favour the organisation or agency.

- **Creating active groups**

The literature states that creating active online groups is a common task performed during digital activism, and that social movements are generally driven to solve a specific problem by creating awareness of a particular cause.

Creating active groups was also emphasised as one of the characteristics of a PR activist, where the activist would scan and evaluate the online environment to inform its communication activities. An activist could interact with existing groups on social media that are active in a particular area of interest. Alternatively, an online group could be created for a specific purpose or around a particular social issue to focus attention on it.

A participant asserted that it would be useful for an organisation or agency to partner with the influencers in an active online group. These influencers should be experts in a particular field to stimulate discourse in that online group. A participant explained that using influencers has specific difficulties, as the “challenge is to target the right type of influencers, regarding objectives, like identifying the right kind of social media influencers, that are very active on social media”.

Another participant mentioned that the organisation or agency needs to develop “profitable and equitable relationships with them”. This agrees with the literature that relationships between an organisation or agency and its active influencers require a constant exchange of information and resources; both parties need to align their understanding to ensure that there is a balance of mutual benefits.

Participants also held a strong position that building active online groups through social media could be achieved by using the organisation’s employees. These employees would act as strategic influencers to cultivate and stimulate the active online group. This idea was reinforced

by one of the participants who mentioned that “you should search who is an ambassador or influencer in your company”. Another participant supported this by stating “some actors in the organisation are relying on the staff, for the support to the organisation, for the communication strategy, they also give some kind of trust; they are the ambassadors, when it is spontaneous, I think it gets more impact”.

The findings confirmed that the participants identified influencers (either internal or external) to participate in active online groups or to support the formation of new online groups. These influencers acted on behalf of the organisation or agency to nurture meaningful online relationships and to persuade individuals in the online group to accept a particular viewpoint to benefit the organisation or agency.

5.5.2.3 *Characteristics of an activist*

The interview guide explored the social role and social responsibility characteristics of an activist. Figure 5.11 shows that both of these characteristics emerged during the thematic analysis.

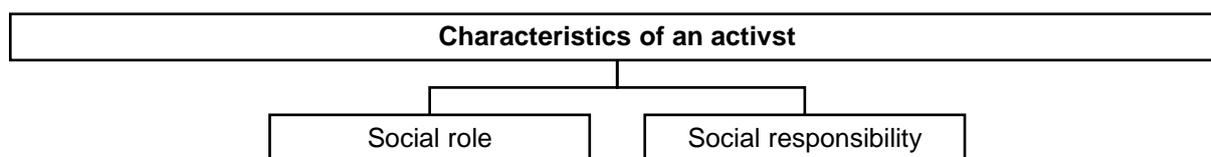


Figure 5.11: Thematic patterns for the characteristics of an activist

The findings demonstrate that the characteristics of an activist, such as playing a social role and accepting social responsibility, were acknowledged by the participants and practised to some degree.

The literature emphasises that PR professionals acting as PR activists would represent the organisation’s conscience and that they would take on a more social role in the organisation. Given this, it was learned that participants were using their country’s national vision as a motivation to promote social responsibility and to build online OPRs that were directed towards supporting society. Although the participants’ intentions aligned with using the organisation or agency’s resources to benefit its society, this practice was in contrast to critical PR, as the participants did not resist the dominant projects of truth and idealised realities.

Furthermore, the literature states that PR activists would be sceptical of any claims of totalising explanations or metanarratives. However, it was seen that it seems impossible to implement PR activism in a hierarchical organisation.

The literature also points out that PR activists would form alliances with subordinated or marginalised groups. This was in fact confirmed by one interview participant, who stated that the national vision has a social responsibility aspect to it, as “we have to create a new volunteer team for our organisation, who was responsible for conducting the voluntary activity for the community, this is part of the 2030 vision”. Another participant recommended that the organisation or agency needs to “adjust its internal activity to be in the same line as the 2030 vision”. This suggests that participants were mainly focused on compliance rather than implementing PR activism.

However, it is noticeable that they were conscious of their social role in their organisation or agency as they were attempting to encourage the organisation or agency to participate in online dialogue about specific social responsibility issues.

The two characteristics of an activist discussed below are social role and social responsibility.

- **Social role**

The literature emphasises that PR professionals are obligated to take on a social role in the organisation or agency. PR professionals should uphold a set of morals and ethical responsibilities in the organisation or agency.

One participant stated that codes of ethics are essential in PR and that “telling the truth” should never be compromised. However, another participant indicated that not all PR professionals take on a social role as it “depends obviously on the PR professional’s code of ethics or his morals”. This revealed a belief that taking on a social role is a personal endeavour and that the PR professional can decide whether or not to take it on.

The literature highlights that PR professionals who practice critical PR would promote discourse that challenges the authorities’ power and discloses breaches and inconsistencies. This behaviour was not evident amongst the participants, which suggests that they struggled to implement certain degrees of critical PR in a dominant structure.

One participant explained that the reason these levels of critical PR might not be practised is that “it falls back to a combination between culture and religion”. Furthermore, the participant stated that, if “I expose somebody that is in crime or a gang member, this person is running a gang, that is ruining his family’s life, that can fly outside [the country of Saudi Arabia], but the culture here we do not have that”. This suggests that the participant’s culture also influenced the degree to which a social role was practised.

The findings identified degrees of moral obligations that defined the participant's social role, such as truth and codes of ethics.

- **Social responsibility**

The literature emphasises that PR professionals in the Middle East find themselves in an environment where they can use the country's national vision as a motivation to direct the organisation or agency resources to contribute to its society.

It was discovered that this practice was being implemented through the organisation or agency's CSR efforts. This practice is in contrast to critical PR, which rejects partnering with authoritative and dominant structures of power. One participant explained that they could only do "what we can in our capabilities as an organisation or agency". This illustrates that the participant had to work within limited parameters and capabilities governed by the organisation in order to contribute to its society. The participants generally agreed that social responsibility was directed and implemented through the organisations' CSR programmes.

Although there are many communication activities that PR professionals can use to deliver on social responsibility, CSR was a prominent one, to which the participants related the most. Participants felt they could engage in online discourse about societal issues within the organisation or agency's CSR boundaries. As an example, one participant stated that "Nike could engage with promoting physical fitness, that could be one of its CSR pillars, in trying to reduce obesity". This example provided by the participant reveals confidence about engaging with the societal issue of obesity when it was part of the organisation or agency's CSR programme.

A participant stated that, "for the corporate social responsibility, it is important to consider the social media". Although it has previously been noted that the participants did not debate general societal issues on social media, they did, however, feel free to promote awareness and initiate online discussions about specific societal issues that the organisation or agency supported in its CSR programmes. It was further argued, "I think that as part of the social responsibility, which is now requested more and more, it shows the commitment of the organisation or agency, I think the proof is in the communications".

These findings indicate that there is a possible starting point for critical PR to be implemented through the organisation or agency's CSR programmes, as they enable and provide resources for the PR professional to focus on specific societal issues. This is to some degree aligned with the literature's emphasis that PR professionals must focus on social situations as a precondition for economic progress.

The next subsection reports on the category relating to online OPRs.

5.5.3 Online organisation–public relationships

This theme aimed to explore four categories that were related to online OPRs. The first category explored the complexities of online OPRs. The second determined the level at which the organisation or agency developed antecedents as a foundation for building quality online OPRs. The third examined the degree to which the organisation or agency used cultivation strategies to online OPRs. Lastly, the fourth category in the theme explored the degree to which cultural sensitivity was practised in developing online OPRs networks.

Insights into these categories formed the researcher’s understanding of the participants’ perceptions of online OPRs in the Middle East.

5.5.3.1 Challenges in online organisation–public relationships

The interview guide explored four problems encountered in online OPRs, specifically training, content and timing, perceptions of social media and restrictions on free speech. However, six prominent complexities emerged during the thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 5.12.

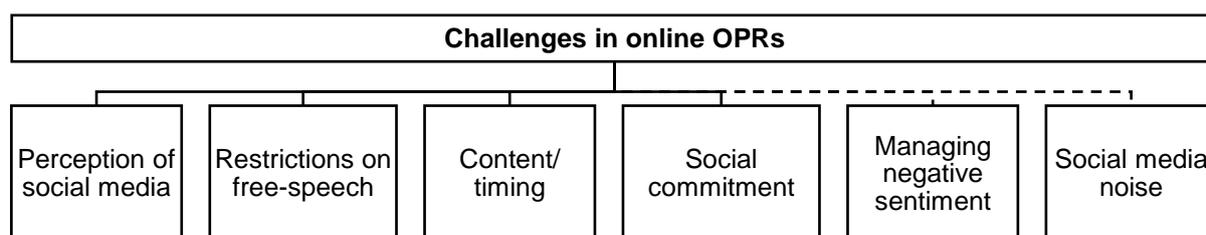


Figure 5.12: Thematic patterns for the challenges in online organisation–public relationships

It was learned that participants did not feel that training was a problem. As one participant declared:

“The social media is sensitive, very sensitive media platform. That is why you need to make sure that your team are trained well, they have good knowledge, they have a good experience, they are very well educated, they know how to deal with feedback from others. They should also have good knowledge of how to escalate any risk or any issue that we are facing on our social media through the proper concerned departments.”

This statement suggests that the participant had a good understanding of the level of training that the individual or team needed to manage the organisation or agency’s social media accounts. In general, the respondents did not find that training was an issue for building online

OPRs so the interviews did not provide adequate information to report on this issue. It is for this reason that training was excluded as a problem.

However, three new patterns emerged from the thematic analysis: social commitment, managing negative sentiment and social media noise, which have been included in this section.

The participants generally agreed that there needs to be a genuine business or communication need to open social media accounts for the organisation or agency. This was confirmed by one participant who raised the question:

“Are you going to invest in a genuine community of people? If you are, then you have a responsibility to those people that you have coalesced around a particular issue. If you are not interested in building a genuine community, then what is the point and why bother, then you can direct your resources far better elsewhere.”

The above statement is in alignment with the literature, as it emphasises that social media accounts require the organisation or agency to be continuously engaged and to maintain the speed at which interactivity is required.

This demonstrates that an organisation or agency requires resources to be invested in the management of its social media accounts. This was confirmed by a participant who stated, “This needs monetary investment, in specialised tools or sometimes with a dedicated PR team”. This notion was in agreement with the literature, which states that managing active online OPRs conversations in an online network is time-consuming and engaging in numerous concurrent conversations also places a severe demand on the organisation or agency’s resources. Another participant corroborated that “once you start, it is very difficult to stop”.

These findings illustrate that the participants were generally faced with numerous complexities in building and sustaining online OPRs in the Middle East.

The following difficulties in online OPRs are discussed below: perceptions of social media, restrictions on free-speech, content and timing, social commitment, managing negative sentiment, and social media noise.

- **Perception of social media**

There was a noticeable difference between the literature and the participant’s views about the organisation or agency’s top management perception of social media. The literature claims that an organisation or agency’s management often perceives social media as a threat

because it allows open criticism. However, participants generally did not feel that their management felt threatened by the criticism on social media.

Instead, one participant explained that the “challenge is that top management does not have time to listen to the discussions of social media”, which suggests that the participant’s management might not find any value in the content that was being presented to them. Another participant stated, “They [the decision-makers] think it is not important; it is not as important as other things; this is the challenge.” This confirms that the participant’s management perception of social media was not based on fear but on value. This was endorsed by another participant, who stated, “they [the decision-makers] rarely take social media discussions seriously”. This further demonstrates that top management was not focused on the opinions of the online OPRs because it is not a priority.

The literature review presented online OPRs as requiring a continuous obligation from top management to integrate issues raised into its internal decision-making process. The literature further emphasises that it is the responsibility of the PR professional to create awareness of this amongst top management and to integrate the online OPRs issues into decision-making procedures.

The findings demonstrate that the participant’s top management did not prioritise social media as they did not perceive that it provided them with the specific value to operate the business.

- **Restrictions on free-speech**

The literature states that restrictions on free speech in terms of the organisation or agency’s social media policies hindered employees from participating in online discussions about the organisation or agency. The literature also claims that organisations or agencies used policies to restrict free-speech of the employees on social media. It described social media as a public communication channel where organisations and agencies attempt to govern or influence the online discourse.

The participants generally felt that the organisation or agency’s social media policies were a problem and that they restricted the employees from participating in social media discussions. In light of this, one participant stated that employees “have to follow these policies; otherwise they will ruin the company’s brand image. The problem here is that we are a listed company, we cannot play with our image”. This statement supports the literature that explains that social media policies act as a control to govern disclosure of confidential information.

Another participant stressed that “you feel sometimes that you are restricted about what to say and what to mention through your social media accounts”. This shows that the organisation or agency’s social media policies were a problem for the participant.

The findings reveal that social media policies did provide a level of governance to protect the organisations' or agencies' public image and that they also restricted employees, in the sense that they were forced to consider what content was appropriate to share on social media.

- **Content and timing**

The literature states that PR professionals who spearheaded the organisation or agency's online OPRs activities were put to the test in communicating with the right online groups and promoting the right conversations at the right time.

Generally, the participants agreed with this. One participant asserted, "Any kind of communications through social media is challenging". Participants provided some guidance on how they addressed these complexities: one mentioned that there needed to be "a clear social media strategic plan with a clear target audience and clear strategic content strategy for each target audience". This explains why the participant had predetermined and developed clear guidelines to support the PR process in communicating with online OPRs through social media.

This is in agreement with the literature that states that PR efforts on social media would be unsuccessful if they failed to identify key online groups that would support the organisation or agency's goals.

Another participant reinforced this by stating that the organisation had "a clear strategy of who is our target audience, what type of content that each of our target audience is looking for, and how we can reach each target audience through this content, and when to publish this content". This suggests that the participant conducted in-depth research to develop a comprehensive strategic plan outlining the specific procedures to be implemented, to support the content creation and identification process of targeting the appropriate audience.

The literature also states that social media monitoring tools could be used to track and evaluate discussions. This was acknowledged by a participant who stated, "We see in the analytics by the end of the month what type of contents perform very well." Another participant explained, "We are checking what is causing the negative sentiment and how we can evolve. It is all about content, honestly speaking: It is how you create the perfect content for the perfect channel." The findings show that the participants used social media monitoring tools to conduct specific analyses that could be used to improve the value of content and to distribute it to the right audience at the right time.

- **Social commitment**

The literature indicates that an organisation or agency needs to have a genuine investment in building and sustaining online OPRs through social media. This suggests that the organisation

or agency should have a long-term vision for nurturing its online OPRs. This was confirmed by one participant who mentioned “taking into account the durability of these relations; it must also be sustainable for the long-term”. In support of this, another participant stated, “At an organisation or agency level, the challenges might be to develop social commitment.” Both of these statements were supported by the literature, which highlights that the organisation or agency needed to invest in building long-term relationships with specific online OPRs.

The findings suggest that, in order to establish and sustain social commitment from online OPRs, it is necessary to examine the expectations of the communicating parties continuously to ensure there is a mutual understanding.

- **Managing negative sentiment**

The literature warns that negative sentiment is a threat in social media as negative messages can become viral and harm the public image of the organisation. It also highlighted that PR professionals could not control the flow of information on social media as they can with traditional media. This was emphasised in the discussion of the contagion theory, which explained that PR professionals would be faced with a problem in managing a contagious message in social media (threatening or promoting the organisation or agency). Attempting to use strategic online PR to make a target audience change or alter the meaning of the message is very difficult.

This idea was confirmed by a participant who stated, “If the message is positive, it is good for the campaign; if there is a negative message among the larger audience, it is a big challenge to manage”. This shows that the participant had experienced the problem of managing negative sentiment on social media, especially if it has gone viral in the social network. Another participant agreed, saying, “A huge challenge for us was how to decrease the social media negative sentiment.”

These findings suggest that the participants were facing difficulties in managing negative sentiment and that the opinions generated in the social networks were generating contagion.

- **Social media noise**

The literature emphasises that entities using social media are all competing for market awareness. The salience model discussed in the literature review recognises that there are demanding publics on social media competing for public claims and contributing to the social media noise.

One participant confirmed this by stating that the “challenge is the noise from multiple channels, as there are a lot of channels; people receive a lot of information from different

channels”. Considering this difficulty, the literature emphasises that it takes time to gain popularity and attain a generous social network of online OPRs.

The findings were that the participants generally agreed that social media noise and the vast number of social media channels available to the public were challenges that made it difficult for them to reach their strategic audiences.

5.5.3.2 *Antecedents to online organisation–public relationships*

The interview guide explored the following two antecedents to online OPR: expectations and interdependency. Figure 5.13 identifies three prominent antecedents that emerged during the thematic analysis; it was learned that trust emerged as a pattern from the thematic analysis so trust was included in this section.

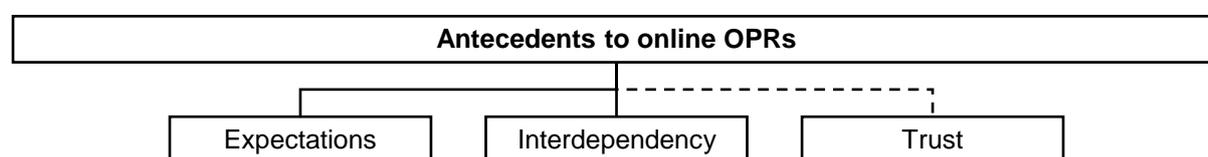


Figure 5.13: Thematic patterns for the antecedents to online organisation–public relationships

The literature defines antecedents as the preconditions that needed to be in place for an organisation or agency to build online OPRs. The literature also states that these antecedents are identified by the PR professional through environmental scanning.

The participants generally agreed that expectations, interdependency and trust were foundational antecedents to online OPRs. The thematic analysis identified trust as a prominent antecedent for the participants.

One participant confirmed this when stating that “we need to be trusted by our followers”. This statement reveals that the participant believed that trust needed to be in place to sustain the organisation or agency’s relationship with its followers. Another participant said that “trust can be built”. This is in line with statements in the literature that trustworthiness or perceived confidence could be established between two parties through demonstrating reliability and honesty.

The following antecedents to online OPRs are discussed in more detail below: expectations, interdependency and trust.

- **Expectations**

The literature emphasises that expectations are created between the two parties as an antecedent to building online OPRs when an exchange or transaction is anticipated, and both parties want something from each other.

This was confirmed by one participant who stated the organisation or agency needed to determine “what are their expectations, and how to make alignment between your internal process”. This suggests that the participant used environmental scanning and research to determine what the online OPRs expectations were. This was confirmed by another participant who stated that it is essential to “analyse your stakeholders and then, for example, draft up the expectations”. Furthermore, the participant suggested that, once these expectations are identified, there needs to be an internal alignment to ensure these expectations are considered.

The literature further states that online OPRs presume that the organisation or agency is dependable and that it delivers on its promises. One participant acknowledged this by stating that “if you show them contents, you better deliver on it”. This demonstrates that there is an expectation between the two parties to deliver on specific promises that have been mutually agreed to.

Taking this into account, another participant stated that a notable expectation with the online OPRs was that the organisation or agency would resolve their complaints: the participant emphasised that “we try to resolve it all online”. This implies that there is a mutual understanding between the organisation or agency and its online OPRs, and that the organisation or agency would behave in a particular manner to support this expectation.

It was further argued that another expectation evident in online OPRs was that the organisation or agency is “a reliable source of information to these online communities or social media followers”. This agreed with the literature, which states that the organisation or agency should share reliable information.

These findings suggest that in order to build and sustain these online relationships, there needed to be clear expectations in place between the organisation or agency and its online publics.

- **Interdependency**

The literature states that there is a level of interdependency between the organisation or agency and its online OPRs. This implies that the behaviours of each party could have positive or negative consequences on each other.

One participant discussed how customers have interdependency on the organisation or agency and that it needed to address customer issues as quickly as possible. The participant asserted, “If they have any problem, you should sort it out in hours. Don’t ignore any customer.” This affirmed a detectable level of interdependency between an organisation or agency and its customers.

It was further argued that the organisation or agency’s online groups are dependent on receiving official and reliable updates on specific developments. One participant stated, “Let’s say there was an incident in the plant; if there was a fire, we should be the first ones to report it, before the media.” This was in line with the literature, which mentions that, if an organisation or agency is slow to provide its public with reliable information, it would be vulnerable to false information being published from alternative online accounts.

These findings reveal that the participants were aware of certain interdependencies that supported building and sustaining online OPRs.

- **Trust**

The literature states that trust is an essential antecedent for an organisation or agency to build and sustain online OPRs. It is a central precondition for the survival of a relationship. The literature also states an organisation or agency needs to uphold a high standard of trust to ensure that its relationships with its online publics are in good standing.

A participant reasoned, “We are a listed company on the Saudi stock market, so we need to be trusted by our followers that everything mentioned in our account is reliable, and that what we share is the right information.” This emphasises the point that the participant placed a significant value on trust as an antecedent. It further implies that trust between an organisation or agency and its online groups might be linked to delivering reliable information.

This is aligned with the literature, which states that trust is the precondition and aim of persuasion. An organisation or agency would not be able to engage in persuasive discourse if there were not a healthy level of trust from the online publics.

Another participant argued that online groups “are better informed, thanks to the web and social media; they are requesting and demanding greater transparency”. This is also aligned with the literature, which explains that trust ensures reliability and improves the efficiency of the relationship.

These findings support the idea that the majority of the participants perceived that trust can be built and that it is dependent on providing reliable information to its online OPRs.

5.5.3.3 Strategies for online organisation–public relationships

The interview guide explored three strategies in online OPRs: access, assurance and openness. Figure 5.14 shows that six prominent strategies emerged during the thematic analysis: Three new patterns emerged from the thematic analysis so positivity, sharing of tasks and networking were included in this section.

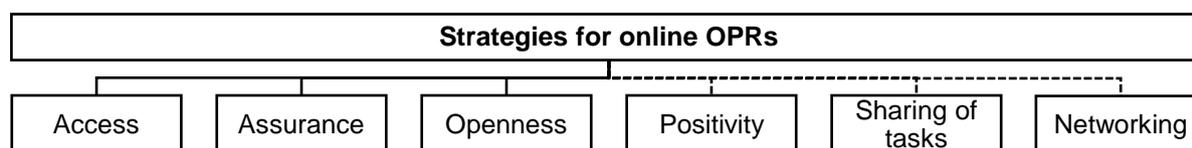


Figure 5.14: Thematic patterns for strategies for online organisation–public relationships

The literature states that strategies refer to the organisation or agency’s behavioural efforts to create and maintain quality relationships with key online OPRs. It requires relationship management skills to ensure that online OPRs do not dissolve.

It was noticed that the participants generally used these strategies as measures that the organisation or agency might use to track the effect of its relationship efforts on its online OPRs. One participant’s view was that:

“There has to be a good social media strategy, with a clear target audience list, with a clear content strategy, with a clear messaging and tone of voice, clear policies, what to do, and what we should not do, monitoring. Of course, this will help them in a positive way.”

This statement discloses that the participant’s organisation or agency had developed a variety of interlocking strategies that supported and guided the PR department in managing the online OPRs. Another participant argued that “it is with ongoing insight that you keep going”. These positions may indicate that environmental monitoring provided essential insight that influenced how the strategic plan was implemented.

Another participant stated, “We revise our social media strategy every six months; we used to do it once per year.” This suggests that there was an ongoing, evolving approach, which is in line with the literature that states that the strategies for online OPRs need to be dynamic, changeable, flexible and adaptable to environmental complexities.

Another discovery was that an organisation or agency could not rely on one social media strategy to target multiple publics. One participant stated that, when it comes to:

“strategy, there is a difference between country and country: If your target is in your country, you should only study what is my country’s concept for social media, what is accepted, what is the language, everything – you should have steps in your country. If you think for globally, no, you should learn for each country who is your target.”

This position is aligned with the literature that asserts that an organisation or agency should use a variety of strategies simultaneously to build and sustain online OPRs. It further states that relationships change and the expected behaviour should also be modified to sustain mutual interest or mutually-beneficial relationships.

The findings show that the participants generally realised that environmental changes and shifting perceptions are influencers that affect the organisation or agency’s overall strategies in online OPRs.

The following six strategies for online OPRs are discussed in more detail in the next subsections: access, assurance, openness, positivity, sharing of tasks and networking.

- **Access**

The literature declares that access is a strategy for online OPRs; it explains that access is given when the organisation or agency allows its employees to participate in handling sporadic social media enquiries from the online publics.

The participants generally endorsed the idea of providing employees with access as a strategy in building and sustaining online OPRs. One participant confirmed that “you need to get the hype from the employees; the emotions that are reflected from the employees is what our organisation is to the customers”. This demonstrates that the participant acknowledged that employees add value to the building and sustaining of an organisation or agency’s online OPRs. It also suggests that the organisation or agency’s internal culture may influence or be projected onto its online OPRs. This was verified by another participant, who stated that the organisation or agency should “have a central content hub and use your staff as nodes to push out that centralised content”.

This intimates that the participants were in favour of providing the employees with a certain degree of support in terms of producing organisation- or agency-specific content.

- **Assurance**

The literature review showed that assurance is a strategy for online OPRs, it refers to using social media as a tool to recognise the online public’s issues and to include them in the organisation or agency’s decision-making process. The literature further states that the

process of assurance ensures that online OPRs have moral inclusiveness with the organisation or agency. Assurance as a strategy also indicates that both parties are committed to sustaining the online relationship.

One participant acknowledged that online OPRs required assurance from the organisation or agency: “the consumers request some time to be listened to by the top level, by the authority and the decision-makers; they want to get quick answers and satisfaction to their request.” This demonstrates that the participant’s online OPRs expected the organisation or agency to recognise the issues that had been raised on social media.

It was further argued by another participant that “it should be clear what type of issues we should respond to”. This shows that the participant was aware of the online OPR issues and that a specific procedure needed to be followed in deciding which issues needed assurance from the organisation or agency.

This is supported by the literature that discusses the theory of the salience model, which states that not all publics have the same level of power, urgency and legitimacy. It also testifies that a demanding public possesses urgency, but without power and legitimacy, so seeks attention from the organisation or agency. The noise produced by a demanding public is not dangerous and is not sufficient to project a public claim.

These findings illustrate that the participants did acknowledge assurance as a strategy for online OPRs. Furthermore, the organisation or agency is selective in which online OPRs it would provide that assurance to on social media.

- **Openness**

The literature states that openness can be used as a strategy for online OPRs. Openness can be understood as the moral obligation or behavioural effort of the organisation, agency or public to disclose or be transparent about its thoughts and emotions regarding specific issues, situations or circumstances.

It was seen that the participants did generally value openness and transparency. One participant stressed, “If something happened, don’t lie.” This demonstrates that openness was acknowledged and that the participant felt a moral responsibility to tell the truth about a specific incident.

It was clarified by another participant, who stated, “You can’t say everything about the business.” This shows that the participant could not divulge confidential information to the online public, which demonstrated that there are restrictions to the degree of transparency that an organisation or agency can have on social media.

Another participant stated, “We are not as open here to other people’s opinions as in other parts of the world; that is a cultural thing, but it is a stereotype, and it is not true for everybody.”

These findings reveal that the participants generally valued openness; however, cultural influences and organisational or agency restrictions on disclosing certain information limited the strategy.

- **Positivity**

The literature states that, if an organisation or agency places a high value on its online OPRs, it will devote resources to improve the interaction, cooperation and emotions of those people. The literature further emphasises that positivity is seen to be the most effective strategy for building and maintaining mutuality and content.

In support of this, one participant stated that “building a positive attitude and commitment” was a crucial priority in their social media strategy. This demonstrates that the participant associated the online OPR commitment to the organisation or agency with their attraction to positivity.

Furthermore, it was stated that, “if the message is positive, it is good for the campaign”. This highlights the fact that the participant measured the success of the campaign by the level of positivity.

Another participant explained that the culture of the organisation or agency was used to influence the online OPRs level of positivity: We “showcase our culture, as that is very authentic, as it is bringing us a lot of positive engagement”.

These findings suggest that the participants generated social media content that they believed would improve the emotional state of online OPRs and the level of attraction towards the organisation or agency.

- **Sharing of tasks**

The literature emphasises that sharing of tasks is a purposeful behavioural effort from an organisation or agency to involve its key online publics in solving social issues together. It is a strategy that builds mutual involvement between both the organisation or agency and its active online publics. A place where sharing of tasks frequently occurs is in CSR programmes, whereby both parties work together towards a common interest.

This was confirmed by one participant who stated that the organisation or agency “focuses on social responsibility, volunteering for the community projects”. The participant specified that the organisation or agency shared tasks through its CSR and that the volunteering

programmes provided a platform for shared responsibility between the organisation or agency and its active online publics.

Another participant suggested that CSR helped to build relevant relationships; and that the “solution is building our online campaigns about the services and what we are doing for the community”. This shows that the participant attempted to integrate the organisation or agency’s CSR efforts into social media strategies.

A third participant added that “the CSR actions in building a positive attitude and commitment” were key to nurturing online OPRs.

These findings suggest that the participants used volunteer programmes to share specific CSR tasks. Furthermore, the participants may have improved the relationships between the organisation or agency and its online OPRs by conducting online campaigns about the success of its CSR programmes.

- **Networking**

The literature explains that networking is a relationship strategy that supports the organisation or agency in online OPRs. It emphasises that networking is a behavioural effort by the organisation or agency in building relationships with the same groups to whom their key online OPRs are closely related. This practice established social networks.

One participant stated that “social media contributes to creating a kind of proximity with the consumers”. This suggests that there is virtual proximity in social media, which enabled the organisation or agency to develop relations strategically with groups to which their online OPRs were connected.

The literature further explains that social networks grant the organisation or agency network power. According to the literature, network power can be used by PR professionals to advance specific causes by distributing information through the networks to educate larger clusters of individuals. This was acknowledged by one participant, who stated that social media enabled the organisation or agency “to reach much larger audiences”. This suggests that social media provided the participant’s organisation or agency with network power to reach large audiences.

Another participant maintained, “If you have a hundred people saying similar kind of thing, then that is probably quite strong, given the way these kinds of networks grow, the more you radiate out.” This emphasises that network power enables an organisation or agency to tailor specific messages to reach larger audiences in the social networks.

These findings establish that the participants acknowledged that social networking provided the organisation or agency with opportunities to build and sustain online relationships through social media. This is in line with the literature that states that organisations or agencies cannot

merely observe online social networks but have to be strategically and actively involved in creating them.

5.5.3.4 Cultural sensitivity in online organisation–public relationships

The interview guide explored how networking and cultural norms influence how organisations or agencies express cultural sensitivity when building online OPRs. Figure 5.15 shows that cultural norms were the most prominent pattern that emerged from the thematic analysis for cultural sensitivity. Networking was excluded from this section because it was recognised as a relationship strategy and was reported in Section 5.5.3.3.

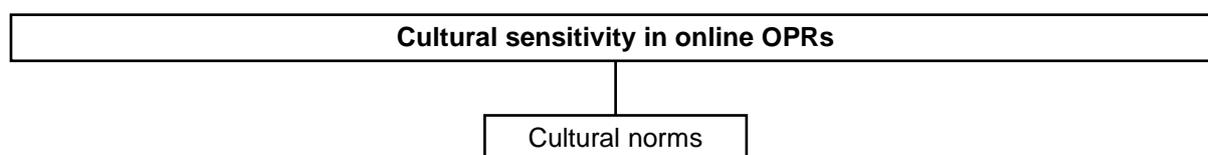


Figure 5.15: Thematic pattern for cultural sensitivity in online organisation–public relationships

The literature emphasises that, for an ideal online public sphere to exist, there needs to be autonomy from the government and economic powers. There also needs to be independence from the discourse of the public citizens, so that it is not determined by the agendas of governments, organisations, agencies, the media or administrative powers. These discourses occur through social media channels that form the Middle Eastern culture. The literature explains that, although social media has provided public communication channels for voices to be heard in the Middle East, it has also gained the attention of the government authorities, who have attempted to control the discourse by surveillance and fear-mongering.

The participants generally revealed that they needed to be sensitive towards the culture in their country. They also needed to be cautious about what information they shared or which societal issues they engaged with on social media. One participant stated that PR professionals needed to be sensitive, “particularly in this part of the world, where you have strict social media rules”. This statement recognises that the participant may have been aware of existing restrictions imposed through government social media policies.

It was further admitted that, “in the Middle East, it is a lot more difficult in engaging in debating, exchanging ideas, disagreeing with one another, without taking things personally”.

These findings demonstrate that the participants generally acknowledged that there were distinctive cultures that influenced how an organisation or agency would communicate with its online OPRs.

Cultural norms are discussed in the next subsection as an element of cultural sensitivity when building online OPRs.

- **Cultural norms**

The literature states that cultural norms reflect specific normative assumptions relating to a group of individual values. It emphasises that PR professionals need to be respectful of and sensitive to cultural norms when dealing with various online OPRs.

It was evident that the participants generally identified with the cultural sensitivities of their organisation or agency's online OPRs, and this was epitomised by the participant who stated that "every community has a specific culture". This implies that the participant acknowledged that there are specific cultural norms that need to be considered for each online OPR.

This is in line with the literature, which emphasises that culture plays a significant part in determining the boundaries and limitations in developing online OPRs. It was supported by another participant, who stated, "Culture affects the way of communication, the way content is shared." This statement suggests that specific cultural attitudes influenced the type of content that was developed for each online OPR.

Another participant proclaimed, "There are aspects about the culture that is positive." This reveals that cultural norms are not necessarily limits or restrictions but can also be areas for positive engagement. This was confirmed by a participant who emphasised that "the themes we use a lot in our social media is interviews with our people, to showcase our culture, as that is very authentic, as it is bringing us a lot of positive engagement".

The findings indicate that the participants acknowledged that communication activities on social media were influenced by various cultural norms that were specific for each online OPRs. They also suggest that the organisation or agency's culture could be used to cultivate positive relationships and build meaningful online OPRs.

The next section reiterates the key findings from the one-on-one interviews.

5.6 KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews provided vital insights into the characteristics of critical PR and the role it played in online OPRs in the Middle East.

It was learned that it generally seemed impossible to implement critical PR in a hierarchical organisation. The literature emphasises an ideal perspective of critical PR, but the participants did not completely align with it or practise it.

The PR professionals working in some of the top 100 listed organisations in the Middle East, who participated in the interviews, did not generally support the idea of rejecting power

structures; instead they placed emphasis on strategies that supported the dominant coalition and the government's national vision. This is in complete contrast to the critical PR presented in the literature, which proposed that PR professionals should resist dominant projects.

It noteworthy that the culture in the Middle East does not favour practising the characteristics of critical PR because it could cause the practitioners to be excluded from the dominant coalition and would result in their not being able to serve the purposes of their organisation or agency. It is in light of this that the researcher observed that the participants demonstrated some degree of the characteristics of critical PR that are useful to the organisations/agency's society. These include the characteristics of an activist, such as taking on a more social role and motivating the organisation or agency to be more socially responsible.

The literature suggests that a PR activist is loyal to a cause and aims to solve societal issues explicitly. This type of behaviour was evident in the participants who reported that they used the organisation or agency's CSR programmes to help them address societal issues. This shows that the participants practised a degree of critical PR that benefited both the organisation or agency and its public.

The findings indicate that, as a starting point, there is an opportunity for critical PR to be implemented through the organisation or agency's CSR programmes, which would enable and provided resources for the PR professional to focus on initiating online conversations about specific societal issues that were predefined by the organisation or agency's decision-makers. This is in line with the literature that insists that PR professionals who are practising critical PR should focus on influencing the organisations/agency's policies for economic progress to benefit society.

The following list summarises the findings from the one-on-one interviews:

- The participants used strategies to alter the public's perceptions to favour the organisation or agency's agenda, which is in contrast to critical PR.
- Mutual understanding was rooted in the organisation's efforts to have constructive online discussions with both external and internal publics; this ensured management of the expectations of the communicating parties.
- The participants were culturally sensitive and aware of the social media restrictions in their respective countries. They were also extremely cautious in how they used social media to persuade a party to accept the organisation or agency viewpoint.
- The participants implemented strategies that used a negative sentiment as a catalyst to persuade the online public's perceptions to favour the organisation or agency. This is in conflict with critical PR as they implemented strategies that supported the dominant coalition instead of its society.
- The findings show that the participants generally faced numerous complexities in building and sustaining online OPRs in the Middle East. New patterns that emerged as additional problems included sustaining social commitment, managing negative sentiment and social media noise.
- Cultural norms played a significant part in determining the boundaries and limitations of online OPRs.

The next section discusses the variances between the quantitative results and qualitative findings.

5.7 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

This section examines the variances between the items that were correlated in the quantitative results and the patterns that emerged from the qualitative interviews.

Table 5.9: Comparative summary of quantitative results and qualitative findings

Categories	Items that were correlated in the quantitative results	Patterns that emerged from the qualitative interviews
Factor 1: Characteristics of persuasive dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing • Trust • Mutual understanding • Co-creation of solutions • Interactive communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing • Mutual understanding • Interactive communication
Factor 2: Characteristics of persuasion in activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debating societal issues • Resolving conflict • Creating active groups • Positive coercion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolving conflict • Creating active groups
Factor 3: Characteristics of an activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social role • Social responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social role • Social responsibility
Factor 4: Challenges in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of social media • Restrictions on free-speech • Training • Content and timing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of social media • Restrictions on free-speech • Content and timing • Social commitment • Managing negative sentiment • Social media noise
Factor 5: Antecedents in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations • Interdependency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations • Interdependency • Trust
Factor 6: Strategies in online OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • Assurance • Openness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • Assurance • Openness • Positivity • Sharing of tasks • Networks
Factor 7: Cultural sensitivity in OPRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks • Cultural norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural norms

The categories identified in Table 5.9 were formed through the exploratory factor analysis that was done from the web-based survey data, which provided enough scientific evidence to group these items together into factors.

The results from the web-based survey show that the respondents had a neutral position towards the characteristics of persuasion in activism, challenges in online OPRs and strategies in online OPRs. This demonstrates that the respondents did not agree with the items in each of those categories or were undecided. It was further noticed that the respondents generally

agreed to the items in the characteristics of persuasive dialogue, characteristics of an activist, antecedents in online OPRs and cultural sensitivity in OPRs.

The results from the web-based survey directed the structure and questions in the interview guide; the interviews provided an in-depth understanding of each item in each category. A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts, and patterns were identified in each category. New patterns emerged for some of the categories and some of the items had to be excluded as the participants did not practise or acknowledge them.

The following new patterns emerged from the qualitative findings:

- Three new complexities emerged in online OPRs and the following new patterns were included in this category: social commitment, managing negative sentiment and social media noise.
- Positivity and sharing of tasks emerged as new patterns for strategies in online OPRs.
- It was discovered that networking was a relationship strategy and not part of cultural sensitivity.

The following summarises the reasons why certain patterns were not explored in the qualitative findings:

- The participants in the interviews did not practise the co-creation of solutions.
- Participants felt that it was inappropriate to debate societal issues on social media as they were concerned about their respective country's restrictions and surveillance on social media.
- The participants did not practise coercive strategies that use power to attain compliance.
- The participants generally provided training and that they themselves received enough social media training; it was therefore not considered a challenge to building online OPRs.

These findings suggest that the respondents from the quantitative web-based survey and the participants in the one-on-one interviews did provide some new insights into the role that critical PR could have in online OPRs in the Middle East.

A notable finding is that the participants did not have online debates about societal issues on social media, although this characteristic is prominent in the literature, especially in the paradigm of critical PR and PR activism.

The next section provides a brief summary of this chapter.

5.8 SUMMARY

Monarchs rule the majority of Middle Eastern countries and all of the GCC countries. The literature emphasises certain ideals of critical PR, such as activism, which are not tolerated in these countries. It is in the context of this situation that the researcher attempted to discover what role critical PR could play in online OPRs through social media. It was found that PR professionals in the Middle East were slow to take up critical PR. It was also noticed that it seemed impossible to implement PR activism in a hegemonic organisation or agency and an autocratic monarchic structure. It was observed that the participants were more loyal to their organisation or agency than to a particular cause. It was clear that critical PR practices were not used to resist the organisation or agency, which is entirely contradictory to the literature, as it mentions that critical PR practices are fundamental approaches used against the dominant alliance of power.

The following points summarise the degree to which some of the characteristics of critical PR were observed in respondents and participants in the Middle East in building online OPRs:

- Participants felt that they had a moral obligation to be transparent by providing reliable and trustworthy information to online groups. This is in line with PR activism and digital activism, whereby information is distributed on social media in order to expose illegitimate dictatorial principles that are embedded in autocratic structures.
- Participants generally attempted to resolve customer conflicts raised on social media. Although this finding suggests that the participant's efforts were benefiting the dominant power structure, it also implies that the participants do attempt to address and resolve societal issues.
- Participants agreed that they used social media influencers to create active online groups. This practice aligns with that of PR professionals who practise digital activism and use digital technologies to mobilise citizens to solve social problems through collaborative efforts.
- Participants wanted to practise ethical decision-making, which is consistent with the concept of critical PR, as it challenges existing PR practices and provides a level of resistance towards the dominant power structures' intentions, corruption and unethical behaviour.
- Participants do attempt to act as the organisation's conscience by taking on a more social role, and they did try to include societal issues as part of the top management agenda. This aligns with PR activism in that the participants were

taking on a more social role and attempting to influence the decision-making process.

- Participants felt that they did form alliances with subordinated or marginalised groups. This conduct aligns with critical theory as its ultimate goal is man's emancipation from slavery and it places issues of power and truth at the core of enquiries.
- Participants agreed that they coordinated with active online publics towards a specific CSR agenda. This suggests that participants were acting as their organisation's PR activist in attempts to address and resolve societal issues by using the organisation or agency's resources dedicated to its CSR programmes.
- Participants believed that they did encourage the organisation or agency to instigate discussions on social media. This is consistent with critical PR, which advocates that the PR activist should act as the facilitator of debate, dissent, and discussions and encourage online public input.
- Participants admitted that they took advice from social movements. This is in line with the literature that highlights that PR activists focus on social situations and take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, environment and social equality.
- Participants generally felt that they attempted to influence the organisation or agency's policies to benefit society. This behaviour is aligned with the characteristic of the PR activist, who attempts to influence the organisation or agency decision-making process so that it results in changing policies and procedures to support its society.

In conclusion, the PR professional who practises digital activism is in a continuous online war between the principle of empowering the human rights aspect of free-speech and the overarching intention to control and manipulate the public. PR professionals working on online OPRs are extremely challenged when attempting to build online relationships, as they are motivated to take on an ethical role in promoting trust, openness and transparency by acting as the PR activist in the organisation or agency while, at the same time, attempting to guide the organisation in its involvement in uncharted public deliberation, where criticism is abundant.

The next chapter provides a conclusion and a summary of the main findings, limitations and strengths of this study, as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study contributed to critical PR research on PR practice in a Middle East context. Its purpose was to explore the practice of critical PR and to understand how it could play a role in online OPRs in the Middle East. The first step to achieving this was an exploration of the theories in the existing literature on critical PR and the stages of developing online OPRs on social media. The second step was to measure the characteristic elements of critical PR and the principles of online OPRs in the theory against the existing practices of PR professionals in the Middle East.

The empirical study aimed to explore the prominent characteristics of critical PR, including its role in online OPRs in the Middle East. It was discovered that PR activism is evident in Middle Eastern countries, especially among females who are demanding political and social reform. Activists in the region have utilised social media as a strategic tool to encourage debate and participation in resolving societal issues. Governments in the Middle East have strict laws that govern free speech and do not tolerate rhetoric that criticises the ruling authority. Against this background, the majority of the governments in the region have implemented transformational agendas. They have also encouraged national visions that promise to address specific societal issues, as well as attempt to resolve problems associated with the oil crisis, job creation, economic growth and diversification of revenue. Given this, there seems to be an on-going power struggle between the government and its publics.

This study put forward the notion that PR professionals in the region need to act as PR activists in the organisation or agency, who would place more focus on solving societal issues than on the objectives of the organisation or agency. The study proposed that these PR professionals should take on a distinctive social role in the organisation or agency, and that they would intentionally influence its policies so that it would benefit the communities in which it operates. Furthermore, it proposed that these PR professionals should scan and evaluate online discussions on social media in order to incorporate societal issues into the organisation or agency's decision-making process.

This chapter reviews the subproblems and research questions that were identified in this study and how they were addressed to answer the research problem. It reflects on the research methods used in the study and summarises the significant findings, which include insights from both theory and practice. This is followed by a recognition of the limitations and contributions of the study, as well as the recommendations for future research.

6.2 REVIEW OF THE STUDY

Table 6.1 provides an overview and outcomes of the subproblems and research questions for each chapter in this study.

Table 6.1: Review of the study aligned with the subproblems

Chapter	Focus	Subproblem and research question addressed	Overview	Outcome
Chapter 1	Orientation and rationale of the study. Definition of key concepts.	This chapter did not focus on a specific subproblem or research question. It did, however, provide an orientation and rationale for the study.	Chapter 1 provided context and background to the study, outlined the study's objectives and explained its relevance and relationship to the discipline of communication. The chapter expounded on the fundamental concepts of the study and research methodology.	The outcomes of the chapter were an orientation and rationale for the study. It provided definitions of key concepts such as PR, publics, critical PR, PR activism, OPRs, online OPRs and a brief description of the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs.
Chapter 2	Literature review	<p>Subproblem 1: To explore the emergence of critical PR from theory and practice.</p> <p>Subproblem 2: To explore touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations.</p> <p>Research question 1: How are PR ideologies defined in theory and in practice?</p> <p>Research question 2: What are the touchpoints and critical PR developments in Middle East organisations?</p>	This chapter discussed PR as a foundational concept to the study. It described the concept of PR critical theory, and identified characteristics of PR professionals who act as PR activists. The chapter provided an overview of the Middle Eastern countries, with a specific focus on the GCC, whose member countries are leaders in the wider region. The chapter explored contemporary issues in the Middle East, and concluded with critical developments in the Middle East.	The chapter discussed critical theory, defined critical PR and identified characteristics of PR activism. It emphasised that PR professionals who are practising critical PR need to take on a more social role in the organisation. The chapter suggested that PR activism was evident in Middle Eastern countries, although governments do not tolerate free speech.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Chapter	Focus	Subproblem and research question addressed	Overview	Outcome
Chapter 3	Literature review	<p>Subproblem 3: To determine how the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics.</p> <p>Research question 3: How do the largest listed organisations in the Middle East interact and engage in sustained online communication with publics?</p>	<p>Chapter 3 discussed the dimensions and characteristics of OPRs, and the salience model as a process for public identification. The chapter explored the three stages in developing OPRs, which are identifying the key antecedents of relationships, relationship cultivation strategies, and relationship cultivation outcomes. It investigated another critical concept of the study, which was ICTs and how they contribute to social media and digital activism. The chapter also addressed online OPRs, as well as identifying the ideal conditions for online OPRs, and the role of social media in building them.</p>	<p>This chapter suggested that organisations can use social media as a strategic tool to build active online publics and to sustain their online OPRs. It identified three stages that are considered by a PR professional in developing online OPRs. It explored the difficulties of using social media to build online OPRs, as well as the influence of digital activism. It identified the characteristics of PR professionals practising digital activism and the role of social media in building online OPRs.</p>
Chapter 4	Research Methodology	<p>This chapter did not focus on a specific sub-problem or research question, but did provide an overview of the research methods for the quantitative and qualitative approaches.</p>	<p>This chapter provided an overview of the research methods required to address the subproblems and research questions. It explained that the study was explorative and interpretive. It discussed how triangulation was used to gather data from multiple data sources, such as the existing literature, a quantitative survey and qualitative one-on-one interviews. It also identified the unit of analysis and the data collection methods. It presented the quantitative web-based survey and the qualitative interview guide. It discussed strategies to improve the study's reliability, validity and trustworthiness, and concluded with ethical considerations.</p>	<p>The outcomes of the chapter determined the research methodology for the quantitative web-based survey and the qualitative one-on-one interviews.</p>

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Chapter	Focus	Subproblem and research question addressed	Overview	Outcome
Chapter 5	Data reporting and interpretation of findings	<p>Subproblem 4: To determine the degree to which the characteristics of critical PR are practised in the Middle East.</p> <p>Subproblem 5: To determine the role that critical PR plays in building online OPRs in the Middle East.</p> <p>Research question 4: Are the characteristics of critical PR acknowledged and practised in the Middle East?</p> <p>Research question 5: What role does critical PR play in building online OPRs in the Middle East?</p>	<p>Chapter 5 focused on reporting and interpreting the data results attained from the 233 PR professionals in the Middle East who completed the quantitative web-based survey. It reported and interpreted the findings from the nine one-on-one interviews with participants from the top 100 listed organisations in the Middle East. The chapter discussed the key differences between the quantitative results and the qualitative findings.</p>	<p>The outcomes of the chapter were the results from the quantitative web-based survey and the findings from the qualitative one-on-one interviews.</p>
Chapter 6	Conclusion	<p>Although the chapter did not address a specific subproblem or research question, and focused on providing a comprehensive summary of the significant findings of the study.</p>	<p>This chapter provided a summary of the significant findings of the study, it further reflected on the research methodology that was used in the study to explore the role that critical PR plays in online OPRs. It also identified the limitations and contributions to the study and concluded with recommendations for future research.</p>	<p>The outcomes of the chapter were a conclusion and summary of the role that critical PR plays in online OPRs in the Middle East.</p>

6.3 REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IMPLEMENTED IN THE STUDY

The unit of analysis for this study was PR professionals, and the population was located in the Middle East. It was assumed that these individuals would have knowledge and experience of online OPRs and critical PR practice. The researcher formulated each statement (question) in the questionnaire based on theoretical concepts in the literature review. To improve the level of face validity, the researcher utilised the professional insights of a supervisor and a statistician to assess whether the measurement techniques were correct. Their insights led the researcher to reduce the initial questions and the overall length of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then translated into Arabic, and the translation was reviewed by an Arab PR professional. A pilot study was conducted with a group of individuals who were not involved in the study to identify any errors in interacting with the online web-based survey. Thereafter, a panel of Middle Eastern PR experts was consulted to assess whether the questionnaire adequately addressed the key concepts being studied.

The researcher then sent invitations to PR professionals from the MEPRA membership and to those identified on LinkedIn, and the quantitative web-based survey was completed by 233 PR professionals from the Middle East. The statistician tabulated the data using the computer-aided software, SAS version 9.4, and an exploratory factor analysis was calculated using Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy on the 41 web-based survey questions. This allowed the researcher to group specific items in each factor and to develop a deeper understanding of the relationships between the literature and the quantitative results.

A Cronbach alpha coefficient method was used to measure the internal consistency of the factors that had three or more items. An item analysis was also conducted to determine how the Cronbach Alpha would be affected if one of the items was removed from the factor. Despite weak internal consistencies for the Cronbach Alphas, there was enough statistical justification that the items in each factor correlate.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the linear correlation in the remaining factors, which only had two items each. Although the Pearson correlation coefficients for the factors had a weak linear correlation, there was still enough statistical evidence that the two items in each factor correlate. Future research should revise the questions in the survey to measure these factors more accurately.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine whether the response groups (which included GCCR, GMER, LR and Other) were the same or differed in some value of interest on an ordinal or nominal level. The typical response for each factor by response group provided

insight into which factors the respondents agreed with and which of them they were uncertain about. The researcher focused the quantitative reporting and interpretation on factors that had significant results, which were the main factors that respondents supported.

The quantitative results directed the interview guide, as it presented questions on the specific topics being investigated in each of the categories (factors). Non-standardised one-on-one semi-structured interviews were administered with PR professionals from the Middle East Business Intelligence Index. The researcher targeted PR professionals from the top 100 listed organisations in the Middle East as it was assumed that these individuals would be leading the implementation of online OPRs in the Middle East. The researcher contacted the majority of the top 100 listed organisations to invite their respective PR professionals to participate in a telephonic one-on-one interview. Several participants did respond positively; however, when they reviewed the interview guide, many opted out of the interview. The researcher conducted a pilot interview before sending out the invitations. In total, nine telephonic interviews were conducted with eight of the top 100 listed organisations.

A few of the participants interviewed were not fluent in English and this limited their ability to provide in-depth explanations of the topics being investigated.

The researcher recorded and transcribed all the interviews. The audio recordings of the one-on-one interviews were an advantage for the researcher as they allowed for easy transcribing of the conversations for data analysis. Thematic and content analysis methods were used to analyse the transcripts, and produced both existing and new ideas. All of the categories were reported and interpreted in the qualitative findings.

The next section provides an overview of the major findings in the study. It focuses on PR in the Middle East, critical PR, online OPRs on social media, and the role of critical PR in online OPRs.

6.4 SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR FINDINGS IN THE STUDY FROM THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section focuses on summarising PR in the Middle East, as it is in this context that PR professionals need to add value to the organisation and its online publics. It also highlights significant findings related to critical PR and online OPRs on social media, which were two foundational concepts for this study. The section concludes with a review of the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs in the Middle East.

6.4.1 PR in the Middle East

The study defined PR as a “communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics” (Molleda & Kochhar 2015:949). There was a transformational social movement happening in the Middle East, which revolved around liberating society. This was caused by suppressing human rights and restricting freedom of speech. Human rights and freedom of expression are two distinct issues that are noticeably growing on social networks in the Middle East. Activists in the region understand the power that social networks have to inform and raise consciousness about facts and events. PR is the key to engaging in this complex social, economic and political climate.

6.4.1.1 *From a social perspective*

Females and youths have been boldly leading the transformational social movement by openly expressing their views and encouraging public debates about societal issues on social media. The PR industry in the region has been significantly affected by attention to the female rights crusade. Female’s contributions to social networks in the region have increased, and these networks have become platforms for debate, dissent, raising societal issues and public discussions.

Online activism was a driving factor in the 2011 Arab Spring, which was an Arab revolution that spread throughout the Middle East in the form of violent and non-violent protests.

6.4.1.2 *From a governance perspective*

The governments in the Middle East are not tolerant of criticism of the authorities, as they enforce strict punishment of anyone who instigates any form of disobedience. Individuals who have criticised authorities or who have encouraged public discussion of sensitive issues have been identified as activists. Many of these activists have received severe punishment. Governments in the region have created a climate of fear and intimidation for activists who are using social networks to speak against their beliefs and values. Governments are using social network surveillance and trolling (the systematic process of monitoring online users) as a form of online social control.

Many of the governments in the Middle East are leading transformational agendas through their national visions. They are attempting to convince their publics that they are addressing a variety of societal issues that would develop new sources of revenue that would benefit and safeguard future generations. Middle Eastern countries are increasing their investments in PR to refashion their negative public image, and to attract business investors to their diversification programmes. PR professionals in organisations and agencies in the Middle

East are encouraged to shape government-sponsored communication campaigns. It was also discovered that the Middle East has a rising demand for PR professionals, as many of the countries are recruiting these professionals to support their radical transformational strategies.

6.4.1.3 *From an organisation-centred perspective*

The primary aim of PR is to build and sustain OPRs for the survival of the organisation. Organisations in the Middle East are noticing a shift in responsibility, where PR professionals are expected to play more of a social role, to mediate ongoing debates, and to encourage public input on social networks. PR professionals need to keep a much closer watch on the organisation and to have a keen understanding of how the organisation is shifting with complex environmental developments. ICTs have also captured the attention of organisations in the Middle East, as they provide a link that enables organisations to engage with their online publics directly.

6.4.1.4 *From the PR professional's perspective*

Participants in the region felt that they were faced with an unpredictable environment. In light of this, participants were cautious about sharing information online and did not support the idea of debating societal issues on social media. They did feel responsible for building and sustaining the organisation's online relationships, and they demonstrated that they had various strategies and processes in place to address customer conflicts on social media. They also believed they needed to facilitate online relationships by encouraging the organisation to participate in interactive communication.

Participants felt that the organisations' CSR programmes should support social situations by providing resources to address specific societal issues. They felt that they could provide PR backing by creating active online publics that supported these CSR programmes. They also felt that they could use these CSR programmes as a foundation for meaningful online relationships. They agreed that, if there were support from top management for engaging with specific societal issues, they would feel confident about contributing to online discussions about that specific topic of interest.

Participants showed that they supported their country's transformational agendas and that they believed they would benefit their country's society. They also felt the need to take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, the environment and social equality.

The next subsection provides a brief summary of the major findings related to critical PR.

6.4.2 Critical PR

Critical theorists have claimed that Critical PR radically changes the traditional approach of PR, from asking how it can assist organisations to be more profitable, to asking what its role is in society. Critical PR advocates that PR professionals take on a more social role and act as PR activists in the organisation, facilitating debate, dialogue and dissent to encourage public input. In so doing, they would influence public policies for developing long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society.

The study discerned ideal characteristics associated with critical PR, which would be observed when a PR professional:

- uses bio-power to resist dominant power;
- does not align with authoritative organisational power structures;
- strives for multidirectional and inclusive power;
- challenges the legitimacy of determining organisational outcomes through strategies and goal setting;
- uses dissensus to promote discourse that challenges authorities' power;
- acts as the organisational activist (change agent) who deconstructs the language of management and gives a voice to those deprived of power;
- is the voice of conscience in ethical situations;
- resists philosophical and theoretical meta-narratives; and
- bases decisions on particularism (the particular circumstances at hand).

The study discovered that these characteristics are idealistic and slow to be implemented by PR professionals from the top 100 largest listed organisations in the Middle East. A possible reason for this is that the participants were working in a hierarchical organisation, which hinders the display of these ideal characteristics.

Participants believed, however, that they had a moral responsibility to distribute truthful information and to practice ethical decision-making. The majority of the participants supported their countries' national visions and transformational agendas, which is in total contrast to the usual critical PR practice.

However, it was learned that there had been a noteworthy paradigm shift in the way PR professionals dealt with societal issues. Participants demonstrated the characteristics of PR activism to some degree. In the literature, it was explained that the practice of critical PR would motivate PR professionals to play more of a social role and to act as the internal organisational PR activist. The majority of the participants attempted to persuade the top management to

address societal issues and to include them in their decision-making process; however, top management, in general, was not interested in supporting this practice. They felt that it did not add any value and that they had no time to discuss societal issues on social media.

Participants did, however, endeavour to use CSR as a platform to obtain top management's support in allocating organisation or agency resources to address specific societal issues of interest. This demonstrates that participants attempted to use various means to influence the organisation or agency to participate in addressing societal issues. It was also found that a social role and social responsibility were prominent characteristics of an activist that participants did acknowledge and, to some degree, practise. This shows that the participants were evolving as the conscience of the organisation, which has a moral obligation to address and resolve societal issues.

Although the implementation of the concept of a PR activist, otherwise known as the internal organisation activist, was slow, there were signs that persuasive dialogue and persuasion in activism had started emerging. It was further discovered that participants were familiar with the characteristics of persuasion in activism. Participants agreed that they would persuade one party to accept the message creator's viewpoint by using persuasive techniques, even though participants did not feel confident about debating societal issues on social media.

They agreed that they had a responsibility to the organisation to resolve customer conflict and create active online publics through social media. Participants used online social influencers to help the organisation or agency develop active online publics and persuade certain online groups to a specific viewpoint. In this way, participants used persuasive techniques to benefit the organisation or agency, which conflicts with critical PR. Even so, it was observed that persuasion in activism has become apparent as a practice in PR activism and that it is used to build and sustain online OPRs.

Participants acknowledged that they used persuasive dialogue to obtain a shared understanding between the organisation or agency and its online publics. It was found that participants employed interactive communication to gain mutual understanding between the organisation or agency and its publics. It was learned that the majority of the participants were cautious in using social media to develop persuasive rhetoric. It was also found that the type of business determined whether the organisation or agency would engage with persuasive dialogue on social media.

These findings suggest that, even though the participants were part of the dominant coalition, they would not resist or challenge their dominant power structures, which again conflicts with critical PR. Despite this, the study found that persuasive dialogue was a prominent PR practice that was used in online OPRs.

The study found that, in order for PR professionals in the Middle East to implement critical PR, they would need to be familiar with critical theory relating to PR activism. The PR professional would need to demonstrate a personal obligation to become more socially orientated, which implies that they would utilise all means necessary to influence organisation or agency policies in developing long-term, transformational programmes that would benefit the society in which they operated. PR professionals would need to move away from the organisation-centric approaches of PR, which include dominant functionalist ideologies of managerialism, centralisation and functionalism. A change in mindset would be required to implement critical PR, as PR in the Middle East is understood to be a hegemonic practice. Furthermore, PR professionals would need to be more tolerant of criticism.

The next subsection provides a brief summary of the major findings related to online OPRs on social media.

6.4.3 Online organisation–public relationships on social media

The study defined online OPRs as a progressive network where mutual expectations are created through the process of interactive communication. OPRs can be further understood as methods that facilitate the measurement of relationships between the organisation and its public. The study held that social media could be used as a strategic interactive tool to implement interactive communication between the organisation and its online public.

It was found that organisations or agencies used social media to cultivate OPRs that provided strategies for organisations to manage interactive online relationships. It was further understood that, in order for an organisation or agency to achieve its objectives and goals, it has to be involved in understanding its publics' issues, needs and values. It must determine a course of action to build mutually beneficial relationships that solve public issues. It was shown that the benefit of OPRs to the organisation or agency is that they can determine what relational outcomes would satisfy its public.

It was found that the PR professional is at the heart of the process of building online OPRs through social media. Participants explained that they would engage with a public identification process that involved environmental scanning, evaluation and analysis to obtain useful information. This information would inform the development of social media strategies for online OPRs. Furthermore, it was found that the participants needed to determine what type of relationship the organisation or agency wanted to create with distinctive online OPRs to give it a unique advantage.

Such online OPRs may form when an organisation or agency initiates relations with its strategically identified publics in an online social network, or when it participates in online

discussions. These relationship-building practices require a constant exchange of information and resources. In this regard, to ensure that there are balanced mutual benefits, both parties must recognise their interdependence; they need to participate in online discussions to align their understanding and expectations. Participants emphasised that the process of interactive communication improved mutual understanding and sustained online relationships.

The findings from the study indicate that there were several difficulties involved in building and sustaining interactive online relationships on social media.

- The participants' top management teams did not prioritise social media because they did not perceive that it provided them with value to operate the business.
- The organisation or agency's social media policies restricted employees from posting content on social media.
- Participants struggled with sharing effective content with the right audience at the right time.
- Participants found it challenging to establish and sustain social commitment from their online OPRs.
- Participants also mentioned that they were facing problems in managing negative sentiment and that public opinions generated in social networks were influencing the social media messages' contagion.
- Lastly, participants generally agreed that social media noise and the vast number of social media channels available to publics posed a challenge in reaching their strategic audiences.

The literature review identified three prominent stages in online OPRs, as explained below.

6.4.3.1 *Antecedents of relationships*

The first stage was the establishment of the antecedents of relationships. Antecedents were explained as preconditions that need to be in place for an organisation to establish online OPRs. It was learnt that these antecedents are identified by the PR professional through environmental scanning. The participants generally agreed that expectations, interdependency and trust were prominent antecedents in online OPRs in the Middle East. It was discovered that the process of building online relationships would involve interactive communication activities with active online publics to develop specific antecedents.

6.4.3.2 *Relationship-cultivating strategies*

The second stage was the implementation of relationship-cultivating strategies for online OPRs. It was found that these strategies are understood as being multi-dimensional because

organisations have a variety of publics with different issues, conflicts, needs, expectations and interests. It was found that relationship-cultivating strategies are unsuccessful if they fail to identify key online groups that can support the organisation's goals. In this context, participants agreed that they used several strategies to build online OPRs on social media. They also agreed that these online relationships are continually evolving and that there have to be ongoing strategies that are dynamic and able to adapt to the shifting environment.

The findings from the study identified the following cultivation strategies for online OPRs in the Middle East:

- using employees as ambassadors/influencers to engage with sporadic public enquiries;
- using social media analytical tools to develop content that would inform the interaction, cooperation and emotional status of the online public;
- disclosing information about specific issues, situations or circumstances to demonstrate the organisation's level of transparency;
- using CSR programmes to purposefully share tasks with active online publics to solve issues together for a common interest;
- partnering with social media influencers to strengthen the organisation's/agency's network power and ability to influence public opinion in its online OPRs network; and
- recognising publics' issues online and including these issues in the top management's decision-making process.

It was also found that cultural sensitivity emerged as a prominent feature in online OPRs in the Middle East. This shows that the participants needed to be familiar with specific cultural norms for building various online OPRs because these cultural norms inevitably influenced how an organisation or agency communicated with its online OPRs.

6.4.3.3 Relationship quality outcomes

The third stage was the measurement of relationship quality outcomes in online OPRs. It was discovered that relationship quality outcomes are produced by the process of conducting effective relationship-cultivation strategies. It was found that the PR professional needed to determine these outcomes to build specific online OPRs. These relationship quality outcomes are mostly the organisation's relational goals with its publics.

The study identified trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction as outcomes that PR professionals can use to measure and determine the quality of its strategic online OPRs.

Measuring these quality outcomes over time promoted long-term thinking and improved the relationship between the organisation and its online OPRs. The study held that OPR measurement is a vital ingredient for PR to establish quality relational outcomes. Relationship outcomes are apparent immediately after an organisation conducts PR activities. The participants shared a common perception of online OPR, holding that the organisation needs to have a genuine interest in purposefully building and sustaining online OPRs. They mentioned that, once online OPRs are established, the organisation has an obligation to nurture its investment by maintaining these online relationships.

The next subsection provides a concise summary of the major findings related to the overall research problem, which was to explore the role that critical PR could play in online OPRs on social media.

6.4.4 The role that critical PR plays in online organisation–public relationships

PR professionals who practice critical PR online demonstrate and promote the characteristics of PR activism. Critical PR is practised on social media fundamentally as PR strategies that deliberately address and encourage debate, dialogue, dissent and public input. In so doing, it can influence public policies to develop long-term, transformational programmes that benefit society.

Critical PR practised on social media is essentially digital activism, which aims to disclose breaches and inconsistencies of knowledge, opening opportunities to new ways of thinking. The internet, in the form of social media, reflects the nature of critical PR because it has contributed to PR practices' evolving from monologue to dialogue, and from control to engagement, which has challenged traditional paradigms and elevated ethical public issues.

The study held that PR professionals in the Middle East who acted as the PR activist would induce their organisations to initiate interactive communication around social issues. In this regard, PR professionals need to lead their organisations into uncharted public debate, where criticism and critique are abundant.

However, it was found that the participants did not display characteristics that shape the ideal behaviour for critical PR: They did not noticeably resist the dominant power structure; instead, they supported their government's transformational agendas and the objectives of the organisation or agency for which they worked. The participants were found to use persuasive techniques that would benefit their organisation or agency, which is in contradiction to critical PR.

Despite this, the participants did attempt to play a more social role and to gain the attention of the top management to address specific societal issues that were identified through

environmental scanning. This behaviour is closely associated with the characteristics of activism, as it attempts to place more focus on societal issues than on the organisation, agency or a privileged individual.

Table 6.2 summarises the significant findings about the role that critical PR played in online OPRs in the Middle East. It also provides critical insights from the research in how these characteristics are perceived or practised.

Table 6.2: Summary of the significant findings about the role that critical PR plays in online organisation–public relationships in the Middle East

Prominent characteristics of critical PR	Summary of how these characteristics were perceived/practised
Influencing government, organisation and agency policies to benefit or solve societal issues (Friis 2013:5; Moloney et al 2013:5).	When participants attempted to raise societal issues from social media to the top management decision-making process, they found that top management did not have time to address societal issues or believe that it held value in operating the business. Participants did, however, acknowledge that they used their organisation or agency’s CSR programmes as a guide to determine the societal issues that were of interest to the organisation or agency. This empowered the participants to engage with specific societal issues on social media that the organisation or agency was willing to support or tolerate.
Influencing the organisation or agency to engage in interactive communication (Coombs & Holladay 2012:884).	Participants from business-to-consumer organisations were more likely to justify to and convince top management that the organisation or agency needed to participate on social media in interactive communication, which mainly revolved around solving customer conflicts on social media.
As internal organisation activist, focusing on power issues and solutions to social problems (Auter 2016:99; Kim et al 2015:406; Prasad 2011:56; Sommerfeldt 2012:270).	Participants explained that they used social media monitoring tools to aid in identifying specific public issues during the public identification process. They also monitored the progress of specific online discussions and particular issues. The participants were well informed about power struggles. They recognised that their governments attempted to address specific social and economic issues through certain transformational programmes and national visions. Participants acknowledged that they focused on social conditions to alert their organisation or agency to public issues and expectations.
Acting as facilitator or mediator between the organisation or agency and its online publics (Invernizzi & Romenti 2015:426; McCown 2007:47; Meintjes et al 2012:12045).	The participants did have strategic policies and procedures in place to guide online engagement. These online interactions were focused on resolving customer conflicts and encouraging influencers to create active online publics.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Prominent characteristics of critical PR	Summary of how these characteristics were perceived/practised
Rejecting meaningless communication (Holtzhausen 2002:10).	Participants indicated that they were cautious in sharing information on social media. They explained that it is not possible to address all the online issues; the organisation needs to be selective about the issues it decides to engage with. Which predominantly influenced the type and meaning of messages developed during the communication process.
Promoting ethical decision-making (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Tyma 2008:203).	Participants felt a moral obligation to share truthful information. However, it was discovered that ethical decision-making was dependent on the individual's code of ethics or personal morals.
Using communication for ethical purposes to empower marginalised social groups (Grunig 2006:165; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63; Sommerfeldt 2013:350).	Participants mentioned that they could use the organisation or agency's CSR activities to promote awareness of general social topics, like empowering young people and females.
Taking advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, environment and social equality (Prasad 2011:56).	Participants did feel the need to take advice from social movements in areas such as human rights, gender justice, environment and social equality.
Using disruptive strategies that threaten the public image and reputation of the organisation or government when they ignore public demands (Paterson 2007:1).	Even though top management generally did not consider societal issues in their decision-making process, participants did not demonstrate hostility towards their government, organisation or agency.
Exposing illegitimate dictatorial principles that are embedded in autocratic structures (Friis 2013:5).	Participants did not acknowledge that they would expose illegitimate dictatorial principles.
As PR professionals acting as internal organisation activists, being more loyal to a cause than to a specific organisation or agency (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60).	Participants were more loyal to their organisation or agency than to a cause, and demonstrated this by utilising PR techniques that would favour the organisation or agency instead of the online public or specifically marginalised online groups.
Compelling the organisation or agency to initiate dialogue and debate societal issues (McCown 2007:47).	Participants did not feel that it was appropriate for the organisation or agency to debate general societal issues if it would associate itself with negative sentiment. Participants did, however, confidently participate in online discussions about societal issues that were in the interest of the organisation or agency (especially in its CSR programmes).
Promoting dialogue to resolve conflict or break deadlocks (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:64; Macagno & Walton 2008:205; McCown 2007:47).	Participants did use persuasive dialogue to resolve conflict on social media. However, the conflict was mainly related to customer complaints, and the persuasive dialogue benefitted the organisation or agency's public image.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Prominent characteristics of critical PR	Summary of how these characteristics were perceived/practised
Creating active online publics (Ciszek 2015:452; Uysala & Yang 2013:467; Werder 2015b:520).	Participants used employees and social media influencers to create active online publics. They used these active online publics to strengthen the organisation or agency's network power. This allowed it to advance its agenda by distributing information through the networks to educate larger clusters of individuals.
Influencing discourse that challenges what truth, morality and meaning are (Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:24).	Participants did not engage in online philosophical discussions about truth, morality and meaning.
Using persuasive strategies to alter the perceptions of online publics that favour the cause (Perloff 2003:4).	Participants used persuasive techniques to benefit the organisation or agency that they worked in. Their cause was aligned with the agenda of the government, organisation or agency, and was not necessarily aligned with specific societal issues.
Persuading the public to work towards a unified objective (Hallahan et al 2007:17).	Participants capitalised on the organisation or agency's culture to promote its public image. They explained that they were able to persuade employees to promote online discussions with strategic OPRs that would favour the organisation or agency. They also indicated that they strategically enabled employees to engage in sporadic online discussions to address issues relating to the organisation or agency.
Using persuasion as a tactic to change online publics' beliefs or values (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32).	Participants were extremely cautious and held back from engaging in persuasive rhetoric that would offend individuals on social media. It was found that the majority of Middle Eastern countries held similar views about restricting free speech and oppressing human rights. Participants were aware of the dangers involved in being associated with promoting certain ideologies on social media.
Resisting the dominant power because it fundamentally overpowers people (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63; Motion & Weaver 2005:50; Pitsoe & Letseka 2013:25).	The participants did not resist the dominant power where they worked. Participants also did not expose or weaken dominant structures to make them vulnerable and unstable. Instead, they formulated discursive strategies that advanced the hegemonic power. Participants stated that they believe the government's transformational programmes would benefit its society.
Resisting power structures in the organisation, even though they are part of the dominant coalition (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:61).	Participants did not resist authoritative organisational power structures; they supported managerialism. However, they did show some frustration about the fact that top management did not prioritise societal issues as a critical concern to be part of the decision-making process.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Prominent characteristics of critical PR	Summary of how these characteristics were perceived/practised
Becoming the voice for subordinated and marginalised groups (Butler 2002:15).	Participants generally agreed that females, youth and refugees were marginalised groups. However, they were not open about which subordinated or marginalised groups they would personally support. This was due to the restrictions that the governments in the region have enforced. Activism is not tolerated in the majority of Middle Eastern countries.
Disseminating knowledge to empower online publics (Foucault 1980:34; Lynch 2014:2680; Rouse 2005:6).	Participants were focused on disseminating knowledge about the organisation or agency that was in line with its objectives. Social network sites in the Middle East are generally monitored by filtering and surveillance, which threaten the safety of activists. Participants also mentioned that they could not divulge confidential information to online publics. This illustrated that there are restrictions to the degree of transparency that an organisation or agency can have on social media.

6.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following limitations were identified in the study:

- There was limited literature relating to critical PR being practised in organisations or agencies in the Middle East. However, there was literature that indicated that individuals and social movements did practice digital activism in the region.
- Because a non-probability sampling technique was used, the sample could not be generalised to represent the whole Middle Eastern PR population; instead, the sample is only representative of itself.
- The official language in most Middle Eastern countries is Arabic so an Arabic translation of the web-based survey was done to improve the respondents' ability to interpret the questions. A few of the participants interviewed struggled to speak English, which limited their ability to provide detailed answers to the questions. Not all the respondents and participants were familiar with certain academic terminology.
- The quantitative web-based results had low Cronbach alphas and Pearson correlation coefficients, which indicates that the respondents may have misinterpreted the questions and that the researcher did not have sufficient understanding of the responses.
- Not all the participants interviewed believed it was necessary to conduct interactive communication with its online publics, as these participants mainly worked in business-to-business or business-to-government organisations.
- Participants were cautious about disclosing their thoughts about their government's restrictions on free speech and online surveillance, which constrained conversations around PR activism and related topics.

6.6 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The following are vital contributions by the study:

- The body of knowledge on critical PR in the Middle East was extended.
- It was discovered that the characteristics of critical PR are idealistic and not easily practised in the context of a hierarchical structure.
- The literature indicates that a PR professional who acts as a PR activist in an organisation or agency would reject government agendas and dominant structures. However, it was discovered that the participants formulated discursive PR strategies that advance the hegemonic power, contrary to the idealistic practice of critical PR.

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The topics listed below would serve as the basis for future research and discussions. The arguments presented in this study generate several questions that could lead to new research for PR scholars interested in critical PR, PR activism, digital activism or online OPRs.

- If this study is replicated in future research, revise the questions for the quantitative web-based survey.
- The study grouped organisations and agencies together, but it is recommended that future research should compare the views of PR professionals working in-house (in an organisation) with those working in an agency. This would determine the degree to which a hierarchical structure impacts the implementation of critical PR.
- Explore the role that critical PR plays in CSR programmes. There is an apparent relationship between these two concepts in resolving social issues. Further research would determine whether CSR could be considered as a starting point for implementing critical PR in an organisation.
- Focus on B2C organisations specifically, as it was found that B2G and B2B organisations did not believe interactive communication was necessary for their online OPRs.
- Although this study revealed that critical PR rejects power structures and resists dominant power, future research could explore the degree to which PR activism could support PR professionals in collaborating with power structures. For example, how governments and organisations could collaborate to develop transformational programmes that would benefit society.

- Explore various strategies that PR professionals could use to challenge the hegemonic organisation and its decision-makers to address societal issues.
- In the context of the information age, explore how the availability of knowledge through ICTs has shifted the power from the dominant structure to the public. Also examine the role PR activism could play in using this power.
- Explore collaboration techniques and strategies that PR professionals could implement to help marginalised publics resolve societal issues in the Middle East.

6.8 SUMMARY

This study predominately focused on critical PR. It was in this context that new paradigms were suggested for the way PR is practised: Critical PR criticises PR as a hegemonic and organisation-centred practice. It mainly focuses on the interests of the public rather than on those of the organisation to resolve societal issues. PR professionals practising critical PR would evolve into the organisation's conscience and build alliances with marginalised or subordinated groups. These PR professionals would demonstrate the characteristics of PR activists and utilise persuasive dialogue to address the power struggles between the organisation or agency and its online publics.

The study discovered that the participants did not follow all of the characteristic practices of critical PR that were proposed in the literature. It was found that the proposed characteristics of critical PR professionals and activists were idealistic, and that the participants were slow to implement critical PR practices in their respective organisations or agencies in the Middle East. Furthermore, participants were working in a hierarchical organisation or agency whose culture hindered the practice of critical PR.

“A great challenge for public relations would continue to be how to rise up and respond to consumer, labour, citizen, gender and environmental conflicts instigated by the very corporation or government that public relations are supposed to defend, promote and even sometimes whitewash” (Gezgin 2019:1).

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ADDENDUM A: THE SAMPLING FRAME FROM THE MIDDLE EAST INTELLIGENCE INDEX (THE LARGEST 100 LISTED ORGANISATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST)

The organisations below are listed in descending order (largest to smallest).

Sampling Frame	
1)	Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) (Saudi Arabia)
2)	Etisalat (UAE)
3)	Saudi Telecom Company (Saudi Arabia)
4)	Qatar National Bank (Qatar)
5)	First Abu Dhabi Bank (UAE)
6)	Al-Rajhi Bank (Saudi Arabia)
7)	National Commercial Bank (Saudi Arabia)
8)	Saudi Electricity Company (Saudi Arabia)
9)	DP World (UAE)
10)	Almarai (Saudi Arabia)
11)	Jabal Omar Development Company (Saudi Arabia)
12)	Emaar Properties (UAE)
13)	Saudi Arabian Mining Company (Saudi Arabia)
14)	Industries Qatar (Qatar)
15)	National Bank of Kuwait (Kuwait)
16)	Samba Financial Group (Saudi Arabia)
17)	Maroc Telecom (Morocco)
18)	Emirates NBD (UAE)
19)	Kuwait Finance House (Kuwait)
20)	Saudi British Bank - SABB (Saudi Arabia)
21)	Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (UAE)
22)	Kingdom Holding Company (Saudi Arabia)
23)	Banque Saudi Fransi (Saudi Arabia)
24)	Attijariwafa Bank (Morocco)
25)	Riyad Bank (Saudi Arabia)
26)	Emirates Islamic Bank (UAE)
27)	Emaar Malls Group (UAE)
28)	Yanbu National Petrochemical Company (Saudi Arabia)
29)	Dubai Islamic Bank (UAE)
30)	Ezdan Holding Group (Qatar)
31)	Masraf al-Rayan (Qatar)
32)	Ooredoo (Qatar)
33)	Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (Iran)
34)	Mobile Telecommunications Company - Zain Group (Kuwait)
35)	Du (UAE)
36)	Saudi Arabian Fertilizer Company (Saudi Arabia)
37)	Alinma Bank (Saudi Arabia)
38)	Savola Group (Saudi Arabia)
39)	Damac Properties (UAE)
40)	Arab National Bank (Saudi Arabia)
41)	Qatar Islamic Bank (Qatar)
42)	Banque Centrale Populaire (Morocco)
43)	Qatar Electricity & Water Company (Qatar)
44)	Commercial International Bank (Egypt)
45)	Ahli United Bank (Bahrain)
46)	LafargeHolcim Maroc (Morocco)
47)	Arab Bank (Jordan)
48)	Qatar Insurance Company (Qatar)
49)	Aldar Properties (UAE)
50)	Mesaieed Petrochemical Holding Company (Qatar)

Addendum A

- 51) Mobarakeh Steel (Iran)
- 52) Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (Iran)
- 53) Makkah Construction & Development Company (Saudi Arabia)
- 54) Banque Marocaine du Commerce Exterieur (Morocco)
- 55) Agility Public Warehousing (Kuwait)
- 56) Alawwal Bank (Saudi Arabia)
- 57) Housing Bank for Trade & Finance (Jordan)
- 58) Jarir Marketing Company (Saudi Arabia)
- 59) Mashreq Bank (UAE)
- 60) Etihad Etisalat Company – Mobily (Saudi Arabia)
- 61) Telecommunication Company of Iran (Iran)
- 62) Boubyan Bank (Kuwait)
- 63) Saudi Kayan Petrochemical Company (Saudi Arabia)
- 64) National Shipping Company of Saudi Arabia – Bahri (Saudi Arabia)
- 65) Barwa Real Estate Company (Qatar)
- 66) National Iranian Copper Industries Company (Iran)
- 67) Commercial Bank of Qatar (Qatar)
- 68) Emaar The Economic City (Saudi Arabia)
- 69) Company for Cooperative Insurance (Saudi Arabia)
- 70) Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank (UAE)
- 71) Union National Bank (UAE)
- 72) Bank Albilad (Saudi Arabia)
- 73) Commercial Bank of Dubai (UAE)
- 74) Saudi Investment Bank (Saudi Arabia)
- 75) Rabigh Refining & Petrochemical Company - Petro Rabigh (Saudi Arabia)
- 76) Qatar Fuel Additives Company – Woqod (Qatar)
- 77) Bank Muscat (Oman)
- 78) Dubai Investments (UAE)
- 79) Kuwait Food Company – Americana (Kuwait)
- 80) Ahli United Bank (Kuwait)
- 81) Burgan Bank (Kuwait)
- 82) Qatar Gas Transport Company - Nakilat (Qatar)
- 83) Doha Bank (Qatar)
- 84) Bupa Arabia (Saudi Arabia)
- 85) National Industrialization Company - Tasnee (Saudi Arabia)
- 86) Blom Bank (Lebanon)
- 87) Dubai Financial Market (UAE)
- 88) Mabanee Company (Kuwait)
- 89) Saudi Industrial Investment Group (Saudi Arabia)
- 90) Oman Telecommunications Company – Omantel (Oman)
- 91) Gol-e-Gohar Iron Ore Company (Iran)
- 92) Gulf Bank (Kuwait)
- 93) Bank Audi (Lebanon)
- 94) Ciments du Maroc (Morocco)
- 95) Advanced Petrochemical Company (Saudi Arabia)
- 96) Fawaz Abdulaziz Alhokair Company (Saudi Arabia)
- 97) Jam Petrochemicals (Iran)
- 98) Qatar International Islamic Bank (Qatar)
- 99) Ghadir Investment Company (Iran)
- 100) Tamin Petroleum & Petrochemical Investment Company (Iran)

ADDENDUM B: WEB-BASED SURVEY - QUESTIONNAIRE

Invitation

Welcome,

The primary purpose of this questionnaire is part of an **academic master's research assignment**.

This questionnaire aims to explore the role of critical public relations in online organisation-public relationships in the Middle East.

The questionnaire requires **public relations professionals** to participate, as these roles are known to have the responsibility of online organisation-public relationships. For the purpose of this study, the following fields are also considered: corporate communication, marketing communication, strategic communication, internal or external communication, digital communication, public affairs, public information, stakeholder relations, media relations or advertising.

All the answers to this questionnaire will be done anonymously and will be treated in a confidential manner.

The questionnaire is bi-lingual in both English & Arabic; it contains 41 multiple choice questions under the following four sections:

Section A: Demographic data

Section B: Developments of public relations in the Middle East

Section C: Characteristics of critical public relations

Section D: Online organisation-public relationships

It is estimated that the questionnaire will take approximately **15 minutes of your time**. It is advised to complete the questionnaire in one sitting, once you have completed, please click the done button located at the bottom of the page.

Please note that you are required to answer the questions on behalf of your organisation or agency that you are working at.

Please click **HERE** to participate or copy the below link into your browser.

<**[https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MiddleEast PR](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MiddleEast_PR)**>

Thank you in advance for your time.

PREQUALIFYING QUESTIONS	
<p>Thank you for clicking on the link to participate in an academic master's research assignment.</p> <p>To ensure that you have the required knowledge in the field of public relations, please answer the following two prequalifying questions below.</p>	
<p>1) I have experience in the field of public relations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	<p>Section 2.2.1 (Pritchard & Smith 2015:35) Section 4.4.1 (Elo et al 2014:4)</p>
<p>2) I have experience in managing an organisation's/agency's online relationships. (For example, managing online relationships through social media).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	<p>Section 3 (Grunig 2009:1) Section 4.4.2 (Pandey & Pandey 2015:41; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:26)</p>
<p>PATHWAY 1: Respondents who answer 'yes' to both prequalifying questions are directed to Section A on page 2.</p>	<p>PATHWAY 2: Respondents who do not answer 'yes' to both prequalifying questions are directed to page 6.</p>

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA	
This category will measure the PR professional demographic profile.	
DEMOGRAPHIC	
<p>1) I work in this Middle East region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gulf Corporation Council Region (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates) • Levant Region (Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey) • Greater Middle East Region (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Djibouti, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Pakistan, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Yemen) • Other (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.4 (Freitag & Stokes 2009:163; Angrist 2013:2)</p>
<p>2) I work in this sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government/Public Sector • Private Sector • Other (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.4 (Guastella & Menghi 2016:9)</p>
<p>3) I work in this environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency (work at an agency allowing public relations services to organisations) • In-house (work in an organisation's public relations department) • Other (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.2 (Wiggill 2011:228) Section 2.5 (Marshall 2011:1) Section 4.5 (MacDonald & Headlam 2011:18; Middle East Business Intelligence 2017:36-37)</p>
<p>4) My current position is.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisor • Chief Communications Officer • Director • Manager • Officer • Owner of agency • Representative • Specialist • Other (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.2 (Laskin 2012:364) (Grunig & Grunig 2008:335)</p>
<p>5) I have a public relations or communications related qualification.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctorate • Master's Degree • Honour's Degree • Bachelor's Degree • Diploma • Certificate • None of the above (please specify your qualification) 	
<p>6) I have experience in public relations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-2 years • 3-5 years • 6-10 years • More than 11 years • Not applicable 	

SECTION B: DEVELOPMENTS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST	
<p>Within the Middle East region, many countries have developed national development plans to drive transformation and develop the non-oil sector, as an alternative channel of revenue to safeguard future growth. Public Relations in the Middle East plays a critical role in engaging in this complex social, economic and political climate. Public Relations Professionals need to facilitate the transformation through deliberately developing dialogue that encourages social engagement. Public Relations Professionals need to present arguments that are within the public interest as well as promoting the wellbeing of society. This category will measure the impact that contemporary-issues in the Middle East are having on Public Relations.</p>	
<p>1) I am familiar with the country's national vision. (For example, The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, Iran Vision 2025, Jordan Vision 2025, Oman Vision 2020, Qatar National Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, Egypt Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Lebanon 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, Morocco Vision 2030).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not sure (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.4</p>
<p>2) I believe that the national vision of the country that I work in will benefit its society.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.5 (Prasad 2011:55)</p>
<p>3) I attempt to add the national vision logo to public adverts that my organisation/agency publishes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.4 (Callen et al 2014:4) (International Monetary Fund 2016a:15)</p>
<p>4) On behalf of the organisation/agency, I would most likely engage in online social problem-solving discussions regarding the following issue(s). (Select one or more issues from the list).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create more jobs for the youth • Support for the less privileged • Empowering women in the workplace • More environments that support persons with disabilities • Living conditions for domestic workers • Supporting refugees • Other (Please specify) 	<p>Section 2.3 (Toledano 2016:44) Section 2.3 (Butler 2002:15) (Sommerfeldt 2013:350; Grunig 2006:165; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:63) Section 3.4 (Butler 2002:15)</p>

SECTION C: CHARACTERISTICS OF CRITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS	
<p>This category will measure characteristics of critical PR. The main characteristic of critical PR is that the PR professional would take on a more social focused role. In other words, the PR professional focuses on social situations as a precondition for transformation and economic progress. In this regard, the category determines the level that PR professionals are motivated towards social problem-solving strategies.</p>	
<p>1) I pay close attention to societal issues developing in the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Dolea 2017:195) Section 2.3 (Prasad 2011:56)</p>
<p>2) I take guidance from professional associations, such as the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.2 (Freitag & Stokes 2009:171) Section 2.3 (Prasad 2011:56)</p>
<p>3) I believe that public debates on social media provide an opportunity for all the parties involved to share their stories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Kim, Kim, Tam & Kim 2015:406) (Friis 2013:5) (Auter 2016:99; Sommerfeldt 2012:270) (McCown 2007:57)</p>
<p>4) I collaborate with other organisations/agencies to encourage collaborative efforts to resolving social problems. (For example, I encouraged a joint social responsibility effort among various organisations/agencies in allowing less privileged schools with equipment to assist students).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Prasad 2011:56) Section 2.5 (Alfoory 2014:5)</p>

Addendum B

ACTIVISM	
<p>5) I encourage my organisation/agency to take a position on specific causes that affect society. (For example, my organisation/agency advocates for persons with disabilities and prompts that all public facilities should consider them).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Dolea 2017:195)</p>
<p>6) I challenge the employees within the organisation/agency to be more involved in debating societies issues online.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.5 (Woodcraft 2006:27) (Meyer et al 2009:218) (Shalaby 2015:17) (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon & Suto 2014:362)</p>
<p>7) I encourage ethical decision-making even when it causes resistance with the executive management of the organisation/agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Tyma 2008:196) Section 2.3 (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60) Section 2.3 (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002:60; Tyma 2008:203) Section 3.4 (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt 2015:40)</p>
<p>8) I attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public discussions. (For example, partnering with an influencer from a leading university, to discuss the market's current state in meeting the job requirements for national students).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Werder 2015b:520) (McLeod 2014:3) Section 2.4 (Zuazua, Willen, Olivari, and Al-Yousef 2014:2)</p>

Addendum B

PERSUASION	
<p>9) I initiate online discussions on social media to resolve the conflict between the organisation/agency and its publics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.1 (McCown 2007:47) Section 2.2 (Wiggill 2011:227) Section 2.3 (Sommerfeldt 2012:269) (McCown 2007:47) Section 2.3 (Macagno & Walton 2008:205) (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32) Section 2.3 (Holzhausen & Voto 2002:64; McCown 2007:47)</p>
<p>10) I use social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Torp 2015:110)</p>
<p>11) I provide relevant evidence in support of a specific discussion on social media between the public and the organisation/agency. (For example, a customer started a public discussion claiming that the organisation/agency has a low standard of service, on behalf of the organisation/agency I respond with a well-developed argument supported with evidence).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Jowett & O'Donnell 2012:32)</p>
<p>12) I attempt to find common ground during an online debate between the organisation/agency and the public. (For example, during an online discussion I would identify and reiterate issues that both parties agree on).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Macagno & Walton 2008:205) Section 2.3 (Hallahan et al 2007:17)</p>

Addendum B

POWER	
<p>13) I attempt to facilitate internal discussions that address issues between the senior executive management and the young workforce. (For example, the senior executive management in the organisation/agency are conservative/reluctant towards using modern online chatting technology and the young workforce would like to launch an internal chat software for employees to have open discussions about issues).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.5 (Diwan 2017:2)</p>
<p>14) I share specific information on social media to improve the public's perception of the organisation/agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Tankosic et al 2016:292) (Perloff 2003:11) Section 2.3 (Daldal 2014:149) Section 2.3 (Moloney, McQueen, Surowiec and Yaxley 2013:5) Section 2.3 (Brinol, Tormala & Petty 2013:103) (Perloff 2003:3) (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2004:6)</p>
<p>15) I implement reward-driven social media campaigns. (For example, my organisation/agency conducts content-creation competitions on social media where publics are required to create specific content to stand a chance to win a prize).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Werder 2015b:512; Antoniadis 2008:10) Section 2.3 (Titifanue et al 2017:145)</p>
<p>16) I find it challenging to distribute information to the public through social media. (For example, I need to attain many levels of approval before I can share information to the public).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Foucault 1980:34) (Grunig 2009:9)</p>

SECTION D: ONLINE ORGANISATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

Online Organisation-Public Relationships (OPR) can be defined as progressive networks where mutual expectations are created through the process of interactive communication. From a Public Relations perspective, PR professionals may use social media as an opportunity for organisations/agencies to build and manage interactive online relationships. This category will measure relationship-building elements, which include the level at which the organisations/agency develop antecedents as a foundation to build successful online relationships, the level at which the organisation/agency is using cultivation strategies to build online OPR, as well as challenges in online OPR.

ANTECEDENTS TO ONLINE ORGANISATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

<p>1) I attempt to build trustworthiness through having public discussions on social media where anybody can participate in challenging any claim. (For example, my organisation/agency believes in embracing equality, and that open discussions on social media encourage people to become more involved).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Dahlberg 2001:3; Tian & Chao 2012:460; Shaw 2014:154).</p> <p>Section 3.3 (Cheng 2018:126) (Seltzer and Zhang 2011:25; Sohail 2012:237)</p>
<p>2) My organisation/agency practises transparency by making public statements on social media, admitting that it has made a mistake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.2 (Mylrea 2015:4)</p>
<p>3) I attempt to generate inspiring discussions with publics on social media. (For example, I promote that the Arab youth are happy about the move to permit women to drive in Saudi Arabia).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.3 (Hung 2005:396; Seltzer & Zhang 2011:27)</p>
<p>4) I attempt to be respectful towards publics on social media who have different cultural values.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.3 (Yeh 2017:97)</p>

Addendum B

STRATEGIES FOR ONLINE ORGANISATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS	
<p>5) I use social media as a tool for the public to participate in the organisation/agency’s decision-making process. (For example, I ask our customers on social media what we as an organisation/agency can do to improve a specific service to them).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.3 - Table 3.5 Section 3.4</p>
<p>6) I practice openness by contributing to conversations on social media about specific issues that attract the organisation/agency’s attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	
<p>7) I purposefully ask questions on social media to stimulate the public to discuss issues together. (For example, regarding the issue of the residential electricity bill in summer, I would ask the public on social media what can families do in the house to conserve and reduce power consumption?).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	
<p>8) I build social networks with specific influencers on social media. (For example, when executing a public relations campaign, I purposefully identify and include specific popular social media influencers that are highly regarded and followed by our customers to participate in online discussions).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Stefanone et al 2010:511)</p>
<p>9) My organisation/agency consents that its employees take on a key role in handling sporadic social media inquiries from the public. (For example, when an individual asks a question on social media about a specific service/product that we offer, any one of our employees can respond with the appropriate information).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:223; Ki & Hon 2009:242,246-8; Ni & Wang 2011:271,275-276; Hung & Chen 2007:5; Hon & Grunig 1999:14, 15).</p>

Addendum B

CHALLENGES IN ONLINE ORGANISATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS	
<p>10) I find it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Tankosic et al 2016:291)</p>
<p>11) The restrictions on free-speech (in terms of the organisation/agency's policy) prevents employees from participating in online discussions about the organisation/agency. (For example, only authorised individuals within the organisation/agency are permitted to participate in online discussions).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Jones 2013:74)</p>
<p>12) The senior executive management within my organisation/agency perceives social media as a threat.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 3.4 (Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011:221) (Tankosic et al 2016:293)</p>
<p>13) My organisation/agency provides financing for me to pay attention to social media training courses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Agree • Undecided • Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Section 2.3 (Prasad 2011:53; Bowen & Stacks 2014:239; Ngozi et al 2016:288) Section 3.4 (Luo & Jiang 2012:60).</p>

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Thank you for your time and for participating in this academic assignment.

Yours sincerely,
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Addendum C

ADDENDUM C: WEB-BASED SURVEY - RESULTS FOR ALL QUESTIONS ON ALL RESPONSE OPTIONS

Section A – Demographic Question A1 I work in this Middle East region				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Other	10	4.29	10	4.29
GCCR	156	66.95	166	71.24
LR	38	16.31	204	87.55
GMER	29	12.45	233	100.00

Section A – Demographic Question A2 I work in this sector				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Other	13	5.58	13	5.58
Gov/Public	44	18.88	57	24.46
Private	176	75.54	233	100.00

Section A – Demographic Question A3 I work in this environment				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Other	15	6.44	15	6.44
Agency	54	23.18	69	29.61
In-house	164	70.39	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section A – Demographic Question A4 My current position is				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Other	26	11.16	26	11.16
Advisor	14	6.01	40	17.17
CCO	19	8.15	59	25.32
Director	36	15.45	95	40.77
Manager	66	28.33	161	69.10
Officer	34	14.59	195	83.69
Owner of agency	7	3.00	202	86.70
Representative	10	4.29	212	90.99
Specialist	21	9.01	233	100.00

Section A – Demographic Question A5 I have a public relations or communications related qualification				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Other	32	13.73	32	13.73
Masters	71	30.47	103	44.21
Honours	4	1.72	107	45.92
Bachelors	107	45.92	214	91.85
Diploma	9	3.86	223	95.71
Certificate	10	4.29	233	100.00

Section A – Demographic Question A6 I have experience in public relations				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
1-2 years	26	11.16	26	11.16
3-5 years	46	19.74	72	30.90
6-10 years	54	23.18	126	54.08
More than 11 years	102	43.78	228	97.85
Not applicable	5	2.15	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section B – Developments of PR in the Middle East				
Question B1				
I am familiar with the country's national vision. (For example, The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, Iran Vision 2025, Jordan Vision 2025, Oman Vision 2020, Qatar National Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, Egypt Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Lebanon 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, Morocco Vision 2030).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Not sure	5	2.15	5	2.15
Yes	210	90.13	215	92.27
No	18	7.73	233	100.00

Section B – Developments of PR in the Middle East				
Question B2				
I believe that the national vision of the country that I work in will benefit its society				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	106	45.49	106	45.49
Agree	89	38.20	195	83.69
Undecided	28	12.02	223	95.71
Disagree	9	3.86	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Section B – Developments of PR in the Middle East				
Question B3				
I attempt to add the national vision logo to public adverts that my organisation/agency publishes				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	51	21.89	51	21.89
Agree	87	37.34	138	59.23
Undecided	43	18.45	181	77.68
Disagree	49	21.03	230	98.71
Strongly disagree	3	1.29	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section B – Developments of PR in the Middle East Question B4 On behalf of the organisation/agency, I would most likely engage in online social problem-solving discussions regarding the following issue(s).				
Question B4a: Create more jobs for the youth				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Not chosen	57	24.46	57	24.46
Create more jobs for the youth	176	75.54	233	100.00
Question B4b Support for the less privileged				
Not chosen	134	57.51	134	57.51
Support for the less privileged	99	42.49	233	100.00
Question B4c Empowering women in the workplace				
Not chosen	89	38.20	89	38.20
Empowering women	144	61.80	233	100.00
Question B4d More environments that support persons with disabilities				
Not chosen	146	62.66	146	62.66
Environments for disabilities	87	37.34	233	100.00
Question B4e Living conditions for domestic workers				
Not chosen	156	66.95	156	66.95
Living conditions	77	33.05	233	100.00
Question B4f Supporting refugees				
Not chosen	184	78.97	184	78.97
Supporting refugees	49	21.03	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR Question C1 I pay close attention to societal issues developing in the country.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	137	58.80	137	58.80
Agree	79	33.91	216	92.70
Undecided	14	6.01	230	98.71
Disagree	2	0.86	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C2				
I take guidance from professional associations, such as the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	18	7.73	18	7.73
Agree	79	33.91	97	41.63
Undecided	56	24.03	153	65.67
Disagree	65	27.90	218	93.56
Strongly disagree	15	6.44	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C3				
I believe that public debates on social media provide an opportunity for all the parties involved to share their stories.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	90	38.63	90	38.63
Agree	115	49.36	205	87.98
Undecided	16	6.87	221	94.85
Disagree	10	4.29	231	99.14
Strongly disagree	2	0.86	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C4				
I collaborate with other organisations/agencies to encourage collaborative efforts to resolving social problems. (For example, I encouraged a joint social responsibility effort among various organisations/agencies in allowing less privileged schools with equipment to assist students).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	73	31.33	73	31.33
Agree	118	50.64	191	81.97
Undecided	29	12.45	220	94.42
Disagree	12	5.15	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C5				
I encourage my organisation/agency to take a position on specific causes that affect society. (For example, my organisation/agency advocates for persons with disabilities and prompts that all public facilities should consider them).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	103	44.21	103	44.21
Agree	100	42.92	203	87.12
Undecided	22	9.44	225	96.57
Disagree	7	3.00	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C6				
I challenge the employees within the organisation/agency to be more involved in debating societies issues online.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	38	16.31	38	16.31
Agree	89	38.20	127	54.51
Undecided	52	22.32	179	76.82
Disagree	43	18.45	222	95.28
Strongly disagree	11	4.72	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C7				
I encourage ethical decision-making even when it causes resistance with the executive management of the organisation/agency.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	96	41.20	96	41.20
Agree	98	42.06	194	83.26
Undecided	29	12.45	223	95.71
Disagree	8	3.43	231	99.14
Strongly disagree	2	0.86	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C8				
I attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public discussions. (For example, partnering with an influencer from a leading university, to discuss the market's current state in meeting the job requirements for national students).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	48	20.60	48	20.60
Agree	104	44.64	152	65.24
Undecided	44	18.88	196	84.12
Disagree	34	14.59	230	98.71
Strongly disagree	3	1.29	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C9				
I initiate online discussions on social media to resolve the conflict between the organisation/agency and its publics.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	37	15.88	37	15.88
Agree	81	34.76	118	50.64
Undecided	50	21.46	168	72.10
Disagree	56	24.03	224	96.14
Strongly disagree	9	3.86	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C10				
I use social media as a tool to build trust with strategic communities.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	97	41.63	97	41.63
Agree	117	50.21	214	91.85
Undecided	13	5.58	227	97.42
Disagree	4	1.72	231	99.14
Strongly disagree	2	0.86	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR Question C11 I provide relevant evidence in support of a specific discussion on social media between the public and the organisation/agency. (For example, a customer started a public discussion claiming that the organisation/agency has a low standard of service, on behalf of the organisation/agency I respond with a well-developed argument supported with evidence).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	78	33.48	78	33.48
Agree	110	47.21	188	80.69
Undecided	29	12.45	217	93.13
Disagree	13	5.58	230	98.71
Strongly disagree	3	1.29	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR Question C12 I attempt to find common ground during an online debate between the organisation/agency and the public. (For example, during an online discussion I would identify and reiterate issues that both parties agree on).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	64	27.47	64	27.47
Agree	125	53.65	189	81.12
Undecided	27	11.59	216	92.70
Disagree	16	6.87	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR Question C13 I attempt to facilitate internal discussions that address issues between the senior executive management and the young workforce. (For example, the senior executive management in the organisation/agency are conservative/reluctant towards using modern online chatting technology and the young workforce would like to launch an internal chat software for employees to have open discussions about issues).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	94	40.34	94	40.34
Agree	111	47.64	205	87.98
Undecided	20	8.58	225	96.57
Disagree	7	3.00	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C14				
I share specific information on social media to improve the public’s perception of the organisation/agency.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	97	41.63	97	41.63
Agree	111	47.64	208	89.27
Undecided	19	8.15	227	97.42
Disagree	5	2.15	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C15				
I implement reward-driven social media campaigns. (For example, my organisation/agency conducts content-creation competitions on social media where publics are required to create specific content to stand a chance to win a prize).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	63	27.04	63	27.04
Agree	88	37.77	151	64.81
Undecided	39	16.74	190	81.55
Disagree	39	16.74	229	98.28
Strongly disagree	4	1.72	233	100.00

Section C – Characteristics of critical PR				
Question C16				
I find it challenging to distribute information to the public through social media. (For example, I need to attain many levels of approval before I can share information to the public).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	52	22.32	52	22.32
Agree	76	32.62	128	54.94
Undecided	24	10.30	152	65.24
Disagree	60	25.75	212	90.99
Strongly disagree	21	9.01	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section D – Online OPR Question D1 I attempt to build trustworthiness through having public discussions on social media where anybody can participate in challenging any claim. (For example, my organisation/agency believes in embracing equality, and that open discussions on social media encourage people to become more involved).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	81	34.76	81	34.76
Agree	94	40.34	175	75.11
Undecided	33	14.16	208	89.27
Disagree	23	9.87	231	99.14
Strongly disagree	2	0.86	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR Question D2 My organisation/agency practises transparency by making public statements on social media, admitting that it has made a mistake.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	39	16.74	39	16.74
Agree	102	43.78	141	60.52
Undecided	47	20.17	188	80.69
Disagree	27	11.59	215	92.27
Strongly disagree	18	7.73	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR Question D3 I attempt to generate inspiring discussions with publics on social media. (For example, I promote that the Arab youth are happy about the move to permit women to drive in Saudi Arabia).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	78	33.48	78	33.48
Agree	104	44.64	182	78.11
Undecided	33	14.16	215	92.27
Disagree	15	6.44	230	98.71
Strongly disagree	3	1.29	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section D – Online OPR				
Question D4				
I attempt to be respectful towards publics on social media who have different cultural values.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	160	68.67	160	68.67
Agree	68	29.18	228	97.85
Undecided	2	0.86	230	98.71
Disagree	2	0.86	232	99.57
Strongly disagree	1	0.43	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR				
Question D5				
I use social media as a tool for the public to participate in the organisation/agency's decision-making process. (For example, I ask our customers on social media what we as an organisation/agency can do to improve a specific service to them).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	65	27.90	65	27.90
Agree	73	31.33	138	59.23
Undecided	41	17.60	179	76.82
Disagree	38	16.31	217	93.13
Strongly disagree	16	6.87	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR				
Question D6				
I practice openness by contributing to conversations on social media about specific issues that attract the organisation/agency's attention.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	54	23.18	54	23.18
Agree	116	49.79	170	72.96
Undecided	42	18.03	212	90.99
Disagree	17	7.30	229	98.28
Strongly disagree	4	1.72	233	100.00

Addendum C

<p align="center">Section D – Online OPR Question D7 I purposefully ask questions on social media to stimulate the public to discuss issues together. (For example, regarding the issue of the residential electricity bill in summer, I would ask the public on social media what can families do in the house to conserve and reduce power consumption?).</p>				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	58	24.89	58	24.89
Agree	96	41.20	154	66.09
Undecided	45	19.31	199	85.41
Disagree	28	12.02	227	97.42
Strongly disagree	6	2.58	233	100.00

<p align="center">Section D – Online OPR Question D8 I build social networks with specific influencers on social media. (For example, when executing a public relations campaign, I purposefully identify and include specific popular social media influencers that are highly regarded and followed by our customers to participate in online discussions).</p>				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	69	29.61	69	29.61
Agree	129	55.36	198	84.98
Undecided	19	8.15	217	93.13
Disagree	16	6.87	233	100.00

<p align="center">Section D – Online OPR Question D9 My organisation/agency consents that its employees take on a key role in handling sporadic social media inquiries from the public. (For example, when an individual asks a question on social media about a specific service/product that we offer, any one of our employees can respond with the appropriate information).</p>				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	44	18.88	44	18.88
Agree	85	36.48	129	55.36
Undecided	25	10.73	154	66.09
Disagree	53	22.75	207	88.84
Strongly disagree	26	11.16	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section D – Online OPR Question D10 I find it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	30	12.88	30	12.88
Agree	93	39.91	123	52.79
Undecided	36	15.45	159	68.24
Disagree	63	27.04	222	95.28
Strongly disagree	11	4.72	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR Question D11 The restrictions on free-speech (in terms of the organisation/agency’s policy) prevents employees from participating in online discussions about the organisation/agency. (For example, only authorised individuals within the organisation/agency are permitted to participate in online discussions).				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	70	30.04	70	30.04
Agree	86	36.91	156	66.95
Undecided	33	14.16	189	81.12
Disagree	34	14.59	223	95.71
Strongly disagree	10	4.29	233	100.00

Section D – Online OPR Question D12 The senior executive management within my organisation/agency perceives social media as a threat.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	25	10.73	25	10.73
Agree	48	20.60	73	31.33
Undecided	28	12.02	101	43.35
Disagree	90	38.63	191	81.97
Strongly disagree	42	18.03	233	100.00

Addendum C

Section D – Online OPR Question D13 My organisation/agency provides financing for me to pay attention to social media training courses.				
Response Option	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	38	16.31	38	16.31
Agree	99	42.49	137	58.80
Undecided	31	13.30	168	72.10
Disagree	40	17.17	208	89.27
Strongly disagree	25	10.73	233	100.00

Addendum D

ADDENDUM D: WEB-BASED SURVEY - CRONBACH COEFFICIENT ALPHA FOR EACH FACTOR

Cronbach Alpha for factor 1: characteristics of persuasive dialogue

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha	
Variables	Alpha
Raw	0.758082
Standardized	0.756973

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha with Deleted Variable				
Deleted Variable	Raw Variables		Standardized Variables	
	Correlation with Total	Alpha	Correlation with Total	Alpha
Sharing information (C14)	0.479186	0.730452	0.485667	0.726998
Co-creation of solution's (C13)	0.492421	0.726069	0.490572	0.725272
Trust (C10)	0.473218	0.732407	0.473692	0.731192
Interactive communication (C11)	0.563311	0.701490	0.555801	0.701887
Mutual understanding (C12)	0.623678	0.676862	0.615596	0.679726

Cronbach Alpha for factor 2: characteristics of persuasion in activism

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha	
Variables	Alpha
Raw	0.664731
Standardized	0.667643

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha with Deleted Variable				
Deleted Variable	Raw Variables		Standardized Variables	
	Correlation with Total	Alpha	Correlation with Total	Alpha
Debating societies issues (C6)	0.452398	0.593045	0.454462	0.596896
Creating active groups (C8)	0.539522	0.539332	0.537630	0.539381
Resolving conflict (C9)	0.466689	0.583071	0.473646	0.583914
Positive coercion (C15)	0.336677	0.668860	0.335963	0.673398

Addendum D

Cronbach Alpha for factor 4: challenges in online OPRs

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha	
Variables	Alpha
Raw	0.644135
Standardized	0.640249

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha with Deleted Variable				
Deleted Variable	Raw Variables		Standardized Variables	
	Correlation with Total	Alpha	Correlation with Total	Alpha
Perception of social media (D12)	0.610495	0.426556	0.608375	0.428861
Restrictions on free-speech (D11)	0.450660	0.557812	0.446740	0.552263
Training (D13)	0.356155	0.623915	0.348598	0.620721
Content/timing (D10)	0.297018	0.656381	0.297344	0.654616

Cronbach Alpha for factor 6: strategies for online OPRs

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha	
Variables	Alpha
Raw	0.623347
Standardized	0.622952

Cronbach Coefficient Alpha with Deleted Variable				
Deleted Variable	Raw Variables		Standardized Variables	
	Correlation with Total	Alpha	Correlation with Total	Alpha
Access (D9)	0.452744	0.495398	0.450391	0.497002
Assurance (D5)	0.460485	0.482966	0.457445	0.486785
Openness (D2)	0.387864	0.584083	0.388055	0.584634

ADDENDUM E: WEB-BASED SURVEY - PEARSON CORRELATIONS COEFFICIENT FOR EACH FACTOR

Pearson correlation coefficient for factor 3: characteristics of an activist

Pearson correlation coefficients, N = 233 Prob > r under H0: Rho=0		
	Social role (C1)	Social responsibility (C4)
Social role (C1)	1.00000	0.26946 <0.0001
Social responsibility (C4)	0.26946 <0.0001	1.00000

Pearson correlation coefficient for factor 5: antecedents for online OPRs

Pearson correlation coefficients, N = 233 Prob > r under H0: Rho=0		
	Expectations (D1)	Interdependency (D3)
Expectations (D1)	1.00000	0.40907 <0.0001
Interdependency (D3)	0.40907 <0.0001	1.00000

Pearson correlation coefficient for factor 7: cultural sensitivity in online OPRs

Pearson correlation coefficients, N = 233 Prob > r under H0: Rho=0		
	Cultural norms (D4)	Networks (D8)
Cultural norms (D4)	1.00000	0.22918 0.0004
Networks (D8)	0.22918 0.0004	1.00000

ADDENDUM F: WEB-BASED SURVEY - KRUSKAL WALLIS TESTS FOR DIFFERENCES BY RESPONSE GROUPS

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 1: characteristics of persuasive

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 1 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	19171.50	18252.0	480.258633	122.894231
Levant Region	38	4194.00	4446.0	377.204290	110.368421
Greater Middle East Region	29	2704.50	3393.0	337.040121	93.258621
Other	10	1191.00	1170.0	206.928329	119.100000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	5.2484
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.1545

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 2: characteristics of persuasion in activism

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 2 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	19092.50	18252.0	481.681169	122.387821
Levant Region	38	4335.00	4446.0	378.321576	114.078947
Greater Middle East Region	29	2712.00	3393.0	338.038440	93.517241
Other	10	1121.50	1170.0	207.541255	112.150000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	4.6839
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.1965

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 3: characteristics of an activist

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 3 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	19386.0	18252.0	464.861035	124.269231
Levant Region	38	4054.0	4446.0	365.110723	106.684211
Greater Middle East Region	29	2534.0	3393.0	326.234259	87.379310
Other	10	1287.0	1170.0	200.293989	128.700000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	9.3281
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.0252

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 4: challenges in online OPRs

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 4 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	18017.50	18252.0	481.773196	115.496795
Levant Region	38	4360.00	4446.0	378.393856	114.736842
Greater Middle East Region	29	3619.50	3393.0	338.103024	124.810345
Other	10	1264.00	1170.0	207.580906	126.400000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	0.7107
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.8707

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 5: antecedents to online OPRs

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 5 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	18636.50	18252.0	473.908127	119.464744
Levant Region	38	4401.00	4446.0	372.216480	115.815789
Greater Middle East Region	29	2615.00	3393.0	332.583406	90.172414
Other	10	1608.50	1170.0	204.192095	160.850000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	9.4346
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.0240

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 6: strategies for online OPRs

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 6 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	17929.00	18252.0	480.687593	114.929487
Levant Region	38	5226.50	4446.0	377.541203	137.539474
Greater Middle East Region	29	2972.50	3393.0	337.341160	102.500000
Other	10	1133.00	1170.0	207.113154	113.300000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	5.1170
Df	3
Pr> Chi-square	0.1634

H_0 : The response groups are identical.
 H_a : The response groups are not identical.
 Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Kruskal-Wallis test for factor 7: cultural sensitivity in online OPRs

Wilcoxon Scores (Rank Sums) for Variable Factor 7 Classified according to the response group					
Response group	N	Sum of scores	Expected under H0	Std dev under H0	Mean score
Gulf Corporation Council Region	156	18607.50	18252.0	460.332058	119.278846
Levant Region	38	4702.50	4446.0	361.553578	123.750000
Greater Middle East Region	29	2827.00	3393.0	323.055874	97.482759
Other	10	1124.00	1170.0	198.342595	112.400000
Average scores were used for ties					

Kruskal-Wallis Test	
Chi-square	3.3573
Df	3
Pr > Chi-square	0.3397

H_0 : The response groups are identical.

H_a : The response groups are not identical.

Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

ADDENDUM G: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

1st email: To invite the PR professional to participate in the telephonic one-on-one interview.

EMAIL TITLE: Interview: Online organisation-public relationships

START OF EMAIL TEXT

Mr Name and Family Name

Position Name

Organisation Name

Good day <First Name>,

The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a telephonic interview for my **academic master's research assignment**.

The interview aims to **explore ideas around online organisation-public relationships**.

The interview requires **public relations or communication professionals** to participate, as these roles are known to have the responsibility online organisation-public relationships.

It is estimated that the interview will take approximately **20 minutes of your time**.

For your convenience, I have attached the semi-structured interview questions.

The interview is only used for academic purposes and will be strictly confidential, and only members of the research team will have access to the information. No personal data will be published in the dissertation.

Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Sincerely,

Steven Smith
Corporate Communications Professional
+966 540 892 138

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2nd email: To PR professional that have agreed through telephonic discussion to participate in the one-on-one interview, attached with the interview questions.

EMAIL TITLE: Interview: Online organisation-public relationships

START OF EMAIL TEXT

Mr Name and Family Name

Position Name

Organisation Name

Dear <First Name>,

With reference to our telephonic conversation, I am grateful that you have agreed to do an interview with me which is part of my academic master's research assignment.

Please let me know when a suitable time would be for you to conduct another telephonic discussion (approximately 20 minutes) regarding online organisation-public relationships.

For your information: please know that the interview will be recorded which will only be used for transcribing the discussion. You may examine the transcription of the recording of the interview in which you participated at any time. The interview is only used for academic purposes and will be strictly confidential, and only members of the research team will have access to the information. No personal data will be published in the dissertation.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,
Steven Smith
+966 540 892 138

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The statistics that are represented below are taken from the **233 Public Relations and Communication Professionals in the Middle East** that participated in the academic survey.

QUESTIONS
Section A: Characteristics of Critical PR
CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSUASIVE DIALOGUE This category measures the degree to which PR & Communication Professionals in the Middle East demonstrate the characteristics to obtain a shared understanding between communicative parties.
<p>Sharing information (C14) 89.27% of respondents agree that they share specific information on social media to improve the public's perception of the organisation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you briefly describe the process within the department in sharing information on social media?
<p>Trust (C10) 91.84% of the respondents use social media to reach out and build relationships with strategic communities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your experience, how can trust be built between the organisation and its online communities on social media?
<p>Mutual understanding (C12) 81.12% of respondents attempt to find common ground during an online debate between the organisation/agency and the public.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you go about creating a mutual understanding during social media discussions? For example, would you identifying and reiterating issues that parties agree on during a debate on social media?
<p>Co-creation of solution's (C13) 87.98% of respondents attempt to facilitate internal discussions that address issues between the senior executive management and the young workforce.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your experience, what do you feel are some of the critical issues that need to be addressed between an organisation's senior leadership and the young workforce? • What guidance can you offer PR Professionals who are trying to create opportunities where senior management and the younger workforce generate solutions together?
<p>Interactive communication (C11) 80.69% of respondents provide relevant evidence in support of a specific discussion on social media between the public and the organisation/agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefly explain how your department will develop messages to facilitate interactive communication on social media.
CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSUASION IN ACTIVISM This category measures the degree to which PR & Communication Professionals in the Middle East demonstrate the characteristics to persuade one party to accept the message creator's viewpoint.
<p>Debating societal issues (C6) 54.51% of the respondents challenge their employees to get more involved in debating societies issues online.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts about PR Professionals encouraging employees to debate societies issues on social media? Do you think it is appropriate? Why?
<p>Resolving conflict (C9) 50.64% of respondents attempted to initiate online discussions on social media to resolve the conflict between the organisation and its publics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some of the lessons that you can share about resolving conflicts between the organisation and its publics on social media? • How does your organisation determine which issues to engage with on social media?

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<p>Creating active groups (C8) 65.24% of respondents agree that they attempt to create active social media groups that participate in public discussions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you create active social media groups, what type of profiles or characteristics do you look for? • What recommendations could you offer PR Professionals who are battling to encourage these social media groups to participate in online discussions?
<p>Positive coercion (C15) 64.81% of the respondents implement reward-driven social media campaigns. (For example, my organisation conducts content-creation competitions on social media where publics are required to create specific content to stand a chance to win a prize).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has your organisation conducted reward-driven social media campaigns (where the online community creates specific content to win a prize)? If so, what did you learn from it?
<p>CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ACTIVIST</p> <p>This category measures the degree to which PR & Communication Professionals in the Middle East are taking on a moral, social role within the organisation to resolve social problems.</p>
<p>Social role (C1) 92.71% of the respondents pay close attention to societal issues developing in the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature shows that PR professionals are taking up a more social role within the organisation, to initiate and encourage dialogue on societal issues. What challenges do you face in raising societal issues within the organisation?
<p>Social responsibility (C4) 81.97% of the respondents collaborate with other organisations to encourage collaborative efforts to resolving social problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature also points out that PR professionals are motivated towards social problem-solving strategies that help resolve societal issues. Based on your experience, what societal issues do you think are adequate for organisations to conduct joint social responsibility efforts in?
<p>Section B: Online Organisation-Public Relationships (OPR)</p>
<p>CHALLENGES IN ONLINE OPRS</p> <p>This category measures the degree to which PR & Communication Professionals in the Middle East are challenged in online Organisation-Public Relationships.</p>
<p>Perception of social media (D12) 31.33%, of respondents, say that senior management does perceive social media as a threat to the organisation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What encouragement could you offer PR Professionals who are still trying to overcome the anxiety and negative perceptions that management has towards social media?
<p>Restrictions on free-speech (D11) 66.95% of respondents agree that the restrictions on free-speech (in terms of the organisation policy) prevents employees from participating in online discussions about the organisation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that employees can add value to the organisation if they are permitted to participate in the online discussions? • What advice could you offer other organisations to be more tolerant in their policy to allow employees to participate in online discussions about the organisation?
<p>Training (D13) 58.80% of respondents agree that their organisation provides financing for them to pay attention to social media training courses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think it would benefit the organisation if internal training was done with the employees on using social media to promote the values, products or services of the organisation?
<p>Content/timing (D10) 52.79% of respondents agree that they find it challenging to promote the right conversations at the right time on social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What guidance could you offer PR professionals in promoting the right conversations at the right time on social media?

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<p>ANTECEDENTS TO ONLINE OPRS</p> <p>This category measures the degree to which these antecedents in online Organisation-Public Relationships occur in the Middle East.</p>
<p>Expectations (D1) 75.10% of respondents attempt to build trustworthiness through having public discussions on social media where anybody can participate in challenging any claim.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your organisation respond to each comment made on its posts on social media? • What advice could you offer PR Professionals in managing the online communities' expectations of the organisation?
<p>Interdependency (D3) 78.12% of respondents attempt to generate inspiring discussions with publics on social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advice could you offer to PR professionals who want to participate in promoting their country's transformational achievements and its national vision? • There are consequences of not participating in the right conversations on social media. How does your PR/Communications department determine what topics/conversations would be selected to inspire its online community on social media?
<p>STRATEGIES FOR ONLINE OPR</p> <p>This category measures the degree to which these strategies in online Organisation-Public Relationships occur in the Middle East.</p>
<p>Access (D9) 55.36% of respondents agree that their organisation consents that its employees take on a key role in handling sporadic social media inquiries from the public.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts about allowing employees with access for them to participate in responding to social media inquiries about the organisation?
<p>Assurance (D5) 59.23% of respondents agree that they use social media as a tool for the public to participate in the organisation's decision-making process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What guidance could you offer PR Professionals who are trying to use social media as a tool where online communities can participate in the organisation's decision-making process?
<p>Openness (D2) 60.52% of respondents agree that their organisation practises transparency through making public statements on social media, admitting that it has made a mistake.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advice could you offer PR Professionals in using social media as a tool to encourage transparency?
<p>CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN ONLINE OPRS</p> <p>This category measures the degree to which PR & Communication Professionals in the Middle East regard cultural sensitivity in online Organisation-Public Relationships.</p>
<p>Networks (D8) 84.97% of the respondents agree that they build social networks with specific influencers on social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your organisation partner with specific popular social media influencers that are highly regarded and followed by its customers? • Based on your experience, what should PR Professionals look out for when building strategic online social networks?
<p>Cultural norms (D4) 97.85% of respondents attempt to be respectful towards publics on social media who have different cultural values.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role do you think culture plays in building relationships between the organisation and its online communities?

ADDENDUM H: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Transcript of interview 1

Country: Saudi Arabia
Position: Digital Media Senior Specialist
Qualification: Bachelor's degree in English Literature,
Master's in Business Administration specialising in Marketing
Experience: Five years
Interview date: 8 April 2019
Time: 13:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 41 minutes

Researcher: The first question is really about sharing information, how do you go about sharing information, is there a process that you need to follow? Or are you able to share information as you like?

Participant: So, on social media, we at [REDACTED] are managing our social media accounts internally. I will just give you the main idea first. So [REDACTED] social media accounts are managed internally. We used to hire the social media agencies to handle these accounts and then we terminated these contracts and started to manage our social media accounts internally. So, all the information shared is controlled by us. Is that what you are looking for?

Researcher: Ok, that's good, it is interesting that you are managing it internally. Do you prepare information and share it, or do you get managerial approval, CEO approval, to post anything?

Participant: What's the purpose in hear, is that. We manage everything related to social media internally. In terms of content, design, posting, monitoring, reporting. First, we have the social media department, where content is created, then it goes to the designing process, then we take the final approval, from the management of the social media department, which is me, and then it will be posted on the social media account.

Researcher: Interesting that is excellent thank you, do you think that trust can be built, between the organisation and the online communities on social media?

Participant: Yeah, trust can be built, like, for being a reliable source of information to these online communities, or social media followers. This is actually an important topic; trust is very important for us. I am talking about [REDACTED] here; we are a listed company on the Saudi stock market. So, we need to be trusted by our followers that everything mentioned in our account is reliable and that what we share is the right information. You know what I mean?

Researcher: Exactly, as you said, the keyword there is reliable. With regards to mutual understanding, when there is a discussion on social media when your company is the topic of discussion, how do you go about creating mutual understanding? Do you get involved in discussions or do you rather watch it from a distance?

Participant: Ok, so in our case, it is clear in our social media strategy, that our social media accounts are speaking only. We are not interfering in any online discussions with online communities. Our accounts are speaking only; we are just posting, we avoid replying to comments, or interfering in any online discussions. Maybe this is due to the type of audience that we are targeting because we are business-to-business and business-to-government, so we are not targeting society, that is why we don't feel that we have to respond to participate in online discussions.

Researcher: Excellent, so your customer base that you are providing information for, they don't really have the desire to chat, or to have discussions about the company.

Participant: Yeah, because they are mainly business-to-business and business-to-government.

Researcher: (06:53) With regards to creating solutions together between the new generation and the senior management in your company, how do you go about working with these two very different groups?

Participant: Sorry, can you repeat this one?

Researcher: So within your organisation, you have the senior leadership that are a bit older and more mature, and then you have your younger workforce, which has a very different way of doing things, and with the technology they want to do things a lot differently, how do you go about creating

solutions with them together, or do you create an environment where they can speak together?

Participant: You mean through social media?

Researcher: Either internally or on social media? Because what I have noticed is that the younger generation enjoys social media as a place to talk about things, whereas the older generation does not really like to talk about things on social media publicly.

Participant: I think that recently things have changed, senior management has to understand that there needs to be a clear and good presence on social media, once they know, once they are aware of this strategy, of the social media accounts, what type of content what type of audience we are targeting, this creates a kind of relief for them. They know that we are not going to post anything that will ruin the brand, identity or image of the company. They have to be assured that there is a clear strategy to follow, on social media, and that nothing will go wrong.

Researcher: So, all the solutions are internal, and then it is agreed upon, and nothing will be implemented without management approval. What about interactive communication, do you practice interactive communication?

Participant: What do you mean by interactive communication?

Researcher: For example, developing messages in such a way, where you ask a question or for example, with Earth Hour.

Participant: You mean on social media?

Researcher: Yes.

Participant: Our accounts are speaking only, so we don't usually create interactive communication, with our online communities.

Researcher: Do you think it is appropriate for employees to debate societies issues on social media?

Participant: I am against this idea. There was a discussion about whether employees should engage with our accounts on social media. But for employees, we at [REDACTED] worked on social media policies and procedures for employees, who want to declare their affiliation to our account. So

that it is clear that if you want to declare your affiliation to [REDACTED] account, then you have to avoid discussing any religious, political, or sensitive social topics. As you know, this will affect our brand. If employees are declaring that they are working at [REDACTED] and then they are retweeting or posting sensitive or political tweets, then this will obviously affect [REDACTED]. It happens sometimes; you will find a comment or mention, look at your employee that said, you know this kind of conversation, would fire back our account.

Researcher: (11:44) What about resolving conflicts on social media? As you mentioned now if there is a social media conflict would you engage, how would you engage with resolving that conflict publicly? Would you write back? Get involved in the discussion or absolutely refrain from it?

Participant: Usually, if it is not related to [REDACTED], we would not interfere, we are not interfering with any conflicts. If it is related to [REDACTED], we have a social media crisis management plan, with a clear crisis management team. Everyone in the team knows his role, so we sit and decide what type of conflict that needs an urgent reply, or we can just neglect it. This is decided after we sit and see this issue or conflict.

Researcher: What about creating active groups, so, for example, you were talking about stakeholder or customer identification, do you go out and search for influencers or people or social media to connect with?

Participant: As I said, we are not targeting the society directly, so usually we do not look or search for on social media influencers or communities. Because there is no point in focusing on them directly, there is no clear message for that society that we want to deliver to them, as all our services are for businesses and for the government.

Researcher: What about communities within the operational area, for example when you are doing social responsibility programmes, within your strategy, do you potentially look to connect with those people, or would you rather let that happen organically; naturally they just connect with the account.

Participant: Yeah, I might go and connect with them, but maybe because I have a connection with them. But we have not reached any influencers. But yeah if we have any activities in the future, related to CSR that we want

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to reach society through them, of course, we will contact those influencers, but there will be fixed characteristics for these influencers, not anyone should be contacted.

Researcher: What about for example if you have an event, would you hashtag that event, or would you @ that event – by connecting with them?

Participant: (15:00) Yeah, we use the hashtags that are related to the event, that we are cross-branding with, we mention the related account.

Researcher: Excellent, have you ever done reward-driven social media campaigns? What that means is, would you post a message asking the community to create specific content, and if they do, they can win a prize.

Participant: We have not done this, based on the nature of our business.

Researcher: (15:59) One of the other things that I learnt in the literature is that, professionals are working more towards a social role, so like identifying social problems within the organisation, taking on a more social role, like letting people hear the voices of the public, if there is a problem you escalate it, or try and help certain groups within an organisation. Do you see this trend within your company, within the corporate communications department, for example?

Participant: I don't want to give you any miss leading information, I am not working on this part. I am focussing on digital and social media, not internal.

Researcher: Let me rephrase it for you, for example, if you come across a specific dialogue on social media, would you escalate that as taking on more social role it is taking it to the senior management?

Participant: Maybe yeah, it depends on the content of the conversation.

Researcher: For example, if you were to take on something, what type of challenges do you think you will face? Would your management team be open to listening to it?

Participant: Ok, maybe the challenge is that top management does not have time to listen to the discussions of social media, do you know what I mean, they think it is not important. It is not as important as other things; this

is the challenge. Like they rarely take social media discussions seriously.

Researcher: The next question, then we finished with section A, is the social responsibility aspect, what social responsibility issues do you think is appropriate or adequate for an organisation to be involved in. I will just give you two examples from the quantitative survey that I did, where 233 professionals from the Middle East participated and the two that were rated the highest issues that they will participate in, is creating jobs for the youth, and empowering women in the workforce. What type of social responsibility issues does your organisation participate in or stand for that you obviously post on social media?

Participant: For social responsibility activities, there are generic topics, like empowering youth and women in general, also there are some activities related to environment, especially for those companies in the power, oil and gas sector – where they have to highlight their environmental issues, indirectly in this way they are saying that we are not ruining the earth, we are just trying to fix it.

Researcher: Exactly, so you are saying that social responsibility would really rely on the operation or industry that the company is in.

Participant: (20:18) We can be involved in some generic topics such as empowering women and empowering youth, but also there are some activities that we can touch on like the environmental awareness activities.

Researcher: Excellent, now we are going to talk about section B, section B is really about building online relationships, and some of the challenges that I have noticed is the perception of social media. If you could give advice to other digital media specialists or managers or people in the field, what advice could you give them when their management have a lot of anxiety and negative 'perceptions' towards social media?

Participant: Actually, we have to understand that recently, social media has become a good tool that can be utilised to deliver the right message that these managers want to share with the right target audience. This has become more accessible for them. For me there are so many reasons, it is cost-effective, it is timely if they want to publish any declaration – or

anything – through social media, they can do it, at the exact time that they want. They don't have to for example wait for a picture that needs to be published or something like that, so they can utilise social media for their own benefit.

Researcher: Exactly, that is fantastic, and with regards to restrictions on free speech, what I mean in that is not from a high level, from more the restrictions of the free speech that we referenced at the beginning, where there are policies in the organisation preventing employees to participate in online discussions, and one of the things that you have actually touched on was that you have a policy in place where employees need to declare their affiliation with the company. I think that is fantastic, the question is really how can you encourage companies to be more tolerant in their policy in allowing employees to participate in building the brand, in building the story of the company online, the company by itself cannot build its own story, by the employees participating in it, they are like ambassadors building and enhancing the story.

Participant: (23:06) Since there is a clear policy for the employees, there is no need for this restriction, to restrict their ideas and opinions. As I said, they have to follow these policies; otherwise, they will ruin the company's brand image. The problem here is that we are a listed company, we can't play with our image.

Researcher: Excellent, so they (employees) do add value?

Participant: Yeah, they do add value if they are following these policies and procedures.

Researcher: With regards to training the employees internally, on how to use social media, do you have a training course in place? How do you do it, internally or do you do an online training course with them?

Participant: We have not done an actual training, this is also new, we have only recently started to work on these policies and procedures. We have sent an internal message through email to all employees, but there is a plan to work on workshops for these employees to explain these policies and procedures more.

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Researcher: Ultimately, you can tap into this in such a positive way by actually creating brand ambassadors, digital ambassadors through the type of training that you provide. Like, how you guys can promote the company, what we expect from you to enhance the company's image to build the story.

Participant: Yeah, this is one of the plans to conduct a training session and workshops with LinkedIn - in particular – where representatives from LinkedIn came to conduct workshops for our employees and explain how they can work on their profiles and how to reflect [REDACTED] on LinkedIn in a positive way. Because we know who our assets brand ambassadors are through our social media platforms.

Researcher: (25:34) Excellent, with regards to content and timing, one of the things that I have noticed is that more than half of the respondents in the survey find it very difficult to promote the right content and the right time on social media. What are your thoughts towards this?

Participant: I think that if there is a clear social media strategic plan with a clear target audience, and clear strategic content strategy for each target audience, there will not be a problem in this part. Because we have a clear strategy of who is our target audience, what type of content that each of our target audience is looking for, and how we can reach each target audience through this content, and when to publish this content.

Researcher: How often do you renew that monthly, weekly, quarterly?

Participant: We revise our social media strategy every six months. We used to do it once per year, and then we revised it every six months to see if there are any new social media features that need to be added.

Researcher: How do you look into your profiling, for example, do you have software to analyse your followers or is it done manually?

Participant: Actually, when we were with the agency, there were some social media tools, like Buffer, Socialbakers and HootSuite that we used. Recently we started to do it manually, using each platforms analytics and networks.

Addendum H

- Researcher:** With regards to managing expectations with your online communities, do you know what their expectations are?
- Participant:** Our online communities?
- Researcher:** Like your followers, do you reach out to them by any chance and ask them what do you expect from us?
- Participant:** Actually, we have not done this.
- Researcher:** So you create the perception internally through analysing your stakeholders, and then, for example, draft up the expectations.
- Participant:** Yes, we do it indirectly; we assess the type of content we publish through the analytics to see how our online communities or our online followers respond or engage with this type of content. If we post 13 contents, then we see in the analytics by the end of the month. What type of contents perform very well. So, we know, or online communities are more likely to engage with posts relating to work experience, talking about our work environment. Or they more engaged with events coverage; this is how we draft the content, it all depends on how they engage with the content that we publish.
- Researcher:** Excellent, this really leads us up to the next question about inspiring your followers. What kind of advice can you give other professionals in the region, if they really want to promote, for the example the 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia, or the 2020 transformational programme, and align with it? I have seen so many companies putting the logo onto some of their posts, talking about it, and really getting involved in promoting it. What advice could you offer them in being apart and inspiring their followers?

Addendum H

Participant: Actually, in terms of the Saudi vision 2030, I don't recommend that every company should post about it. Just mention this vision, if you really have something to say about it, not because other accounts are talking about Saudi's 2030 vision. No, if you have something to say that is related to this decision, say it. Recently, it became too much, do you understand what I mean?

Researcher: People are trying to show that they are on board, that they want to associate with it, that they are behind it.

Participant: Ok, but do they really have something related to this vision?

Researcher: Exactly, I hear you.

Participant: Unless they have something, to say that is related to this vision, then ok. Otherwise no.

Researcher: What about inspiring other messages, like when Saudi Arabia's women could start driving. Would you, for example, post something about it, like congratulations to all the Saudi women. How do you feel about that?

Participant: Yeah, sometimes we try to link social activities to the account that we feel are related.

Researcher: As you have women in the workforce.

Researcher: With regards to access, I am going to come back to providing employees with access to participate in social media inquiries. So, you said that you have a policy in place, but do they have access on their computers to access social media, or is that forbidden?

Participant: No, it is not activated for all employees.

Researcher: What about getting the followers or other businesses involved in company 'decision-making' on social media. Would you do something like that?

Participant: I don't think so; we have not actually done something like that.

Researcher: Where they participate in a decision. I mean you said earlier that they do not engage with any discussions. But do you think it is possible to create a decision-making platform on social media?

Addendum H

- Participant:** Honestly, I don't think so, I don't think that we will be able to do it.
- Researcher:** Do you think it is more manageable to get everybody into a workshop when you get everybody into a room, were you can create groups, do you think it is more manageable like that, for the decision-making process?
- Participant:** Yes, I think so.
- Researcher:** What type of advice could you offer other professionals who want to use social media as a tool for creating 'transparency'?
- Participant:** Ok, I think the main idea for using social media for business is to create a kind of transparency with online communities. I think this is how social media emerged in the beginning. However, this is not applicable sometimes, where you can't say everything about the business. You feel sometimes that you are restricted about what to say and what to mention through your social media accounts.
- Researcher:** Once again, they will follow an internal policy to what to say and what not to say.
- Participant:** Yeah.
- Researcher:** What happens when one of the employee's leak information, would that come back to their association, and they would need to go to HR?
- Participant:** Yes, that happens sometimes, actually, when one of the employees said something about the business on his social media account. We try to contact him directly and request that he delete this post immediately, and then everything works well.
- Researcher:** What about creating strategic online social networks, so for example, the companies that you work with, would you create a network with their followers. Would you hashtag them to get their followers to view your content?
- Participant:** Actually, we have not done this, and I don't think that there is a future plan to do this.
- Researcher:** What role do you think culture plays in building online relationships in the Middle East, for example.

Addendum H

Participant: I think for businesses there should be a clear understanding between the organisation and the site where they will operate. As this will affect the type of communication and the type of content posted or shared with these online communities. Every community has a specific culture that you want to play with. Sometimes culture affects the way of communication, the way of content shared.

Researcher: I will give you another example, would you company do something with a bit of humour to engage with the youth, or would it strictly be corporate, with less humour?

Participant: [REDACTED], as a corporate, we can't do this kind of, it depends on the tone of voice that this account is following. So yeah, it is all about the tone of voice, and the personality of the account. For example, here at [REDACTED], we can't speak humour, but some accounts are operating in the same communities such as STC, Dominos or Mc Donald's, they can be less formal. It depends on the company itself.

Researcher: From your experience, what advice can you give professionals, like your top two things you could offer professionals in the region?

Participant: I really need to work on a good social media strategy to follow, and this will pave the way to all other things. There has to be a good social media strategy, with a clear target audience list, with a clear content strategy, with a clear messaging and tone of voice, clear policies, what to do and what we should not do, monitoring, of course, this will help them in a positive way.

Researcher: One last thing about the issues on social media, do you recommend avoiding all issues?

Participant: There needs to be a social media crisis management plan. In this crisis management plan, it should be clear that what type of issues we should respond to, and what type of issues we should neglect as if it is nothing. Sometimes if you respond to small issues, it will be big, and people will start noticing them, so things need to be neglected, and sometimes there are issues that we need to respond to, and we have to take action.

Transcript of interview 2

Country: Saudi Arabia
Position: Global Brand and Marketing Communications Manager
Qualification: Honours Degree in Marketing,
Master's in Business Administration
Experience: Ten years
Interview date: 9 April 2019
Time: 11:30 (GMT+3)
Duration: 51 minutes

Participant: I had a look at your questions and have noticed the level of academic sophistication behind it, normally, we tend to engage with these type of things when we have consultants come and visit us, PR consultancy businesses, PR Executives, key company's Weber Shandwick, which are part of the IPG, in my case the branding and marketing communications person from Ludwig Hart. It is always refreshing for me to take a break from the practical work and go back to theory. I did my masters while I was working, so I know what you are going through.

Researcher: (03:33) Thank you so much. I really appreciate your kind words. Shall we get stuck into it?

Participant: Yes, please, I am ready.

Researcher: All right, so the first section that we will deal with is looking at the characteristics of persuasive dialogue. Before we go into the questions is ■■■'s social media outsourced or is it internal?

Participant: I will go into how we work, from a practical point of view yes and no. in most developed companies, including ■■■, the less we outsource, the better. Although it is always good to outsource, it is always good because we are a diversified petrochemical company. Whether it is branding, whether it is social media, let's us go outside of our speciality in communications, whether it is finance, you going to deal with consultants such as KPMG or E&Y, you going to be in contact with specialists in the field. But we should not deal with specialists on a day to day basis, let's say for example with social media – monitoring – I would engage with a consultancy firm so that we can work together to

develop a dashboard, and programme that dashboard to select keywords, that is important within our industry to pick up on social media. Then we categorise it; this is what is coming from twitter, what is the type of word is it relating to influence? Is it related to responsive action? What does influence mean? This type of outlet is saying something of influence – of people how they perceive our industry and company. For example, we have a category for the response; we work with key stakeholder that developed key measurement tool – so that we can see how others are responding to ■■■'s actions. Or any other company regardless of the stakeholder. So that is a project, a dashboard, we work together. They train us because they are the experts, then we have a social media expert here who knows about our industry and is also good at social media. It is good to work with consultants from project to project basis. I am a firm believer that there is nothing that cannot be done in-house regardless of any profession, when it comes to day-to-day work, when it comes to projects, new technologies out there, new communication tactics, new communication strategies, something that is being developed by a university that has more than forty years of experience in communications and now he has a PHD, he develops a new way for organisations to measure social media, in a world that is saturated by data, and where we have an attention span of 15 seconds, instead of fifteen minutes ten years ago. Those are the things that we will go to consultants for and listen how we can do business better. I hope that this answers your question; this is just my opinion of cause.

Researcher: (06:56) Excellent, your perspective is really the richness of our discussion. With regards to persuasive dialogue, do you think it would be appropriate that ■■■ would have a persuasive dialogue on social media? Cause it would really project information and inform its online community and followers. Do you think that it would be appropriate for them to do persuasive dialogue, for them to actually chat with their online communities?

Participant: (07:48) I won't necessarily speak about ■■■ but let's talk about business-to-business companies in general. Let's think about business-to-customer companies, like Coca Cola, Walt Disney, that is more

focused on the downstream and end-user. In [REDACTED] we are business-to-business we tend engage with the organisations and more sophisticated individuals. When it comes to end-users, the only end-users we interact with is probably a farmer or somebody that wants to buy fertilizer for his garden, that's it. Beyond that, very little end-users. When it comes to business-to-business there are multiple decision-makers within the business, so in terms of business-to-business engagement and dialogue I think that we do not necessarily directly engage in social media in promoting sales, that is not the best way for business-to-business in my opinion. I think we should engage with social media in other issues, like in promoting ourselves, for example sharing industry knowledge, trying to promote new technologies that reduce CO₂ emissions in manufacturing. In any organisation, I am a firm believer; whether it is Shell, whether it is any other company, I don't think that employees just want to collect money and go home, party and not care about the environment, not all employees are like that. I can tell you now, that most people here in [REDACTED] they do care about the environment, and in any organisation, you do have the one person who just wants to make a quick buck, and who do not care about tomorrow. You need to engage with the workforce, and tell them to listen, we do care about the environment, but the only reason why we are still using plastics and other materials that are not sustainable is because, not as a company but as human beings, we are still working to develop better alternatives, so that the blame does not go into the company, rather the responsibility goes to us humans collectively. In other words, let me give you an example, yes, we should engage, but we need to know whom to engage.

Researcher: Exactly, that is fantastic; one of the other questions that I would also like to look at our societal issues. As you said, there are triggers within your system that you can pick up within the different communication channels. Who would define what societal issues to engage with? What is acceptable and what is not acceptable for an organisation to engage with certain societal issues?

Participant: (10:38) I am a firm believer in the truth, if you put me in front of the microphone, no matter what you think, I am going, telling the truth. So,

you ask what is appropriate and what is not appropriate, first of all, if something happened – don't lie, don't tell them, for example we did not have a fire in our office building or in our manufacturing site. Say that we did have a fire, let me give you an instance, I am reading this new book called "PR in a week" I recommend it for you. There is a hype about PR in my industry that people think that PR is about turning dust in gold, when in fact it is actually not true. PR is about affective communications and telling the truth in a way that they will understand you; it is not about lies; it depends on the person's philosophy. Yes, there are people in PR who do lie, but not everyone. For instance, the other day I made a mistake, I did make a mistake, what did I do? I went to the person and said I made a mistake, and you are right, and this is what I am willing to do to correct it. This was a colleague at work, in my organisation we don't mind making mistakes, as long as it is done with pure intentions, if it is unintentional it is fine. So, it is the same thing with a company, right now, when you think about Nike, it is like a person, somebody that is very energetic. Let's say for example a business-to-business company, like Marafiq, your company or mine. We tend to be more official, more responsibility, if we make a mistake, let's say there was an incident in the plant, if there was a fire, we should be the first ones to rapport it before the media. Tell them, listen, guys, there was an accident in the plant, we are going to investigate it, the people who did not do their jobs are going to be fired, so-on, and so forth. Don't let the press be the first ones to rapport your imperfections; you need to disclose all your imperfections. If you do that the press will have a tough time with you.

Researcher:

Do you potentially create forms where the older management team connect with, the younger workforce, in order to create some type of mutual understanding or create co-creation of solutions? Do you believe that this is good practice in any organisation?

Participant: (13:23) Yeah, I think that you will find that in Corporate Social Responsibility. I am part of corporate affairs, it used to be called corporate communications, but now it's called corporate affairs. Corporate Affairs basically consists of corporate social responsibility, events, protocol, government affairs, global brand marketing and communications, and global communications which include media, social media, translators, media relations and so and so forth. Now when it comes to CSR, it is important, but CSR is a very broad field. It is publicly disclosed, if you go to our website or any of our press releases, we have four CSR pillars in [REDACTED], now I will focus on just two random ones, "technology and education" and "water sustainability" for example. So, when it comes to CSR and engaging the public on social responsibility, as a company, it is not feasible to engage with everything regarding social responsibility. For example, there are charities, so many different kinds; you have animal rights groups, you have refugee groups, there are so many different kinds, environmentalists and so on and so forth. As a company look at, as a person I am a kind person, I have an excess of this, these types of things, I have an excess of clothes, and excess of money, for example, therefore, I should donate what I have. I am a kind person; I don't try and cure cancer... (bad telephone connection – not clear). One of our objectives is to show the world that we want to be one of the key contributors of both providing foods in 2050, as in 2050 there is going to be a food shortage. I hope that answers your question, so again. Doing what we can within our capabilities as a company, so we say we are good at this and this, and therefore when we engage with the public on social responsibility, we are going to create these for pillars. There is something that our company is good at, so we are going to engage in these things. One last example, Nike, could engage with promoting physical fitness, that could be one of its CSR pillars, in trying to reduce obesity.

Researcher: That is excellent, it is so amazing what you are referring to, and this is really rich information that I could use. Another question is when you are looking at employees and social media; obviously, the organisation is using social media to create its brand story to build its identity in some way, through reliable information. What is your perception in involving employees in building the story, or the digital brand – do you think that it would be good practice that the company is acceptable to participate in building the brand story in social media or do you think that they should be totally excluded from participating?

Participant: (17:04) That is a very good question actually, look when it comes to companies, I can tell you right now, part of the process, and this is branding 101. Companies right now are so big, when we think about companies, brands especially, they are like person personalities. To me [REDACTED], to give you an example is very organised, it is not perfect, but it is very organised, and it is very systematic, that is one of the brand attributes that allowed me to join it. So, let us say that somebody comes as a director for branding to the organisation, we need to know what the employees think about [REDACTED], what do they like about [REDACTED], what are the imperfections of any company. We need to get the employees feedback, in the end, the sales managers, the customer service representatives, and anybody that is in the face of your customer should have a voice in communicating what [REDACTED] is. So, you collect all of this information from your internal stakeholders, the first people to ask before going to your customers is your employees – people first. When I look at any company or any CEO representing the year's results, I would say that you are very good at public speaking – but I would give credit to your staff. I would say that you have a huge team of sales managers or a great team of scientists. In terms of communicating your advertisements and your brand, we need the feedback of the employees so that when creating customer success stories, when we create brochures about who we are as a company, we need to be accurate about communicating who we are. I come from a business, marketing and communications background, and I work in the business unit. I can tell you right now that the thing that will make the business unit much better is good templates. When they receive a request from the customer to provide the data sheet about your product, go to space,

download this, just plug in the numbers, very effective brochure, guys we need a brochure, we developed a new product these are its specifications. Okay great the template is ready, just plug in the numbers as long as they are accurate. One thing that is really important when you engage your internal stakeholders to tell them listen, we are not actors, we are signers, we are not – you know even with the colours, all the fluff in the communications, media and branding, it is not what it looks like. The Marafiq colour codes were chosen so that you can differentiate yourselves from your competitors so that people would recognise Marafiq through the logo. Oh, and look at this brochure from Marafiq, I can tell that these graphs are from Marafiq by these colours. You need to get the hype from the employees; the emotions that are reflected from the employees is what [REDACTED] is to your customers. One last rule of thumb, as an investor, let's say for example if you buy shares in the future, I recommend this to you as well from a personal perspective, don't look at profits, look at how happy the employees are for starter-up companies. Google got to where it is because they take care of their employees; they treat their employees like human beings. [REDACTED] treated me not like an employee, they treated me like a human being, I would say this ten years from now, even when I leave [REDACTED], I would say the same thing about my company.

Researcher: That is really insightful, and excellent advice, I will definitely take that to heart, thank you very much. More than half of the respondents to my questionnaire, believe that they find it extremely challenging to promote the right content and the right time. What advice could you offer professionals in the region about this?

Participant: (21:37) The first question I have is basically when it comes to communications 101; I am not an expert in communications, I am still 34, I am not 64 presenting in front of university students yet. But I would say the basics of communication, know who your audience is, and know what you want to say to them. Know what you are talking about and know who your audience is. Know what they get out of it; it is called selective perception. Let's say, for example, I like to watch movies with X, Y, Z topic if I am watching it with my wife or mother – I will enjoy the action, and she will probably enjoy the romance – selective perception.

Let's say, for example you are engaging with your target audience, your stakeholder, know who your stakeholder is and know what matters to them. If I am going to an employer roadshow, companies that don't mention this might make this mistake, they freeze the employment temporary until they can get a new budget, but yet their HR department is still going to promote themselves at university roadshows. They engage with communications, they say we want to go to an employer roadshow, we want to go to a university and promote ourselves. You are going to provide content to people who want jobs, the university students who are going to start their careers. Why you being in front of them? Why are you showing them how good we are? And not providing good jobs. It's like for example; I watched a trailer for a movie that was never released, you see that's content, they pulled it from the plug. The same thing for your customers, if you show them contents you better deliver on it, so know who you stakeholder is, and know what matters to them. There are two types of content; first there is the framework, which is from corporate-level – communications and branding, then there is the actual data. For example, let's say financials, you are engaging a bank to get loans from them, you need to provide them with accurate information, what they need to know about your company so that they can know if you will repay your debt. Then they come to communications, and we communicate with them effectively, and that's where messaging frameworks come in. If you look at [REDACTED]'s press releases, we don't just say we invested, we say why we invested – we tell a story, like company X says it invested, part of my exaggeration, 2 trillion dollars for this, I don't care if it is 2 trillion dollars or 2 dollars, I want to know why? What is the reason behind it? Tell me a story and substantiate it. Anything that we say here at [REDACTED], we are very careful in what we release, there is a lot of things that we don't release. Because one of our brand attributes here is humbleness in [REDACTED], it is very difficult for a global company to be humble; it is a challenge for us. Again, it is content management; they do not need to know everything; this is theory right now. From a practical point, an advertisement will tell them as little as possible regarding our product; they want more information they will go to our website. Putting too much content in our advertising – No! if you look at our adverts it is very simple, and it is

realistic, if you look at our photos we try to avoid special effects, because by looking at a person or product it looks exactly like a real thing, like looking through a window. Think about it that way; if you look at an advertisement, it is just a photo with a word, a brand promise. There are no fluffy effects. For example, I work at Range Rover, and [REDACTED] needs an advert for a new polymer grade, there is a picture of a Range Rover and look what we did for our customer, we provided lighter material, a real picture of a Range Rover, not flying through the air. I can use this to manufacture Range Rover. If I want more information go to the website, click, I go and it gives me hundreds of pages of data, to distribute to procurement, to distribute to the sales guys, to distribute to the scientists, after two months of research in [REDACTED], do you think it is the right company to deliver to us – business-to-business.

Researcher: That is excellent another question that I have, from the research that I have done, I have seen a lot of PR professionals in the region, GCC and the Greater Middle Eastern region who are also in countries that are creating 2020/2030 visions, like Oman is now working on the 2040 vision. What advice could you give PR Professionals in the region, who are trying to align their company with for example 2030, what advice could you offer them for promoting that association?

Participant: (27:55) My advice is not to pretend to be aligned with 2030, 2040 or 2050. My advice is whenever a professional is being paid to deliver on that vision. Some of these vision, like countries x, y and z – they have the vision to function as a normal country, so the PR Professional, they cannot act, as a professional, they will end up acting in front of their loved ones. I hope that this does not sound unprofessional, the Abdulaziz that you hear right now, that is the Abdulaziz in front of his wife, his son, his mother, father, boss, this is me. No matter how much you get paid as a PR Professional, if you are lying you are going to have sleepiness nights, you got paid a lot of money, and you exploited, it is legal, what you did is legal, but, you legally exploited the developing country to provide themselves something that is not true to what they bought. This depends obviously on the PR Professionals code of ethics or his morals. Mean what you say, go in and just be yourself, if you really think that the vision is unrealistic, tell them that it is unrealistic,

because right now the Saudi vision, in the last few years I have seen a lot of changes happening. A lot of excitement, a lot of things, of course it is not perfect, but compared to where I was years ago and where I am right now, it is unbelievable the changes that are happening. We are functioning as a normal country. Right now, as a PR Professional, if the country decides to launch a vision and all of a sudden you are having a lot of media moguls outside, saying that company x, y and z, why now? You could have said this years ago. Human Rights is a global challenge for everybody, all of us as humans. Of course we care about human rights, but it is a global challenge, the fact that you are bringing up human rights issues now of all times, is not because you have an issue with human rights it is because you are used to, we call this nation branding, when you try to brand a nation not for what it pretends to be, but for what it actually is. When you talk to me, don't talk to me like I am a Saudi, I am from another planet, I have lived in the U.K., I was in an American school, like a multinational. If I was an alien, I would say that Saudi Arabia is beautiful, that is very humble, I am sure they treat you well, very hospitable, there are issues about the culture that are positive. There are things that are imperfect, but we want to capitalise on the positives, like for example, 2030, naturally we are good at hospitality, okay then let us go for tourism, like the UAE who is having tourism. So as a PR Professional just try to look at the context of what is going on. The context of what is going on and tell them the truth. I can tell you right now, I am not an expert in media, I only took one course in media, and I work with the media department, so I know the basics. One thing that I look at when I see TV presenters, I don't try and listen to the contents, the contents I listen to off-line, either from a newspaper, when they talk about numbers and facts, I just look at the body language, and I can tell if they are lying or not. Seriously, brother, the old saying that the truth will set you free, I tell you this right now, both professionally and personally – that is so true. It will make you so much more confident in front of the media wolves, and if they stop interviewing you, they stop attacking you, it's not because you made a mistake, it is because they are afraid of you because you are telling the truth. That is why they are no longer inviting you to be on their show to

represent your company because they know this guy is very hard to grab.

Researcher: This is another item I have noticed in critical public relations, is that PR Professionals or Communication Experts are taking on a more social role within the organisation, they are not afraid to speak out on behalf of the marginalised, for being the voice of those being oppressed, to talk out. What are your thoughts on this, especially in this type of culture in this region?

Participant: (33:05) Look, I will tell you something in terms of Saudi culture, and it falls back to a combination between culture and religion. I will give you a personal example; it applies whether it is a company or a person so that you can understand how organisation leaders act here. If I was a media representative outside, and I expose somebody that is in crime, or a gang member, this person is running a gang, that is ruining his family's life – that can fly outside (the country of Saudi Arabia), but the culture here we do not have that. We have a culture where nobody is perfect; we try to protect somebody's honour, somebody's reputation. We deal with him, if he has done something bad, he needs to be punished, but we protect him, we protect his reputation. For example, in our company's complaint department, one thing that is important for a compliance department is that you deal with the person, but you protect his reputation in front of his colleagues. I am saying this because we are dealing a lot with compliance, they are one of our stakeholders here, and we have volunteers for every department. But as compliance we protect his personal reputation, maybe this guys has problems, why is he behaving this way, maybe he has personal issues, so we disciplined him, but as long as you are not affecting the company's performance, we are going to tolerate you, but just be careful, and don't worry, nobody is going to find out about this. What is the company going to benefit by humiliating him in front of his colleagues and staff? So, the same thing when it comes to a company or a country in this case. As a consultant or as a problem solver, you can do it two ways, you can come to us a journalist trying to advance your career by coming to Jurassic park, and trying to show others look at these dinosaurs, or no, you can try and help a developing country, contribute to the challenges that are

facing the world right now, and one of them is climate change and the other is feeding the world in 2050. Right now, are you worried about your next meal? No. we are trying to contribute to that as an organisation, how are we going to feed the world, that is one of our objectives in agro-nutrients. If the US dollar collapses, my grandchildren will have a big challenge.

Researcher: That is really good; one of the things is debating these societal issues, going back to the social media aspect again, it is so sensitive to be debating societal issues online. In my country, I am South African, I see these debates very often, I see the whole community that gets on a topic and starts debating it, and you have all of these viewpoints, and it is really an outlet where people are able to discuss things. In the Middle East, this does not really occur that much, or do you disagree?

Participant: (36:38) I understand the question that you are trying to ask me, and I think what you are trying to ask me, is that in the Middle East it is a lot more difficult in engaging in debating, exchanging ideas, disagreeing with one another, without taking things personally. I do agree, things do tend to become personal here, we are not as open here to other people opinions as in other parts of the world. That is a cultural thing, but it is a stereotype, and it is not true for everybody. I can tell you right now that a lot of our leaders here are open for feedback.

Researcher: Like resolving conflict, it is a sensitive thing that should be done discreetly, using the culture to protect the reputation of the person. Dealing with resolving conflict is not a public thing; it is more of a private thing.

Participant: (37:35) I will tell you one thing for example, let us say a doctor is being interviewed by CNN and is showing you a table of the countries, where the country has the lowest vitamin-D deficiency, would you believe me if I told you that Saudi Arabia would most likely be on that list. I have a vitamin-D deficiency because we don't go out in the sun much, and also in the UAE. You can look at it in two ways, here we go I am going to attack Saudi Arabia, no, no, it's a global challenge, it's a medical issue, it's an issue for Saudi Arabia, it's an issue. This country has an obesity issue; that country has a vitamin-D issue. You are not fixing anything if

you want to point and laugh go to the circus. My concern when it comes to PR for the challenges for a company, right now business 101 at Harvard University 1923, they never expected companies to grow as big as Walmart, one million people, that's a country population. Or █████, 40,000 employees at its peak, now we are 34,000. I have been looking at how many public listed company's there are, do you know that it is pushing more than 100,000 public listed companies, 45,000 public listed companies in just one part of the world, that is allot, that is publicly listed companies, a lot of them are manufacturing, I am telling myself that you need to stop criticizing companies and reaching out to organisations and saying how can our companies work together to volunteer and to organise to ensure that human life exists twenty, thirty, forty, a hundred years from now. All of our economists are focusing on one thing, the dollar and if it collapses. That is something companies are keeping their eye on, and they are not using the term financial crisis, its more than that.

Researcher:

I think as communicators you are touching on a very important aspect here; it is that we are looking at the human aspect of things and how we can create this dialogue, and how we can create co-creation of solutions between organisations who have the capital to spend. As communication professionals we are trying to engage with this, but creating a forum for this dialogue to happen is really a complicated thing, does it happen or social media, doesn't it happen on social media, what is the best forum for this to happen where we can bring these issues to light, where co-creation of solutions can be created?

Participant:

(41:08) Well the first thing is that there are two types of leaders, our previous CEO and our current one, the one thing that keeps them up at night is safety and environment. I can tell you that right now, it is not financials. I hate to break it down to you, but there are people in very high positions in other parts of the world and here and there, that really just care about what is in their wallet, or what is in their bank account. I know I am going back to philosophy, but this is a reality that needs to be discussed, people are just concerned about how I can live my own heaven on earth, I don't care about this and that, it's all about me, number one. Not all leaders are like that; the first things is that don't put

those types of leaders on the stage, they should not be there. We don't want pretenders; we want the real leaders who do care about the environment, we want leaders who really care about society genuinely, whether they are being paid to be on stage or not, no they really do care, and we want PR Professionals that advise them to say it is not about my company, or your company, or my country, or your country, it's not about my CV or your CV, it's not about my ego versus your ego, it's about, we are two elephants and we are concerned about the ants that we are going to step on. You see, we go on stage, and the people that care from different industries need to go on stage. When I look at the forum, I just want to know one thing, who really cares and who is pretending. One thing to keep in mind a lot has changed in the PR industry; there was a course I took in Dubai, called media literacy; this was in 2005 by the way. But right now, there is more awareness of somebody that is a sixteen-year-old on how the media works, especially with the internet boom. If you want to sugar-coat the truth, if you want to have a go at that, you will not fool them, you might fool a fifty-year-old VP who is an expert in finance, but you will not fool his son, and if his son advises him that the company that went on TV, I can tell that guy is lying, oh really son, how did you know that? Well, I just do; sorry I won't do business with you anymore.

Researcher:

Exactly, you are seeing a lot of this citizen journalism that is coming up around the world, and they are exposing so many things. Even if you look at other countries around the world that are struggling, you are seeing a lot of the citizens that are sharing information globally, and it is so fascinating to see. Previously before social media was such big deal information was withheld, and there was a lot more control, but, as we are moving towards a more global, international arena, where everybody is able to connect with each other. There is a huge pressure on the organisation to participate in this dialogue.

Participant: (44:45) Yeah, very good, I am glad that you have mentioned citizen journalism. In the '60s, not so many media outlets were controlled by media conglomerates, like Time Warner. Now there is a lot of independent journalists, and then they consolidated into corporate, and as we moved into the twenty-first century with all the social media technology, we have different citizen journalists, that are exposing what is going on. Some of them have good facts, but they exaggerate, some of them want to tell the truth, but they are not very good at research. It is a good trend that is going on if you want the truth, it is very easy to find it is out there. As an organisation you can either do your own things, you can either pretend that you are living in the 1970s, or you can get with the programme and just tell the truth. As an example, I mentioned earlier in this interview about a fire in a plant; it is ok to tell them the truth, it is ok to tell them that mistakes happen, we are fixing it. British Airways is a brilliant example; if you remembered in 2013, my brother was on that flight. I love British Airways, as I go to London since the '80s. why do I use British Airways, because it feels like I am in London the moment I board the plane. The brand theme, the British culture, I like their history, history is one of my hobbies. My brother got onto the plane; this is a pure PR case, you can research it. In 2013, Riyadh to London was delayed, you will find it there it was after Ramadan. The plane took off, an indicator in the cockpit went off, the plane had to land, and my brother had to come home. So, he could not go back; he was a student in the U.K. then what happened, I woke up the next day, went past my bedroom, went to go get a shave, then my grandfather called me and said you heard about what happened to your brother? And I was like yeah, yesterday the flight was delayed, they took off and landed. He said, Abdulaziz, the same thing happened again, with British Airways, the same passengers went up, took off, and had to land again due to an indicator turning on. It was a PR disaster, this was a true story, they told me one person even punched the customer service representative, people were frustrated, people were crying, it was a disaster, The third time, and to make the PR not any worse than what it is, they changed the plane, finally, and British Airways took off and got to its destination. So, the fact that I continue to use British Airways since that time until now is not because of that incident; it's because that is

the only incident that happened. Frequency. I don't remember what British Airways said about it, like refunds, that's not it, but if I was in their shoes. I would tell them that we have a good brand, a good reputation, but let us tell them the truth what happened, we screwed up. Let's tell them the truth, and here is what we are going to do, make sure that it never happens again. If they did do that, I will continue to use them, and I do still continue using them to this day. They do need to fix themselves; they sue to be better in the '90s. I hope that this gives you an example of effective PR, telling the truth, reaching out to your audience as if you know, putting yourself in their shoes. Empathy.

Researcher: I think that you have given me so much detail on the human aspect of our profession and how important it is, as a lot of the time we get so lost in the performance part of it that we kind of neglect the human aspect.

Participant: (49:01) It is important, even as a customer if I am buying a product from Marafiq if I am paying a huge sum of money, I want to interact with somebody that is genuine, who really believes in the product that he is selling. I got offers to work in other industries, but I did not take it because I do not believe in their product. Would I sell it to my son, would I sell it to my mother, no I would not. So why am I here selling their product? If there are health issues behind it, why would I sell it? I am talking about business-to-customer when it comes to business-to-business again with the plastics and manufacturing – there are complexities behind it, it is not an issue for the company, it is more of a challenge for humans, for us to switch to renewable energy. So, let us say you are working for an oil company, I would say, I don't feel guilty about it, in the end, it is not as simple as an on and off button, we have not found an alternative for oil, as human beings.

Transcript of interview 3

Country: United Arab Emirates
Position: Corporate Communications Leader
Qualification: Bachelor's degree in law,
Master's Degree in Real Estate Investment & Finance
Experience: 14 years
Interview date: 14 April 2019
Time: 16:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 11 minutes

Researcher: If we look at how organisations are attempting to build meaningful relationships on social media, having that in mind, that in context, what type of challenges do you think, or come to mind in building these type of relationships?

Participant: (01:56) The majority of my work is usually socially-focused; I do have an input in that with regards to [REDACTED]. I think that any kind of communications through social media is challenging. How do you actually talk to your customer? Or are you just beating the algorithm? And just be seen. That is definitely a challenge. I saw that Lash; the beauty company has come off of this in their social media channels as they have realised that they are struggling to talk with their customers. Instead, they were talking to the algorithm. That being said obviously, social media channels are definitely very important, because, in the absence to actual face-to-face conversations, or conversation over the phone, it is the closest way that companies and brands can probably/actually talk to their consumer if they can get through. Then you need to think about how conservative is your organisation. How open to criticism is the organisation? So, a company like [REDACTED], the company that I work for, by the way I don't speak on behalf of [REDACTED]. Large companies that are connected to the public sector have to be probably quite careful about how much they put themselves out there. Cause what happens when they start facing criticism? How do you engage with that in an online public forum? That is a challenge for sure because it leads to your communications being largely one-way, which obviously is not conducive to a genuine conversation, quote-unquote.

Addendum H

Researcher: That is excellent; what comes to mind when we say strategies? What kind of strategies could work well in building these online relationships?

Participant: (04:18) It is probably different for every company, in terms of certainly their risk tolerance. I think that in this part of the world you will need to take quite a pragmatic strategy, you can't just put everything out there at one go. I think, you need to start small and scale up, that allows you to undertake a bit of trial and error, although trial and error is not something that this region likes hugely because nobody likes to make mistakes, we want to be kind of perfect from day one. A measured strategy is the most appropriate for this market because if you try to do everything out of the gate, all it takes is only for one thing to fail, then you probably lose a lot of management buy-in, and then you left with nothing. It is better to do one or two things really well, to demonstrate proof of concepts, and then roll out to other spheres; this is probably the most effective strategy in my view.

Researcher: With regards to these strategies, do you think that employees can be included in these strategies to build online relationships?

Participant: (05:50) It all depends on; it is ultimately about ensuring consistency, the tone of voice of the kind of brand message. If you have a hundred people saying a hundred different things, that does not really work. If you have a hundred people saying similar kind of thing, then that is probably quite strong given the way these kinds of networks grow, the more you radiate out. From a sales perspective, there is no reason why you can't have a central content hub and use your staff as nodes to push out that centralised content. Then have that kind of online conversation with that agreed space. There is no reason why that can't work, but again it takes time, it takes effort, it takes a level of investment, making sure that your teams that are using that space on behalf of corporate, needs to know what is acceptable what is not acceptable. They need to have a clear understanding of the rules, what is going to work and what is not going to work, but again that comes down to investment in training, investment in time, investment into development.

Addendum H

Researcher: What are your thoughts on debating issues on social media? Because between the organisation and its employees it is a very tempting thing to do.

Participant: (07:30) I think that it is risky for a number of reasons that you don't want to say anything that you might regret. I think that you always need to have in your mind that you are not just speaking to yourself; you are representing your organisation. If you are an employee in the organisation, you are a custodian of that organisation's brand and reputation, and you should not be looking to put yourself in a position that may jeopardise that. I think that you need to be quite careful, anything contentious you need to take offline as quickly as possible, particularly in this part of the world where you have strict social media rules. That is new and are probably being tested and are at the moment open to reviewing wider conversations; I think you have to know your risk tolerance, you need to shoot just below the limits of your risks, just to make sure that you are safe.

Researcher: If you could give communications professionals in the region any advice on developing their social media accounts for their organisation, what advice could you give them?

Participant: (09:02) Ask yourself, why are you doing it? Are you going on social because everyone else is on social? Are you going on social because you think everyone else is on social? Or are you going on because you have a genuine business or communications need? You really need to think about is the prize really worth the effort? Because once you start, it is very difficult to stop. That comes down to retaking a pragmatic approach; you really need to understand, is there really a benefit here? If there is a kind of commercial benefit, is there a social benefit? Are you going to invest in a genuine community of people? If you are then you have a responsibility to those people that you have coalesced around a particular issue if you are not interested in building a genuine community, then what is the point and why bother, then you can direct your resources far better else were.

Transcript of interview 4

Country: Oman
Position: Social Media Expert – Senior Manager of Digital Communications
Qualification: Bachelor’s Degree in Digital Communications
Experience: 8 years
Interview date: 14 April 2019
Time: 21:30 (GMT+3)
Duration: 15 minutes

Researcher: What do you think are some of the biggest challenges for companies in building relationships with their followers on social media?

Participant: (02:02) It depends on the company and what is the target for the company? For example, telecommunication is different to an oil company, what is the target for the company, who is the audience? You cannot say a telecommunication company is increasing its followers, but for an oil company, no they are decreasing.

Researcher: Interesting I did notice that from the research that I have done, that companies that are more orientated selling products and services, need to have a strong strategy in building these relationships with their customers, then the industry.

Participant: (05:57) Yes, so you can make relation, first you need to be honest with the customer, second you should have a target in answering them, a target for timing in answering them. If they have any problem, you should sort it out within hours, don’t ignore any customer, if you ignore one customer, his friends they will ignore you, they will fight with you, they will not trust you again for anything, any product or anything.

Researcher: So, you are saying that trust is built on how quickly you respond to their query.

Participant: (03:40) Yes, trust and your message should be clear, your product should be clear, and everyone should like it. For example, in the market you have iPhone, Samsung, Huawei, you have so many devices. How can apple take more customers? New features for the phone, last week or two weeks before Huawei announced the P30 Pro, they announced

that we have a special camera, so everyone that is interested in photography or a new device with a camera – directly they will go to Huawei.

Researcher: Yes, that is excellent; what do you think are some of the perceptions of social media within the organisation. Do you think that the management is scared of social media, or do you think they are supporting social media?

Participant: (04:54) Both, they are hindering and supporting social media. Some customers directly go to social media, so you should solve his problem on social media. Don't ask him to go to your store or your branch or call customer service.

Researcher: So, do you recommend having a social media team that are working specifically on all of the comments and managing all of the responses?

Participant: (05:36) For me, I have two teams, content team and customer service team for social media. The content team is responsible for the contents for the products, the other team is responsible, for what? About the customer who has the issue with our company on social media. You should have a team for that situation or close your social media and announce that it is only for product. But now you cannot do it like that; you should have two-way, one team for product content management and one team for solving the issue for the customers.

Researcher: Excellent, what do you think are some of the main issues from the younger generation and senior management. The younger generation seems that they want to do everything on social media, but senior management are also a little bit worried about digital communication.

Participant: (06:51) If you have a social media policy, the top management will trust the small employee, why? Because it is like a line, everyone will follow this line, so they can do everything below the line. For example, I cannot answer through my mind; I cannot answer the customer with this tone of voice.

Researcher: What do you think about getting the employees more involved in social media? Do you think that employees should not be involved in company

social media? It is only the social media department responsibility, or do you think that employees can add value?

Participant: (07:44) Again you should have a policy as sometimes there will be confidential information if they are employees they do not know if it is confidential or not confidential if it is the right way. To share this information through social media. Sometimes if I have a problem with my line manager, so I cannot go to social media the day that I am fighting with the line manager. If there is an HR policy for Social Media, you will control this one. Another one, you should search who is an ambassador or influencer in your company, so for that situation, you can use your employees for that. You cannot go and search for any influencer outside. You should trust your employee; they will trust you also.

Researcher: That is excellent, thank you so much, Ahmed, it is very interesting what you are saying. With regards to strategy, what advice could you offer other professionals in the region who are battling with social media strategies? What is your advice for other professionals? What type of strategies can they use for making online relationships?

Participant: (09:18) For strategy there is a difference between country and country, if your target is in your country only, you should study what is my country's concept for social media. What is accepted, what is the language, everything, you should have like steps, in your country. If you think for globally, no, you should learn for each country which is your target, what is their age? Everything for strategy, you need to think for what you want, like, if you have a credit card and you go to the market, to the mall, to the shop, you cannot go directly and take everything, it must be in your plan, I want soup, I want one, two, three, four. So, everything needs to be in your plan. So that strategy needs to be from your plan, what you want to reach, then you can meet your strategy.

Researcher: So, you are saying that your strategy is really connected to understanding your target audience?

Participant: (10:25) Yes, because why do you want a strategy? If your strategy is left and your target is right. Choose, if you want to go right, or you want

to go left, or you want to go together. So, you should keep your strategy and target in front of you and follow them.

Researcher: I see so many of the GCC countries have a national vision. I see Oman has a vision 2040, and what is your advice for other professionals who want to support this vision 2040? Do you think that they add the logo to their post, that they add logo in promoting the 2040 vision?

Participant: (11:23) Yes, they should have the logo and have a media plan, they should search the target and audience, through social media, through WhatsApp, or through advertising in a newspaper, they should have a target, think where is my audience, and how can I reach them?

Researcher: Do you use software to analyse the information on the social media account, do you think that it is helpful?

Participant: (12:10) We have like one hundred tools; each tool has a different function or different job for them. What do you want? For me for telecommunication, I want to see the other competitor, what are they doing, I want to see my customers, what they want, so I want tools, what I want exactly. It is like words, they are using, we need more data, we need more credit, so this is like a keyword that I want to catch, if I catch these, I can improve myself and my company.

Researcher: Interesting, one last question, what advice can you generally give for professionals in Oman, in GCC who are really trying to make their company recognised, who are really working with the company social media?

Participant: (13:12) It is to know which company you want, there are so many kinds. Like, accounts management, some company, content management, some for advertising, some for creative, some for designer, so you should search, you should keep yourself one side, don't multi-side, after that concentrate on this side, and search for a team who is expert with two-person, with four persons. After that you will improve, if you have a target, if you have a plan, you will improve step-by-step.

Transcript of interview 5

Country: Saudi Arabia
Position: Public Relations Section Head
Qualification: Bachelor's degree in Business Administration,
Master's in Business Administration
Experience: 22 years
Interview date: 17 April 2019
Time: 08:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 18 minutes

Researcher: I am working on the idea of how the organisation builds relationships with the public, and I see that you are involved a lot with social responsibility events.

Participant: (02:38) Yes, I am a journalist also.

Researcher: What is so interesting that I find is that social responsibility is really a platform where the organisation, especially public relations, can help society. This is really what I am interested in. How can public relations professionals help society through social responsibility? What advice can you give other professionals in the region?

Participant: (03:11) You mean the definitions of that, or talking about the process, or what the value it adds through the social media to the organisation?

Researcher: You can talk about both the process and the value, that will be really kind of you.

Participant: (03:29) For us in ■■■, we have a public relation department, one of the responsibilities of public relations in terms of the process, is sharing news, financial statements, annual reports, and also the company activities, for example safety and environment, or any security campaigns, or any kind of activity. The proper channel right now is social media, to be in touch with your clients, with your shareholders, with all your stakeholders. Also, there are a lot of stakeholders that don't even know the news of your organisation. We are a joint-stock company in the Saudi Stock Market. It is one of our responsibilities to provide them with our organisation news; the proper platform now is social

media, Twitter, Instagram, also Snapchat, some we share our activities through video through Snapchat. Really it is adding value to us, but it is a sensitive platform. The mistakes on social media is not like the mistakes on face-to-face interviews or face-to-face meeting, or to prepare the press release and evaluate it and share it with your management, and then if I took it and published it, or no. Sometimes, if the news already published through social media, and if there are mistakes, yanni (you know), then it will be under risk. Also, the conversations with the customers, the clients through social media, this is very important things, when you want to reply to any questions from your customer, you have to be careful. I mean, be careful. Select the best words for your answers, not more than three or four words. Try to take it to another platform, write what you want and also to give him and chance to write what he wants to deliver to you through social media.

Researcher: That is interesting, and what challenges do you think it is for building relationships on social media?

Participant: (06:32) What is challenging on social media is, really it is amazing, it is adding value, but it is challenging, it is an area of risk, because the reputation of the organisation is the first priority, it is at the top of the list for the public relations. You have to be yanni (you know) caring for the reputations, from this point of view it is challenging you to find a creative or innovative idea to add more value, and also from that point of view, you have to be at least in touch with the last updates of the social media applications. You need to train your team to be aware of the risks that they are facing in contacting or calling our clients or even social media users.

Researcher: What type of strategies do you recommend on building these relationships? Do you have strategies that you can advise on?

Participant: (08:15) Yes, this depends on the organisation charter and structures that you have in public relations. We have to have a mechanism in managing social media accounts, and who is responsible in managing it, and also who is responsible to provide a proper picture for that, and also, we have to evaluate the pictures themselves – before sharing. This mechanism or kind of work, for example, we call this the procedure,

you have to have it in your department as a public relations manager. You have to have a procedure; you have to link your procedure with the company vision, mission, strategy, planning, what kind of objective you will have in your department to reach, what the sub-objectives or sub-actions are that is under the objectives to achieve your objectives. This is a lot of things to organise for your work activity, through your department, to achieve the best way of communication with the others outside, and also it will enhance and develop the picture and reputation of your organisation through your social media, or your media platform, like website, or other channels of communication.

Researcher: Excellent, do you think that you can get employees more involved with social media in helping the company?

Participant: (09:55) Yes, sometimes we have an internal activity, for example, recognition for the best safe man of the year award, a lot of internal activity. That activity as a public relations we have to publish it to the outside through our social media. When one of our employees becomes the best one for example in the year, when he sees his picture in social media, and some other people engage with him, contact him, text him, congratulate him, this is adding value to him, he is proud. It is something, that is not costly, you know, that reflects that you have a good environment within your organisation. Your employee are also interested to see their photos on social media because their company is proud of them. This is only an example to explain it to you. Our employees sometimes during the holidays, for example, international day, there is some circulation, some announcement that comes from the management, to extend one extra day of holiday for national day, which proper platform you send to your employee that it is a holiday? Through our social media, through our Twitter account, most of our team are followers of our Twitter account. That yanni (you know) gives us good chance to be in touch with our employees also. This is an example.

Researcher: How do you choose what social issue to discuss on social media, or what social issue to choose for social responsibility?

Participant: (12:07) As I mentioned before the social media is sensitive, very sensitive media platform. That is why you need to make sure that your team are trained well, they have good knowledge, they have good experience, they are very well educated, they know how to deal with feedback from others, they should also have good knowledge of how to escalate any risk or any issue that we are facing on our social media through the proper concerned departments. Sometimes, we are facing some type of hacking from the hackers to attack for example our social media, this is related to the cybersecurity department, we have to raise it, and we have to send it to the proper guys or sections to solve it, this is a technical issue. From, understanding our customers, this is another way; we have to be patient, do not reply for any questions until we evaluate the answers, is it meeting his expectation or not? If not, yanni (you know), if we cannot explain it properly through social media, then we have to contact him through other channels of communications. It depends on the situation itself.

Researcher: I see so many public relations professionals they really want to support the 2030 vision, they put the logo on their posts, what advice can you give for other public relations professionals in supporting the 2030 vision?

Participant: (14:11) First, you have to understand the objective of the 2030 vision, what are their expectations, and how to make alignment between your internal process and the 2030 vision, and put it in your documents, and an action plan. There are a lot of actions in the 2030 vision, is it suitable for you as an organisation? Some of the things is not for example relevant to the petrochemical sector; this is for the government sector, take what is suitable for your process, then evaluate it and put the action plan, and go through it. In our organisation we did a lot of surveys to find what we have to do, for example Saudization, yeah this is one of the objectives for 2030 vision, how to increase the Saudi's in your organisation in certain departments. We have a plan, for example, to hire the contractor, or to replace for example within general services some positions, which are not critical positions for Saudi's. This is part

of the 2030 vision, if we go for example to another way, for responsibility, we have to create a new volunteer team for Advance, who will be responsible to conduct the voluntary activity for the community, this is part of the 2030 vision. Also, donations and sponsorships, what are the programmes that we are providing to the community, it must be, in the past when we receive for example letter from any government, non-government organisation who needs support for sponsorship, pay 100,000 or 200,000 and that is enough, no. Now we have to evaluate it; this activity is it part of the 2030 vision? Or no? If it is with it, we will go with it. If not, we will have to evaluate it again, if it is a charity, we will go with it, from this way we have to yanni (you know), adjust your internal activity to be in the same line as the 2030 vision.

Researcher: That is excellent, that is such an important way of doing it. So basically, communicating and aligning specifically with the 2030 vision, like you said there is a community aspect in the 2030 vision, and how does the company align with that community aspect, and therefore, you can promote the 2030 vision in this specific context.

Transcript of interview 6

Country: Morocco
Position: Head of Communications Department
Qualification: Bachelor's degree in Business Administration,
Master's in Human Resources
Experience: 24 years communications experience
Interview date: 19 April 2019
Time: 17:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 18 minutes

Researcher: What challenges do you see in creating relationships on social media?

Participant: We do not practice social media for our organisation yet, but I did research to provide you with my point of view. I think that there are two levels to be distinguished; these are, the level of the 'online media tools' and the challenges that we have to take into consideration. The nature of the social media, and at the same time having the potential to reach much larger audience, this can be an opportunity as well as a big challenge, because, if the message is positive it is good for the campaign, if there is a negative message amongst the larger audience it is a big challenge to manage. Also, a challenge is the noise from multiple channels, as there are a lot of channels, people receive a lot of information from different channels, so it must be structured in a certain way. At a company level, the challenges might be to develop social commitment. Now, people are consumers; they are better-informed thanks to the web and social media. They are requesting and demanding greater transparency and strong social commitment. The aim is to gain consumer confidence and trust in the business. Another challenge is to target the right type of influencers, regarding objectives, like identifying the right kind of social media influencers, that are very active on social media such as Facebook, others on Instagram, others on online articles, the posts that, depends that they're most active in, profitable and equitable relationships with them. Also, taking into account the durability of these relations, it must also be sustainable for the long term. There is also another challenge; this one is maybe related internally; it involves the top management, like CEO and the

management team in the social media strategy. At one moment you have to involve them, the consumers request some time to be listened by the top level, by the authority, and the decision-makers, they want to get quick answers and satisfaction to their request. Involving top management is also a challenge. Another point will be the promotion internally, creation of a kind of ambassadors, the promotion of the creation of content by these ambassadors. Some actors within the organisation are relying on the staff, for the support to the organisation, for the communication strategy, they also give some kind of trust, they are the ambassadors. When it is spontaneous, I think it gets more impact, it can be spontaneous by raising the staff awareness on this ambassadors' programmes.

Researcher: Excellent that is very insightful, and that is very interesting as well. What do you feel? Do you think societal issues are also a challenge, what the organisation decides to discuss online?

Participant: (07:15) Yes, I think that societal issues are a challenge, as far as the corporate social responsibility, which is one of the axis that the company is giving importance to, because now we don't only request a business model, an investment, but we also request from the organisation to participate in the development of its surrounding, to be also transparent in a kind of a model, to be compliant. I think that as part of the social responsibility, which is now requested more and more, it shows the commitment of the organisations, I think the proof is in the communications, this part is promoted more frequently in the last five years, more and more by the companies. Is the communications strategy related to this topic?

Researcher: Excellent, this is something that I am really interested in. How can we use social media for social responsibility? I think these two work really good together, where social responsibility can be communicated on social media because you have society talking about societal issues. The organisation who participates in activities for social responsibility can use social media as a strategic tool.

Participant: (09:07) Yes, no it has become more of a strategic tool, and even in the organisations that have not invested yet that have not made a decision

for social media, they will do it soon. Social media is for the larger audience, even if we can target sometimes, reaches larger audience, at the same time, the messages can have more impact, but at the same time it is, it is also something to consider, sensitivity, because, it is also, the social question, it is kind of a crisis situation. Being active in social media means that there is a kind of proactivity because we don't wait to be in a crisis to engage in communications to all the targets. Social media is also a part of the tool that is the tool that has the most impact, yes so, I think that social media contributes to creating a kind of proximity with the consumers. Consumers can be for the B2C business or B2B business because sometimes it is also for the public opinion, to create a link or proximity, to set the image for the organisation that it is responsible and aware of the sustainable development, this is the construction of its public image. It makes a kind of trust between the organisation and its target, for corporate social responsibility, it is important to consider social media.

Researcher: That is excellent, and just the last one, looking at strategies on social media do you have any suggestions, or if you could give advice for other communication professionals in the Middle East, what type of strategies could you suggest?

Participant: (12:10) I can suggest like, talking, we talk now on focusing on the social responsibility, volunteering for the community project, providing sponsorships for the community, demonstrating the company's social responsibility. I can also suggest taking into consideration the employee communications, like keeping employees informed about what is happening in the company, the business opportunities, or even the CSR actions in building a positive attitude, and commitment. They will be like a kind of ambassadors and relay the information when the company needs it. Another recommendation will be adapting the messages to the target; I guess now that there are different ways, different tools for social media channels, for each one we need to adapt the message, depending on the technical constraints, or also on the targets that are more sensitive to each channel. What is also important, as I say is being proactive, a kind of crisis management approach, communicating before a crisis occurs, developing relationships with the influencers and

being close to the targets. What is important also in the strategy is to set the media measuring tools impact on the social media, to have a measurement in the KPI indicators, to see what we have impacted, and to see what we need to do to improve. This needs monetary investment, in specialised tools or sometimes in dedicated PR team, or dedicated PR agency. These are some points to take into consideration, in my opinion.

Researcher:

That is very interesting, thank you so much for your time, I really find it so interesting how you agree with the idea that social responsibility and social media play such an important role together for organisations.

Transcript of interview 7

Country: Saudi Arabia

Position: Division Manager, Digital Communication & Public Relations

Qualification: Bachelor's degree in statistics

Experience: 10 years' experience

Interview date: 21 April 2019

Time: 10:00 (GMT+3)

Duration: 5 minutes

Researcher: So, you know on social media the company is building relationships with its followers, what challenges do you see in building those relationships with the followers?

Participant: Yes, based on our model in [REDACTED], it is B2C, okay, you know what B2C means?

Researcher: Business to Consumer.

Participant: Business to Customer, yes. The biggest challenge to building relationships with the consumer or customer, this is the biggest or largest challenge that we are facing in [REDACTED].

Researcher: What type of challenges do you see in building these relationships?

Participant: Between the company, the client and the customer.

Researcher: Okay, how do you see corporate social responsibility helping in building this relationship?

Participant: Yes, this is one of our solutions in building very good relationships between the company and the customer, we do that, the second solution is building our online campaigns about the services and what we are doing for the community.

Researcher: So, building the, expressing social media activities which are helping to build the relationships.

Participant: Yes, yes, we have a lot of campaigns we are doing that. Each year, we are, and we are following the campaign, we are, how the campaign are

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doing in the end, this is what we do for the client, and building relationships.

Researcher: Do you think that employees can help with this? Building relationships?

Participant: Sure, yes, sure.

Researcher: How do you think the employees can help?

Participant: We have the meters, if they are in the street, they can contact the customers, or because we have the call centre, if they speak nicely with the consumer they will, this will help, I am sure this will help.

Transcript of interview 8

Country: Saudi Arabia
Position: Public Relations Department Manager
Qualification: Unknown
Experience: Unknown
Interview date: 21 April 2019
Time: 11:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 3 minutes

Researcher: Do you find it difficult to build relationships on social media with the followers?

Participant: No, actually no, we have a good relationship with our followers. Because we have good communication between our followers and us, so that is why we have good relationships with them, we listen to them, and also, we are working on social media twenty-four hours.

Researcher: Are you outsourcing it or doing it in-house?

Participant: Yeah, in-house, because we have a lot of technical questions, so that is why we are doing it in-house.

Researcher: How does corporate social responsibility, does that help you build relationships?

Participant: Yes, of course, we have another account, not just a corporate, we have five accounts, one corporate, and another one for social responsibility, also we have a care, and we have a safety – for safety, how can you safety everything's around you, in the street, in your home, in everywhere.

Researcher: That is very interesting, and you have specific people in the company managing those accounts, or only the digital communication team?

Participant: We have a digital communication team.

Researcher: If you could give any other advice for public relations professionals in the region who are trying their best to build these relationships, what advice could you give them?

Participant: Use the account by yourself, not the contractor. Because, when you use it by self, or by your team – you will know what other people need. So, it is easy to get what people need, and also, it is easy to develop your strategy to get more followers, and you will get a good relationship with your followers.

Transcript of interview 9

Country: Saudi Arabia
Position: Senior Manager, Digital Media, Communications and Public Relations
Qualification: Master's in Business Administration specialising in Marketing
Experience: 6 years
Interview date: 25 April 2019
Time: 09:00 (GMT+3)
Duration: 13 minutes

Researcher: What type of challenges do you see in building online relationships between the organisation and its followers?

Participant: Online?

Researcher: Yes, like social media.

Participant: Yes, so the biggest challenge is how you maintain the conversation happening. What is in it for people to follow you? And always, always, always a brand or the organisation should try a theme or should find a message or purpose that they want to deliver on social media to the people to start following them. That one. How they maintain this conversation happening? How do you keep engaging those people? That is very important, especially now that not only people favour human-to-human interaction with the brand. Even if you know that Facebook, Instagram, twitter their algorithms are all programmed for engaging mode, preferring human-to-human, over brand-to-human. Social media is definitely a business, where Facebook, Instagram and all those platforms do want brands to pay for their ads to reach the people. So let's say today I post an organic post, I don't promote it, I did not push it with money, it will only reach five percent of my own followers, why because of those algorithms, and those limitations that social media platforms that they keep putting on brand or company pages. So that is another very huge challenge, while on LinkedIn it is much easier to engage with people because most people there are professionals, they want to know more about the business/work environment. So, we did actually find a huge switch when we changed our strategy on LinkedIn, avoiding any promotional content and

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focussing all on our culture, and our work environment, the followers also increased so much, not only engagement. So maintaining the engagement by maintaining the conversation is definitely the biggest challenge. This is external. If you want to hear internally, I can give you a hint also.

Researcher: Nice, one of the things is how do you get the employees involved?

Participant: (04:09) Our employees?

Researcher: Yes, do you think that they can help the story on social media?

Participant: (04:19) Definitely, I am not sure if this is about our brand only, or even in other brands as well. So [REDACTED], whether you go to U.K. or Saudi Arabia people are always engaged, they want, they love being so engaged. One of our values in [REDACTED] we are open, and I think that this is common among all the people that they hire, although we are very it appears in Saudi that we are closed community, so not everybody is interested in going to social media yet. You need to be very clear in asking the engagement that you want from people, so, they will be interested, but you can't keep it open, your inspection, yeah we want you to go on LinkedIn to use this hashtag, we want you to be talking about x, y, y, or lets send something together, so one of the styles we use, the themes we use a lot in our social media is interviews with our people, to showcase our culture, as that is very authentic as it is bringing us, a lot of positive engagement. The testimonial is proven very good and is driving our engagement very well. Now I forgot to tell you about one other challenge, that will be mostly about us, about my industry, since we are working in insurance, we have to have a huge amount of people. People when they want to complain, they come and complain online, we receive thousands of complaints every day on social media. I think that human nature is when something bad happens to you, you will go and be loud about it. However, when something good happens – you might not be that willing to go and talk it. So, a huge challenge for us was how to decrease the social media negative sentiment. Although I understand for me as a communications professional, who works in marketing, I don't have a say over our approval team or the operations team, so what we try to do is we try to be more human in our

communication. Do more engagement, so at least the positive to negative sentiment, from a percentage perspective the negative drops while we are growing the positives. I clearly remember that in 2017, our negative sentiments were 70% vs 30% positive, now we are operating at 3% only negative sentiment.

Researcher: Wow, how did you manage to do that? What strategies did you use?

Participant: (07:01) Engagement, engagement, engagement, engagement. Driving more engagement through our account, avoiding promotional content, we were digging into so much details where every single piece of content, until now every single piece of content we publish – we check the negative to positive sentiment ratio, it's ongoing learning. So month after month we are checking what is causing the negative sentiment and how we can evolve, it is all about content, honestly speaking, it is how you create the perfect content for the perfect channel.

Researcher: Wow, that is very interesting if you could give.

Participant: (07:50) Do you want me to give more numbers?

Researcher: Okay, that will be kind of you.

Participant: (07:51) So in 2018, so we are all about videos now, videos are definitely much more engaging, not on all platforms, LinkedIn is the all opposite, even when we sit with LinkedIn themselves. A few weeks ago, I was back in London in our Head Quarters, and we sat with them, and they were like Twitter is much better with videos than with LinkedIn. So, when it comes to videos, we have over 25 million viewers in 2018.

Researcher: Wow.

Participant: (08:24) Yeah, that is a good thing, and as an engagement to engage 5 million people online every single year.

Researcher: Wow that is incredible, so you have really challenging KPIs.

Participant: (08:37) Yeah, very challenging.

Researcher: Wow, that is incredible, if you could give other professionals in the Middle East some advice on managing this organisation-public relationship on social media, what advice could you give them?

Participant: (08:54) I have this motto that social media feeds itself. So always, every single content that you publish, see what people are talking, listen to people and create content out of people's questions. Or if you see that the content is bringing in negative feedback, just don't follow it again, this is an insight, develop everything on insight and procedure. You will never start your account with very good successful content; it is with ongoing insight that you keep going. That is what I believe in, I give you an example earlier in my profession I use to handle baby feed account, so we use to, moms they ask a lot, so we use to see what they are asking us and next month calendar its exactly, we answer them in the comments, but that means that this, are asking about how can I introduce solid food to my baby, then we have next month about solid food about your baby, so always fill your theme calendar with peoples comments. Allow people to speak; people love to talk; sometimes we use to do things as simple as, are you pregnant? Tell us, what are you planning to call your baby? My friend is pregnant, and she has a baby boy, and she does not know what to call him, give a suggestion. Another one could be for moms, this always wins, to ask a mom, what is the most valuable advert that you want to pass on to other moms? So people love to talk, they love that you as a brand are giving them this space, to talk and share their own knowledge.

Researcher: And do you engage with any conflict online, or do you take it offline?

Participant: (11:01) We try to resolve everything online; however, we try to take them to their private messaging; actually, we have a dedicated personal account for Twitter in [REDACTED]. So, what we do is speak with them, and we talk to them, sometimes in the public, if we needed to call them, we call them. We try to resolve it all online, and we try to prompt this person to mention that everything was handled okay, so we turn negative into positive.

Researcher: So, you use persuasion? Persuasion techniques?

Participant: (11:39) No. No. We actually resolve his issue, that is number one, you need to resolve his issue, we resolve his issue then we go back to the comment, and we tell you that it was resolved, and it was great talking to him, we are happy that everything is resolved, if you need anything

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else, don't hesitate to speak with us. So if you resolved it and left the conversation open, anyone seeing this would think that you did not do a positive action, and a question would be promoted to see something positive for you. However, after we finished the call or the case in private, we go back and thank him, and wish that everything has went well – he would want to publicly get back and tell you thank you so much because you helped me. However, if you don't put this comment they will not, most of them will not come and say something. Right.

ADDENDUM I: STATISTICIAN PROFILE

Name: Dr Judy Kleyn

Academic qualifications: PhD (Statistics)

Research interests: Preliminary test estimation and risk performance,
Bayesian data analysis

Subjects lectured: STK 210 (Statistics)
STK 220 (Statistics)
MET 720 (Multivariate techniques)

Publications:

- Nakale, S., Coetsee, J., Arashi, M. and Bekker, A. (2013). *Feasible generalised least squares estimators in serially correlated error models from an asymmetry viewpoint*. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/39745>
- Coetsee, J. Bekker, A. & Millard, S. (2014). Preliminary-test and Bayes Estimation of a Location Parameter Under Blinex Loss. *Communications in Statistics: Theory and Methods*, 43:3641-3660. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03610926.2012.707737?journalCode=lstas2>
- Davidson, C.L., Richter, K.L., van der Linde, M., Coetsee, J (2014). Prevalence of oral and oropharyngeal human papillomavirus in a sample of South African men: A pilot study. *South African Medical Journal*, 104(5): 358-361. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0256-95742014000500021
- Kleyn, J., Arashi, M., Bekker, A. and Millard, S. *Preliminary testing of the Cobb-Douglas production function and related inferential issues*. Accepted for publication in *Communications in Statistics – Simulation and Computations* in 2014. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03610918.2014.968724>
- Nakale, S., Kleyn, J., Arashi, M. and Bekker, A (2015). The performance of serial correlation preliminary test estimators under asymmetry loss functions. *South African Statistical Journal*, 49(1):121-138. <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/45836>
- J.C. Ras, J. Kleyn and M. Arashi. (2015) *The risk performance of a heteroscedastic preliminary test estimator under the reflected normal loss function*. The South African Statistical Association's 57th annual conference proceedings, 65-72. <http://reference.sabinet.co.za/document/EJC184033>
- Erasmus, A., Christie, L., and Kleyn, J. (2016). Townhouse residents' use of interior products in the social zones of their homes as a demonstration of their need for uniqueness. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 40: 14-23. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijcs.12198/pdf>

ADDENDUM J: PANEL OF PR EXPERTS

From the United Arab Emirates

- Executive Director of the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA)
- Group Managing Director and MEPRA Member
- Communications Managing Director for Middle East
- Communications Director and Community Engagement International, Middle East & Africa
- Global Director Corporate Affairs
- Director Marketing & Communications

From the Sultanate of Oman

- Communications Director

From the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

- Corporate Communications Manager

ADDENDUM K: TRANSLATION SERVICE

Company name: Torjoman
Address: Dubai Internet City,
Building 2,
Office 105
United Arab Emirates

ADDENDUM L: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



UNISA COMMUNICATION SCIENCE ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date 6 December 2018

Dear MR STEVEN CARL SMITH

NHREC Registration #: Rec-240816-052
ERC Reference # :2018-COMMSCIENCE-CHS-58533826
Name: SC SMITH
Student #:58533826

Decision:
Ethics Approval from 6 December 2018 to 6 December 2021

Researcher(s): MR STEVEN CARL SMITH

Supervisor (s): Prof Y Slabbert
Department of Communication Science
slabby@unisa.ac.za
+27124293242

Working title of research:
An exploration of building online organisation-public relationships: the role of critical PR ideologies within the Middle East

Qualification: Masters

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by Department of Communication Science Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for three years.

*The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by a Sub-committee of URERC on 6 November 2018 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment. The decision will be tabled at the next Committee meeting on 11 January 2019 for ratification.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:



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1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the **Communication Science Ethics Review Committee**.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**6 December 2021**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2018-COMMSCIENCE-CHS-58533826** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature:



Mr Gibson Chauke

Chair of Communication Science Ethics Review Committee

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Tel: (012) 429-6843