ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE MANAGEMENT IN DIGITAL AGE: EXPLORING THE TOOLS AND STRATEGIES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SULTANATE OF OMAN

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at public relations (PR) tools and strategies in Oman in light of the digital era. Using a qualitative methodology, it conducts in-depth interviews with eight public relations professionals from various Oman-based organizations. The study investigates how PR professionals view the benefits and limitations of digital PR as well as how they use social media, particularly Instagram, to establish and maintain the image of their businesses. We discovered that social media is the most popular PR strategy in Oman because it makes companies more visible and credible while facilitating direct, interactive engagement with the public. However, social media also has certain drawbacks and hazards, like the inability to monitor the content, the potential for unfavorable comments, and the digital competencies of public relations practitioners. The study also provide implications for the practice of PR in the Sultanate of Oman. The study suggests that public relations practitioners should be trained and given workshops to improve their digital competencies, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI).

Keywords: Digital Media, Public Relations, Organizational Image Management, Sultanate of Oman

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of overseeing an organization's interaction and communication with its publics is known as public relations, or PR (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). PR seeks to improve and preserve the public's perception of the organization as well as the public's attitudes and actions toward it (Goi & Yong, 2009). Public relations (PR) plays a crucial role in every organization by improving its legitimacy, trustworthiness, and reputation among the general public (Gulerman & Apaydn, 2017). Therefore, PR is considered an important strategy and function of the management to maintain reputation and public image of the organizations.

With the advent of the digital age, the field and practice of public relations have experienced significant changes and challenges. Public relations and the way companies engage with their consumers have been transformed by social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snap Chat, TikTok, and X (Twitter). Social media allows businesses to create and share a variety of content, including text, images, videos, and narratives, as well as to publish and engage with a broad audience. Furthermore, social media allows businesses to monitor and assess the outcomes.
of their PR operations and receive quick, direct feedback from the public (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, in the current era of digital communications, the significance of digital public relations is growing exceptionally.

However, social media also has certain risks and challenges for public relations specialists. Social media lowers control and gatekeeping over the content and messages that organizations transmit while also increasing the possibility of unfavorable comments, criticism, and crises. It also raises moral concerns for public relations practitioners, such as the accuracy, responsibility, and transparency of their communications as well as the safety and confidentiality of their data and information (Wright & Hinson, 2013).

Sultanate of Oman provides us an interesting case study for analyzing the tactics of PR in the digital age. Oman is known as a vibrant, peaceful politically stable, and enrich in historical and cultural diversity. Oman is also striving to achieve an information- and innovation-driven economy by 2040 through modernization and diversification of its economy (Al Harrasia et al., 2022; Al Sinani et al., 2021; Al-Fathi & Al-Hidabi, 2020; Sebiane et al., 2020). Therefore, researchers find it as an interesting case to study the tools and techniques of public relations in the digital age.

The media system of Oman has also certain unique characteristics. Its diverse media ecosystem, includes a vast array of traditional and digital media channels and sources. According to the Arab Social Media Report, Oman has a high percentage of internet penetration (88%) and social media usage, (77%) (Ines, 2016). With over 2.5 million members, Instagram is the most popular and extensively used social media network in Oman. It is followed by Facebook, YouTube, and X (Samuel & Sarprasatha, 2016). Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking service, that allows users to create and share content, such as posts, stories, reels, and live videos, and to interact with other users, such as liking, commenting, and messaging (Instagram, 2021).

The main objectives of the study are to explore the tools and strategies of PR in Oman in the digital age, with a focus on the use and impact of social media, especially Instagram, as a tool for PR in Oman. The paper adopts a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with eight PR practitioners from different sectors in Oman, such as government, education, food companies, and cellular companies.

Public relations is continuously evolving and changing with the advancements of digital technologies. Digital public relations tools include social media management, social bookmarking, search engine optimization (SEO), online press releases, blogs, forums, news sites, and corporate web pages (Sezgin & Cesur, 2019). It involves using social media platforms, communication strategies, and internal influencers to build engagement and support reputation (Fikri & Yuningsih, 2020) Digital public relations tools like social media, company forum pages, emails, and company websites affect various customer segments differently, requiring organizations to develop digital marketing strategies accordingly (Gulerman & Apaydin, 2017).

Public relations practitioners can communicate directly with publics through Web 1.0 platforms like websites and early blogs, using dialogic communication principles to build relationships with publics (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). Micro-level social media, such as X (Twitter), Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, are used by public organizations to achieve PR objectives, with a proactive strategy focusing on transparent communication and a reactive strategy using deliberate inaction (Kharisma & Kurniawan, 2018). Social networks and online videos are considered the most important social media tools for public relations in the digital age (Verhoeven et al., 2012). Another study also found that, public relations practitioners are adopting 18 social media tools and developing skills related to social media as a strategic tool in the digital age, such as Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter) and YouTube, etc (Eyrich et al., 2008).
Public relations practitioners use social media tools, including Instagram for instant posting and access, and preservation of this information is crucial for their success in the digital age (Hajtnik et al., 2015). Due to the popularity of social media communications, scholars have introduced the concept of media catching, where journalists target public relations practitioners for specific content for story ideas, is a reversal of traditional media relations communication patterns in the digital age (Waters et al., 2010).

Top social CEOs use dialogic principles, such as providing information of interest and creating dialogic loops, to enhance public engagement outcomes like reactions, likes, shares, and comments on Facebook (Men et al., 2018). Therefore, it is argued that digital public relations tools and strategies include social media management, search engine optimization (SEO), online press releases, and communication strategies, with a focus on transparent communication, dialogic principles, and adapting to different customer segments are being used by the public relations practitioners in Sultanate of Oman.

**Organizational Image Management**

The present study is conceptually based on the theory of corporate image management. The intricate process of organizational image management includes establishing, upholding, and restoration of a favorable perception in the eyes of stakeholders (Massey & Joseph, 2016). It can be achieved by several tactics, such as corporate advertising, yearly reports, and damage control. (Mohamed et al., 1999). The assessment of the organization's image is a crucial step in this process, and it can be completed with a technique that creates a graphic map of the typical picture that a certain audience perceives (Schuler, 2004). The idea of employer image is also crucial since it affects financial returns, emotional ties, differentiation, and recruitment outcomes (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

As stated by Massey & Joseph (2016), organizations need to establish, sustain, and frequently even restore a respectable reputation among their stakeholders. In order to obtain particular benefits, organizations try to control and manage information and sway the opinions of their constituents (Mohamed et al., 1999). Schuler, (2004) also considered organizational image management as a method to evaluate the image an organization forms in the eyes of a given public was developed. Furthermore, it is also evident that favorable organizational images include better recruitment outcomes, more differentiation, stronger emotional bonds, and financial returns (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

It is also suggested that organizational image can be enhanced with the adaptation of online marketing strategies (Nekmat et al., 2014). So, it is argued that the framework of organizational image management, distinguishes organizational perception management from individual perception management in terms of its practical implementation and strategic nature (Elsbach, 2003). The present study also attempts to understand the implications of organizational management in the context of organizational communication.

The following are the main objectives of the study.

1) To explore the current practices and trends of public relations (PR) in Oman in the digital age
2) To examine the use and impact of social media, especially Instagram, as a tool for PR in Oman
3) To understand the challenges and opportunities of digital PR for PR practitioners and organizations in Oman
4) To contribute to the practice of Organizational Image Management in Oman and other similar contexts
According to the previous literature and objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated to conduct this study.

1) How do PR practitioners in Oman use social media, especially Instagram, to build and maintain the image of their organizations?
2) What are the benefits and challenges of using social media as a tool for PR in Oman?
3) How does the digital PR in Oman play a role in image management process as compare with the traditional PR?

This present study provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the tools and strategies of public relations (PR) in Oman in the digital age. It sheds light on how PR practitioners in Oman use social media, especially Instagram, to communicate with the public and enhance the image of their organizations. It also reveals the challenges and opportunities of digital PR in Oman, such as the ethical issues, and lack of digital competencies. The study would also contribute to the existing literature on PR in Oman, and it offers useful recommendations for PR practitioners and organizations in Oman and beyond.

2. METHOD

The present study is exploratory in nature, and it used qualitative research design for achieving the research goals. In-depth interview method was employed. Data was collected from 8 public relations practitioners, working in various organizations of Oman, having more than 5 years of experience in public relations fields. Interviews of three Respondents were conducted in face-to-face setting, and the other respondents were interviewed Online with Google Meet. Proper permission was taken before starting the interview. They were introduced to the topic, and they were granted the right to withdraw from interview at any stage. Respondents were also assured about confidentiality of information. The average time of interview was recorded 25 to 30 minutes. After data collection, thematic analysis was performed to highlight the tools, strategies and challenges of digital public relations.

We developed the interview protocol to conduct the interview with public relations practitioners. The questions were about; demographic information, use of social media for PR in Oman, challenges related to social media for PR in Oman and impacts of social media for PR in Oman. In line with the objectives and research questions of the study, we formulated the following questions for conducting the interview.

1. What is your role and responsibility as a PR practitioner in your organization?
2. How do you define and measure the image of your organization?
3. What are the main tools and platforms that you use for PR in your organization?
4. How do you use social media, especially Instagram, for PR in your organization?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using social media for PR in your organization?
6. How do you plan and execute your PR campaigns and activities on social media?
7. How do you monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of your PR efforts on social media?
8. How do you deal with feedback and comments from the public on social media?
9. What are the main challenges and opportunities that you face in using social media for PR in your organization?
10. How do you cope with the ethical dilemmas and issues that arise from using social media for PR in your organization?
11. How do you adapt and tailor your PR strategies and messages to the cultural and social context of Oman?
12. How do you compare digital PR with the traditional PR and the PR in other contexts?

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The present study highlights that most of the public relations officers are experienced (M= 6.8, SD=1.3) and they are from young to middle age (M= 31.7, SD= 5.2). The study also reflects that women in Oman are also choosing the profession of Public Relations (Figure 1). Now, they are also serving in different educational and economic organizations. Most of the participants were from the education sector, however, government sector, food sector participants were also involved in the study (See Figure 2).

![Figure 1. Gender of the Respondents](image)

Firstly, we found that PR practitioners in Oman use social media, especially Instagram, to communicate and engage with their audiences, and to share various types of content, such as posts, stories, reels, and live videos, that showcase their organizations' activities, achievements, values, and culture (Figure 3). This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that social media is a dominant and effective tool for PR in the digital age, as it allows for direct and interactive communication with the public, and enhances the visibility and credibility of the organizations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Wright & Hinson, 2013).

![Figure 2. Types of Organizations](image)

However, our finding also reveals some differences and nuances in the use of social media for PR in Oman, compared to other contexts. For instance, our finding shows that Instagram is the most
popular and widely used social media platform for PR in Oman, while in other contexts, such as the US and the UK, other platforms, such as Facebook and X (Twitter), are more prevalent and preferred for PR (Statista, 2021). It depends on the various socio-cultural elements, which determines the users' preferences and choices of social media platforms (Ines, 2016; Samuel & Sarprasatha, 2016). In this way, findings provide answer to RQ1 that social media can be used effectively by the public relations practitioners. We found that most of the public relations practitioners of Oman, are using Instagram and WhatsApp for digital public relations. Secondly, we found that Omani PR practitioners understand the potential and limitations of digital era, including the need for digital capabilities, feedback mechanisms, and ethical concerns. Our findings supports the existing literature that shows social media contains various problems for public relations professionals, including the less control on content, the risk of unfavorable comments, and the ethical concerns related to digital PR (Kharisma & Kurniawan, 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2013). Our findings also highlight the major tools and strategies that Omani PR professionals use to handle these kinds of the issues related to the digital PR. These strategies include using codes of conduct, institutional policies, and systematic monitoring and evaluation strategies. We also argue that public relations practitioners of Oman also have a keen interest to learn and enhance their digital competencies. It indicates the innovative and the strategic approach of PR professionals in Oman according to the socio-cultural context of Oman. (Al-Hasan et al., 2021; Dauletova & Al-Busaidi, 2022). In this way, findings support us to answer RQ2 that the PR practitioners of Oman are also facing the issues and challenges related to feedback mechanisms and digital competencies in the era of digital public relations.

![Figure 3. Popular social media tools for Public Relations](image)

Thirdly, we found that PR professionals in Oman are also preferring the digital PR as compare to the traditional PR. The findings are consistent to the previous literature that explains the change and evolution of PR over the time with the advent of new information and communication technologies (Fikri & Yuningsih, 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Khodarahmi, 2009). We found that PR professionals in Oman recognize and value the advantages of digital PR as compared to the traditional PR, due to the cost-effectiveness, and interactivity. The findings also indicate that PR professionals in Oman also combine traditional PR strategies with digital PR to produce a more complete and all-encompassing approach.
Furthermore, our research demonstrates that Omani PR practitioners acknowledge and value the diversity and complexity of PR in various contexts. Instead of assuming or enforcing a universal or standardized model, they modify and customize their PR messages and strategies to the distinct context of Oman (Al-Hasan et al., 2021; Dauletova & Al-Busaidi, 2022). So, our findings support to answer **RQ3** that the digital PR in Oman is playing a crucial role in image management process. However, traditional methods and strategies of PR are also prevailing in the context of Oman. PROs in Oman are designing and implementing combined strategies of PR.

**4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The main implication and recommendation of our study for the theory and practice of PR in Oman is that PR practitioners and organizations need to be strategic and creative in using social media for managing organizational image in the digital age. They need to be aware and sensitive about the negative comments or discussions about the organization on the digital platforms. They also need to integrate and complement the digital PR with the traditional PR, and to adapt and tailor their PR strategies and messages to the specific and unique context of Oman. Furthermore, many PROs highlighted that they are unaware about the use of modern tools of content writing, sharing, publishing and optimization. So, it is argued that there is a need to provide training and develop digital competencies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), among the public relations practitioners of Oman. By getting training, they can compete with the challenges of digital world and maintain the image of their organizations and influence the attitudes and behaviors of the public towards their organizations, in the digital age.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Key Statements</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>Uses and Benefits</td>
<td>We share information about our services and offers on Instagram and social media. We use social media for announcements. We mostly use social media and Instagram to communicate with our external audience. However, our activities also boost the moral of our internal audience of the organization. We use social media to share posts about our organizational activities. We share reels on Instagram because people love to watch it. We promote hashtags on social media to reach more audience. We use Facebook and YouTube Live features to showcase the broadcasting of our events. We check the comments of the audience and address their queries. We also want to know about the audience opinion about our organization from their actions and comments on social media. After advertising our content, we check the analytics of our pages and posts to check the outcome. We are also using chatbots on social media platforms to handle the requests and issues of our publics. We can easily connect with our followers. We can know about the sentiments of our audience. We can check the reactions of the audience on our posts. It is easy and cost effective. We can easily connect with our followers. Most of the people in Oman are Instagram users, and we can easily find our target audience here.</td>
<td>Information Sharing, Public Engagement, Public Service, Networking</td>
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<td>Challenges</td>
<td>We also receive some negative comments on our posts, we hide it and delete it. Negative reactions of audience can affect our organizational image. When we deal with marketing agencies, they asked about our social media accounts. Without social media accounts, we cannot collaborate with them. Now artificial intelligence is changing the dynamics of marketing, there is an urgent need to train professionals in AI.</td>
<td>Unethical Comments, Digital Competencies</td>
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Most of the marketing services are providing their services in English language. For Arabic content, we face some problems for creative content creation.

REFERENCES


