

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON
UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC RELATIONS
EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2023

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON
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by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

June 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge several special people without whose support, patience, and guidance this thesis would not have been possible. First, my sincere gratitude goes to my wonderful supervisor, Professor Jamilah Ahmad, for her advice, support, and understanding throughout my research journey. I would also like to thank the University Sains Malaysia for creating an encouraging atmosphere for PhD students, which represents a vital contribution to their success.

Second, my deepest appreciation for my wife, Hanan, as well as my daughters, Juwana and Tala, who encouraged and supported me in achieving my academic goals. My gratitude also goes to my parents, brothers, sisters, family, and friends for their help and encouragement. Third, I am very grateful to my sponsor, Jazan University – Saudi Arabia, as this research was only made possible with its financial support. Lastly, a huge thanks to the informants who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Without your valued time and input, there would simply be no thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BA	Bachelor's Degree
CPRE	Commission on Public Relations Educations
ETC	Etcetera
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPRA	International Public Relations Association
KINGDOM	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
L1-L7	Public Relations Educators Informants
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPRA	Middle East Public Relations Association
P1-P7	Informants of the Public Relations Specialist
PR	Public Relations
SAPRA	Public Relations and Advertising Association in Saudi Arabia
TADAWUL	Stock Exchange in Saudi Arabia
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
USM	University Sains Malaysia

SATU KAJIAN PENEROKAAN TERHADAP PENDIDIKAN PERHUBUNGAN AWAM PRASISWAZAH DI ARAB SAUDI

ABSTRAK

Peningkatan dan perubahan berterusan terhadap tahap kemajuan teknologi telah mempengaruhi kaedah pengajaran dan pembelajaran di Arab Saudi. Terdapat jurang kekurangan kajian terhadap pendidikan graduan perhubungan awam dan keupayaannya untuk melahirkan graduan perhubungan awam yang, berkelayakan dan efektif. Penyelidikan ini mempunyai tiga objektif; objektif satu adalah untuk menganalisis keadaan semasa pendidikan perhubungan awam graduan di Arab Saudi. Objektif kedua adalah untuk meneroka arah aliran dan hala tuju masa depan profesion perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi dan, objektif ketiga adalah untuk mencadangkan kurikulum yang ideal untuk pendidikan perhubungan awam sarjana muda di Arab Saudi. Penyelidikan ini secara keseluruhan adalah untuk meneroka arah aliran dan hala tuju masa depan profesion perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi. Matlamat kajian ini adalah untuk mencadangkan kurikulum yang bersesuaian dengan pendidikan graduan perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi. Penggunaan kaedah reka bentuk penyelidikan kualitatif dan pengumpulan data secara temubual diaplikasikan untuk tujuan kajian. Responden dipilih menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Sampel terdiri daripada empat belas responden, tujuh pensyarah perhubungan awam dan tujuh pengamal perhubungan awam. Data dianalisis dan disusun menggunakan kaedah analisis tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa walaupun terdapat peningkatan dalam kualiti pendidikan graduan perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi, terdapat beberapa isu yang membimbangkan dan menjejaskan kualitinya secara negatif, termasuk kebolehubahan yang tinggi terhadap kurikulum, penggunaan buku edisi

lama, kriteria kemasukan yang lemah, penawaran program perhubungan awam yang terhad, dan masih terdapat kebergantungan terhadap kaedah pembelajaran tradisional. Isu-isu ini turut dipengaruhi dengan pilihan latihan praktikal yang terhad, ketaraan jurang antara pihak akademik dan industri, serta kegagalan memenuhi permintaan pasaran buruh dan Wawasan Saudi 2030. Hasil kajian juga mendapati bahawa profesion perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi berhadapan dengan beberapa isu, seperti salah tafsiran profesion oleh pihak berkepentingan, pengambilan pekerja bukan pakar, kekurangan kejelasan mengenai tugas dan kepakaran pegawai perhubungan awam, dan kesukaran untuk mengukur prestasi program perhubungan awam. Kajian ini mencadangkan kurikulum yang bersesuaian dan ideal untuk pendidikan graduan perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi. Struktur yang dicadangkan merangkumi mata pelajaran berkaitan teknologi dan penciptaan, mata pelajaran daripada disiplin lain, mata pelajaran praktikal dan teori dalam bidang perhubungan awam, dan mata pelajaran komunikasi. Kajian itu juga menyediakan beberapa cadangan dan hala tuju masa depan untuk mencapai perubahan yang diinginkan, serta boleh meningkatkan pendidikan graduan perhubungan awam di Arab Saudi.

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC
RELATIONS EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA**

ABSTRACT

The growing degree of technological advancement and the ongoing changes occurring in Saudi Arabia will radically influence how public relations is taught and practised in the country. Lack of studies investigating undergraduate public relations education and its ability to prepare qualified and effective public relations specialists. This research has three objectives; objective one was to analyse the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. Objective two was to explore the trends and future direction of the public relations profession in Saudi Arabia. The third objective was to propose an ideal undergraduate public relations education curriculum in Saudi Arabia. The study adopted a qualitative research design; data were collected using in-depth interviews. Informants were selected using the purposive sampling method. The sample comprised fourteen informants, seven public relations educators and seven public relations specialists. Data were analysed and organised using the thematic analysis method. The results showed that despite recent improvements in the quality of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia, there are several issues that negatively affecting its quality, including curricula, the use of outdated books, poor admission criteria, a limited number of public relations programmes, and overreliance on traditional learning methods. These issues were accompanied by limited practical training options, a noticeable gap between academia and the industry, and the failure to meet the growing demands of the labour market and Saudi Vision 2030. The results also found that the profession of public relations in Saudi Arabia is faced with several issues, such as the misinterpretation of the

profession by stakeholders, the employment of non-specialists, the lack of clarity concerning the duties and tasks of public relations specialists, and the difficulty of measuring the performance of public relations programmes. The study proposes an ideal undergraduate public relations curriculum for undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. The proposed structure encompasses technology and content creation-related subjects, subjects from other disciplines, practical and theoretical subjects in the field of public relations, and communication subjects. The study also provided several recommendations and future directions for achieving the desired changes, which could improve undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter comprises seven main sections. The first one starts with an introduction and background of the study concerning the undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. The following three sections cover the statement of the problem, the significance of the study, and the research objectives and questions while the last section of this chapter describes the structure of the study.

1.1 Study Background

Political, economic, modern technologies, and social changes have influenced and reshaped how organisations conduct their operations in the past few decades. These changes have inevitably affected the public relations field (Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004; Thompson, 2018; Anderson, 2019). Public relations focuses on sending the correct messages to the right place and people to create a strong brand reputation.

Experts view public relations as one of the most effective approaches in creating marketing strategies and developing a solid online reputation. Public relations is defined as an occupation responsible for managing organisational associations and reputations (Gurel, & Aydin, 2016; Almfleah, 2017; Larisu & Mona, 2022). In addition, companies are currently investing to stay on top of their public relations strategies to realise huge returns on investments. For instance, an entity, such as Disney, hires public relations firms to promote its movie when it wants to sell a blockbuster film. Most agencies aim to create social media engagement, which leads to additional sales (Edwards, 2012; Moreno et al., 2021). Public relations is beneficial

as it grows the credibility of a brand. A brand should constantly reinvent itself using innovative public relations campaigns with increasing globalisation and competition. By considering the increased convergence of financial markets and communication technologies advancement, public relations practises are escalating in different organisations (Ki & Ye, 2017). Based on the importance of public relations in present-day businesses, universities must critically ensure that their undergraduate public relations education reflects the market changes.

Furthermore, public relations determines how the message to the public is structured and perceived during interaction with individuals and groups. Public relations is shaped by the cultures and societies where it operates (Edwards, 2012; Larisu & Mona, 2022). For most companies, creating a positive perception about their brand determines the success of the products and services offered to consumers. Hence, an excellent public relations campaign helps to elevate a corporation's relevance. Additionally, public relations allows organisations to link with their internal and external audiences, enabling them to pursue their goals as required (Almahraj, 2016).

Currently, departments have formulated new ways of interacting with the public after the advent of communication technology, especially using new tools such as social media (Bumetea, 2013; Wilder, 2020). Relaying timely information helps to overcome the existing limits between organisations and their stakeholders. During disaster management, public relations determine the resilience of the entities, including recovery efforts. Consequently, universities must critically ensure that their public relations education and courses reflect market changes. The educational structure should guarantee and ensure that graduates can fit into the working environment by meeting the current market requirements.

The current debate regarding the direction of public relations can be categorised into different schools of thought. A notion exists that public relations should be perceived as a profession. Thus, as a part of media, public relations ought to be understood using new paradigms (Barry, 2011; Fawkes, 2018). The assertion explains the reason why the public relations specialists in many countries view public relations as an administrative practice whilst some universities perceive public relations education as theoretically driven.

Saudi Arabia is one of the leading economies in the gulf region, considering its rich oil and gas deposits. The country sits on a 2,225,000 square kilometre space in the Gulf region, hosting 33 million people. Saudi Arabia's population distribution is composed of about 12 million expatriates, which illustrates the economy's dependence on foreign labour (General Authority for Statistics, 2017). The country is the leading oil exporter in the planet with oil and gas exports accounting for 90% of exports, 87% of government revenues, and 42% of GDP (Amirat & Zaidi, 2019). The economic setting of the country has had government inputs to diversify income sources; however, income diversity is still an objective being pursued in Saudi Arabia, which, as the largest in the Gulf region, is heavily dependent on energy resource revenue. Religion is also essential in Saudi Arabia in economic, cultural, and social functionalities. The country is majorly populated by Muslims, which is the main religion and the governing religion, as the country implements Sharia Islamic laws (Meijer & Aarts, 2012).

In Saudi Arabia, universities have been on the frontline in providing public relations education. The institutions have acknowledged that higher education is a critical player in the growth of successful and vibrant societies (Khayat, 2017). The current situation of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia required

improvements to alter the way educators and practitioners view the field. The industry consensus holds the importance of integrating theory and traditional skills to develop an effective public relations curriculum. Saudi public relations specialists are subject to global influences. While their numbers have continued to rise, private entities and governmental institutions do not comprehend public relations' role (Almahraj, 2017). According to Almahraj (2019), organisations in Saudi Arabia do not understand the strategic role of public relations as they have an incomplete understanding of the responsibilities and tasks of public relations specialists in the organisational environment.

The question is whether Saudi universities' efforts help provide public relations graduates with the requisite knowledge and practical skills to meet the needs of the modern public relations industry in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, comprehensive research into the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia is required.

1.2 Problem Statement

The growing degree of independence between various stakeholders involved in global political, economic, and social processes is radically changing the external business environment. Modern organisations require effective instruments that would allow them to align their strategies with the interests and expectations of relevant stakeholders, taking advantage of the opportunities provided by globalisation trends (Altwayjiri, 2020). These recent tendencies are dramatically increasing the topicality of public relations as a science, profession, and educational discipline. This trend is inherent not only to Western countries in which public relations has been successfully

practised for decades but also to developing countries where the profession of public relations is still in its emergent form.

Public relations emerging as one of the world's growing professions and study disciplines. However, significant regional disparities exist in how the subject is taught and practised. In as much as the world grows into a social orientation, there are separating differences, which exist between economies, cultures, and regions. These differences in political functionality, social affairs and cultural philosophies influence the teaching and understanding of public relations (Smith, 2020). In some regions, public relations have a more inclusive approach, for instance, the UK has a more inclusive approach in public relations compared to a country such as Saudi Arabia. The regional disparities that contribute to perception and mentality differences are also supported by cultural practises and governing policies. Hence, public relations practise is significantly influenced by governing policies and cultural orientations. Accordingly, different social, political, and economic elements have shaped how public relations is practised and taught in the Arabian gulf countries (Almahraj, 2017; Kamali & Chirani, 2021). Education plays a vital function in enlightening society and directing countries towards heightened modernisation and advancement levels (Albejaidi & Kundi, 2019). The region's learning institutions' efforts play a crucial role in preparing students for successful professional results in the public relations field. However, proper strategies must be formulated to ensure the efforts attain the anticipated results.

Currently, organisations need to adapt to the processes and functions happening in a new environment (Maulidiyanti & Suciati, 2018; Krishna, Wright & Kotcher, 2020). As illustrated by Krishna, Wright, & Kotcher, (2020), the unpredictability and volatility of the environment is an important element to consider

for organisation survival. The changing factors of a surrounding business environment bring in unprecedented dynamics that organisations, communities, and economies need to be aware of. For instance, recent trends favouring digitisation have compelled organisations to lean more into digital public relations. The recent concerns on human rights and equality affect intentions, sensitivity, and support during public relations actions. The case scenarios elaborate how the ever-changing environment always presents new settings for organisations. Understanding some of the recent fluctuations and their influences on the scope of public relations illustrates how adaptation is key for organisations, communities, or economies. Solid and effective public relations divisions are required to achieve this goal in Saudi Arabia. The progressive development of Saudi Arabia, especially the attainment of Vision 2030, requires education that addresses public relations requirements. The vision includes the need for creating new teaching methods, curricula, philosophy, and institutional environment (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). The kingdom envisions becoming a worldwide investment powerhouse (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2018). Saudi Arabia's aim of attracting foreign investors to diversify its economy as a part of this vision requires more investments in public relations. Hence, stakeholders need to invest more in public relations in Saudi Arabia substantially.

As Saudi Arabia gravitates towards Vision 2030, investment in public relations would create a positive image for the country. The investment would attract foreign investors into Saudi Arabia while improving the communication between businesses in the country and internationally. The implications include the need to invest in public relations education to shape the profession (Ferguson, 2018). The observations further emphasise the need for researching the perceptions towards and progress of undergraduate public relations education in the country. Many businesses and

institutions in the present society tend to involve influencers and modern technologies in public relations activities, explaining the need to conduct creative promotion campaigns (Altwayjiri, 2020). Therefore, the efforts directed towards enhancing the effectiveness of public relations should be heightened. Regardless of the importance of public relations in national success, Saudi Arabia's public relations concern is meagre. According to Almahraj (2017), there is only one public relations association in Saudi Arabia, which is the Saudi Association for Public Relations and Advertising (SAPRA). This entity has few employees and insignificant activity, and the information on the functionality of the association is also scarce.

The last two decades have been characterised by evolution in public relations education and practices in Saudi Arabia. Arabian Gulf nations have expanded their higher education departments in the past few years (David et al., 2017; Kamali & Chirani, 2021). Nevertheless, public relations specialists' attributes and skills set for entry into various sectors and occupations of senior levels is a challenge, especially for educators (Ezzeldin, 2017). The current public relations treatment in Saudi Arabia is inclined towards an administrative function categorised in the communications role (Almahraj, 2017). Saudi Arabia's public relations specialists have become subjects to international influences. Private organisations and government institutions have not entirely understood the role public relations plays. People have divergent views regarding the purpose of public relations in an organisation (Abdelhay, 2014). The public relations specialists working in most divisions are assigned administrative and social protocol functions. Research associated with public relations practice in the Middle East remains sparse, mainly in the Gulf Cooperation Council nations (Kamali & Chirani, 2021). Public relations is presently still under development in the Middle East nations. According to Kirat (2016), there are many issues that public relations

professionals face in Middle East nations, including a lack of a consistent body of knowledge and a domain of expertise, an unclear social status, the absence of an appropriate model of accountability, a poor code of ethics, and relatively deficient educational standards. Thus, the current state is influenced by confusion concerning its definition and roles in a company (Almahraj, 2019). The misinterpretation concerning the role played by public relations is evident in Saudi Arabia and ought to be addressed. The issues should be resolved by the current educational structure of public relations in Saudi Arabia.

Alanazi (2013) highlighted that the majority of public relations specialists in Saudi Arabia had received their education at local universities. Therefore, the country's public relations education represents a critical component for the growing professionalism in the field. Consequently, a better understanding of the country's public relations education would allow for improvements and reforms that will result in qualified graduates capable of meeting the market expectations. Thus, the study attempts to gain better insights into undergraduate public relations education in the country. Public relations programme in Saudi Arabia is offered in four universities, namely King Saud University, Umm Al-Qura University, Imam University, and King Abdul-Aziz University. Two public relations programmes fall under the College of Communication and Media while the third and fourth programmes are located at the College of Arts and the College of Social Sciences respectively. However, the subject literature in the form of books includes mostly translated Western content, outdated content and resources, inaccessible outside of the universities (Algalab, 2011). Additionally, public relations courses at Saudi universities have curricula that consider the public relations role as a technical specialty and do not consider the role of new technology and social media (Abdelhay, 2014). The available literature on public

relations in Saudi Arabia provides crucial insights into the discipline. Nevertheless, the information is still insufficient for the broad public relations topic (Taha, 2017). Thus, a gap exists in the literature on public relations nationwide in the public communication, culture, and knowledge form (Almahraj, 2017). An assessment of the knowledge perpetuated as a part of public relations nationwide and how it is acquired is required. If the assessment is practical, it can play a significant role in bridging the literature gap. The evidence has revealed a lack of sufficient studies about public relations education in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the public relations educators and practitioners have not been firm enough in their perceptions of the field. Some have given a chance to uncertainty, especially on the functions and roles that public relations play (Alanazi, 2013; Wright & Hinson, 2017; Bossman & Tella 2017). The result obstructs the attempts to offer a concise definition and the parameters required for a well-formulated educational curriculum. The observation can help explain the perceived existing gap between public relations education and the practitioners' anticipations on new entrants into the sector. Thus, public relations education and practising elements should operate congruently by providing a solution that guides the field towards greater professionalism. The doubts remain whether the efforts advanced by Saudi universities are sufficient in offering public relations graduates the requisite knowledge and practical capacity to meet the country's current industrial needs. Saudi Arabia leaders and policymakers of education should focus on enhancing the quality of education in the country (Allam, 2020). Thus, these factors are the study rationale. The research intends to contribute to the knowledge concerning undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. The study attempts to develop a better understanding of the current state of undergraduate public relations education. The aim is to provide

recommendations for an ideal curriculum applicable in Saudi Arabia undergraduate public relations education.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The research objectives provide an overall framework in which the study reviews the relevant sources and primary research findings that will help in the exploration of the current situation in Saudi Arabia's undergraduate public relations education.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives of the present study.

RO1: To analyse the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia.

RO2: To explore the trends and future direction of the public relations profession in Saudi Arabia.

RO3: To propose an ideal curriculum for undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia.

1.3.2 Research Questions

The following are the research questions of the present study.

RQ1: What is the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia?

RQ2: What are the trends and future direction of the public relations profession in Saudi Arabia?

RQ3: What is an ideal curriculum for undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia?

These research questions provide a direction to determine the current state of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. The questions also lead to an overarching research question that allows for exploring the public relations profession in the country. It provides a compelling reason to believe that a close exploration of such perceptions can facilitate the comprehension of the gap between academia and the industry. In addition, the skills and attributes proposed by the informants are crucial because they can be employed as a basis for practical recommendations concerning desired changes in the undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the investigation of the first and second questions allows for proposing an ideal curriculum for undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia.

1.4 Study Significance

The study is significant from practical and academic perspectives. From a practical perspective, the study offers a range of findings that can be utilised by various stakeholders in public relations in Saudi Arabia, including students, educators, practitioners, industries, professional bodies, and the government. The academic significance of the study involves bridging the present gap in the current literature concerning the ability of public relations education in Saudi Arabia to develop graduates equipped with the skills and knowledge that meet current market needs and capable of carrying out their responsibilities effectively. Public relations is offered in Saudi Arabia as a university subject. However, a gap exists in the research of how public relations education plays a role in developing graduates qualified for the Saudi

Arabia work environment. The quantity of relevant literature from researchers in Saudi Arabia is lacking. The limited literature presents a challenge for the scholars in the country as they lack access to a rigorous body of knowledge. Hence, the study provides critical information on the public relations specialists and educators' perspectives on exploring Saudi Arabia's undergraduate public relations education.

Many studies have examined public relations education in Western countries (e.g., Goncalves, Spinola & Padamo, 2013; Shen & Toth, 2013; L'Etang, 2016). However, limited studies examined the public relations education experience in Arab countries especially Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the country is currently at a critical juncture in its efforts to modernise and encourage foreign investments. Therefore, studying the issues of public relations education is essential since it possesses the ability to shape the future of public relations practice. The public relations field in Saudi Arabia requires a body of academic knowledge unique to succeed in nurturing an effective public relations education. The present study is an effort in progressing towards the targeted direction. A review of the available body of relevant literature on public relations education shows that the study is one of the first to explore undergraduate public relations education as a holistic system in Saudi Arabia. The study findings will offer evidence to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how public relations education contributes to imparting competitive and effective knowledge and skills to public relations specialists. The study will also be part of a growing body of literature on public relations education in the country.

1.5 Scope of the Study

It is undeniable that the discipline of public relations has considerably evolved over the years, and the trend is likely to continue in the future. With advances in both society and technology, institutions of higher learning and stakeholders in the education sector have focused on adapting the curricula to align with emerging demands. As such, this study focused on exploring the current state of undergraduate public relations education as well as future directions of the profession in Saudi Arabia. The examination intended to propose an ideal curriculum for the undergraduate public relations curriculum in the country, which would be responsive and relevant to current and future trends in the profession. The study was restricted to analysing the views and opinions of public relations educators and public relations specialists in Saudi Arabia. As such, a sample size of 14 informants was drawn from this population, which encompassed seven educators and seven practitioners in the country. The study did not consider the views of students, or recruit participants outside the country. Thus, the generalisation of the study findings was limited and applicable to Saudi Arabia's public relations education system.

1.6 Conceptual Definition(s)

1.6.1 Curriculum

In its basic form, a curriculum in the current study refers to a course of study that enables learners to acquire a specific set of knowledge and skills. It provides a roadmap in terms of the planned sequence of instructions, which encompasses a combination of learners' interaction with instructional content, resources, and evaluation to determine the attainment of learning goals. As Su (2012) notes, a curriculum is a blueprint for systematically implementing educational activities. The

information is segregated into disciplines and courses that are carefully designed to impart specific knowledge and skills. As such, the term can be seen as an important component in education as it embodies the beliefs, values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, which characterise educational processes.

1.6.2 Evaluation

Evaluation is one of the critical processes characterising contemporary programmes. It refers to the systemic assessment of a subject or initiative to determine its merit, worth, or significance. In most cases, evaluation involves the systematic collection and analysis of empirical data to synthesise credible, reliable, and useful evidence for decision-making purposes (Wanzer, 2020). In this context, it can help stakeholders to gain insight and make rational judgments concerning a given subject in order to improve its efficiency. Evaluation can also lead to appropriate identification of future change for improved and sustained performance.

1.6.3 Framework

A framework is a real or conceptual structure that serves as a guiding principle for the building of something more useful (Lutkevich, 2022). In the current research, a framework is important in providing an underlying structure or model to support the study. It attempts to provide or determine the most appropriate approach or method that is applicable in a given situation. In most cases, frameworks help researchers and other concerned parties to prioritise efforts and determine the interrelated nature of various components in a given subject.

1.6.4 Undergraduate Public Relations Education

Generally, undergraduate education refers to the first level of higher education, including both college and university education, in which learners earn a bachelor's degree. As such, undergraduate public relations education equips learners with professional skills and knowledge leading to their ultimate attainment of a bachelor's degree in public relations. Successful candidates in this field are able to gather insights concerning various issues, think strategically, communicate persuasively, and develop rational and actionable plans to manage different issues.

1.7 Structure of the Study

The study attempts to explore the current state of undergraduate public relations education in improving the outcomes for public relations graduates while ensuring their capability to fulfil the industry needs as they join the profession. The study starts with an introduction to the overall research problem and objectives of the study. The following chapters examine the research literature relevant to public relations, with a specific interest in the effect of the educational aspect of the field. The second chapter investigates the constitution of the public relations profession and the required knowledge, skills, and attributes needed for new entrants into the profession. The chapter also covers most themes related to the study and the theoretical framework. The third chapter covers the research design and methodology. The subsequent chapter covers the analysis and the study findings, whereas the final chapter contains the discussion and conclusion. Finally, references and appendices are presented at the end of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a detailed review of the literature relevant to the investigation of undergraduate public relations education in Saudi Arabia. In accordance with the common approach that is used in most theses, this literature review will be conducted by gradually narrowing the focus from general to specific themes. Its first section is dedicated to the analysis of public relations as a profession and an educational discipline. It will present the definition of public relations, outline the key historical milestones of its evolution, and explore the development of public relations education worldwide. After that, the researcher will highlight the basic standards of public relations in the professional and educational fields. This part will also analyse the key job roles of public relations specialists and the connection between the academic dimensions of public relations and industry requirements towards public relations specialists.

The next section of this chapter will explore public relations in the Arab world countries and the unique factors that can influence the public relations education in Saudi Arabia. It will explore the historical and cultural background of Saudi Arabia that is relevant to public relations, the public relations-related aspects of the programme Saudi Vision 2030, and the general features of education in the country. After that, the researcher will analyse the phenomenon of public relations in the country by investigating the public relations education and public relations practice. On the basis of the information retrieved from relevant studies, the chapter will justify the theoretical framework of the research. Finally, in the last part of the section, the

researcher will formulate a conclusion of the literature review in a way that is the most effective for supporting the empirical part of the research.

2.2 The Definitions and Functions of Public Relations

The term “public relations” can be found in several academic papers written during different periods of the 20th and 21st centuries. Public relations is a field of practice that is distinctly rooted in government relations and public policy (Thurlow, 2017). Still, there is no agreement amongst scholars regarding the precise definition of public relations and its key features. The academic literature offers approximately 500 varied definitions of this term with an emphasis on different aspects of public relations (Bernays, 2013). The definitional confusion has emanated from different institutional histories: schools of journalism and speech and communication departments in the United States and schools of continuing education in Canada (Wright & Flynn, 2017). Thus, the field of public relations continues as an emerging discipline without a consensus regarding the definitions of its boundaries, changing character, and theoretical underpinnings embraced by scholars and practitioners (Thurlow, Sévigny, & Dottori, 2018). Notably, its unique topicality and the existence of numerous influences from diverse sciences and practices can illustrate the complex nature of public relations. Fawkes (2008) viewed public relations as a multifaceted field that has been gradually increasing in complexity by including different influences. In light of these conflicting claims, it is evident that describing public relations remains a challenging task that requires the usage of a multidisciplinary approach.

The most apparent controversy surrounding the process of defining public relations is the conflict between marketing and management approaches towards explaining the meaning of the term. In this regard, the term public relations indicates

a body that serves the department of marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Geremew, 2017). Hence, public relations instruments aim to maximise the level of customer satisfaction by implementing capable communicational instruments and explicitly conveying the relevant information. The existing academic literature suggests that the marketing dimension of public relations is concerned with the development of the means and ends of buying and selling. In this respect, Gurel and Aydin (2016) defined public relations as “a business function and administrative tool that serves to establish mutual communication, understanding, acceptance, trust and cooperation between an organisation and its target groups, and to make this environment permanent” (p. 803). Despite the comprehensiveness of this definition, limiting the meaning of public relations to marketing reduces the scope of the concept, turning it into a technical tool that people can use only for achieving marketing purposes (Davis, 2007). As a result, the current literature rarely considers public relations as an exclusive marketing area.

Whilst most modern scholars consider marketing and public relations as separate managerial functions, they admit that these fields often overlap with each other. In particular, Davis (2007) stated that public relations specialists contribute to the transformation of the external and internal environment, making it more favourable for potential marketing activities. Another popular opinion on this matter necessitates distinguishing the four aspects through which public relations influences marketing, including increased awareness, improved credibility, stimulation, and reduction of promotion costs (Kotler & Keller, 2008; Gurel, E., & Aydin, 2016). Scholars have relied on the existence of these commonalities as a premise for creating the idea of “marketing public relations.”

The overwhelming majority of recent studies on public relations associate the concept with management, showing it as a set of instruments for planning, analysing, and implementing the process of communication between an organisation and the public. Indeed, some scholars have characterised public relations as being a management discipline and applied science in communication theory. In this angle, the concept does not imply a neutral technical term, but an idea that captures various indications in different managerial contexts (Thurlow et al., 2018). In this respect, public relations constitutes a management tool intended to establish reinforcement amongst various internal and external publics of a company (Rivero & Theodore 2014). Inferentially, this management function is built around a favourable firm's image via community events and publicity. Besides that, Broom and Sha (2013) asserted that public relations entails the "management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 25). Therefore, the area of public relations entails creating and supporting excellent associations with an organisation's external and internal stakeholders. In such a way, the overall aim of public relations as it relates to the management function is to aid internal and external stakeholders in better understanding each other to ensure productive interactions.

Ihlen and Fredriksson (2018) used system theory perspectives to define public relations and to examine some of its central features. The systems approach to public relations holds that organisations rely on their environments for resources, including labour, raw materials, and customers. At the same time, the environments depend on organisations to receive products and services. Accordingly, organisations need public relations to help collect information about the status and productivity of their relationships with customers and other essential stakeholders in their environment

(Anderson, 2019). Moreover, the systems theory provides a means of examining an organisation's relationship with its external stakeholders and developing an in-depth understanding of its internal functions and stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Public relations represents a means of monitoring associations with internal stakeholders. It represents a function on the frame of an organisation, looking both outside and inside the firm to determine whether the relevant affiliations between an organisation and its environment exists and are productive (Botan, 2017). Experts may regard the function to be a bridge, which connects and informs stakeholders about the company.

Public relations also serves the role of advising the primary decision-makers of an organisation on the challenges and opportunities in its environment and assists the decision-makers in responding to any potential and actual changes. With the restraints that an organisation's environment can impose on it, public relations offers a way to identify the relevant stakeholders and anticipate the relationship needs of both parties (Botan, 2017). Indeed, effective public relations provides a two-way flow of information and resources between an organisation and its environment whilst using the data to adapt to the environment and maintain effective control of it. In general, the standard terms used to define public relations include planned, public interest, performance, strategic management function, and two-way communication. These terms reflect the dominant functional and standard public relations paradigm (Thurlow et al., 2018). However, the fact that scholars define public relations in different ways does not translate into the varied constructions of associated functions. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of contemporary scholars and practitioners agree on the critical functions of public relations (Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999; Sriramesh & Hornaman, 2006; DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009; Broom, 2009; Hizal, Ozdemir, &

Yamanoglu, 2014; Botan, 2017). Based on the most common approach, public relations functions should aid in the spheres of internal relations, publicity, lobbying, advertising, media relations, public affairs, press agency, investor relations, development, and the strategic management function.

2.3 Public Relations Profession

The origins of public relations could be traced back to ancient history. For instance, the use of images on rocks to influence the Ionian allies of the Persian Empire was an example of society utilising public relations for political purposes. The origins of the public relations practice were centred on programmes involving settlement and immigration (Thurlow et al., 2018). Although separate examples of individuals deploying public relations instruments may be observed throughout history, there is a consensus among scholars that the development of public relations as an area of practice started in the 19th century. Indeed, the use of press agency and publicity by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and the so-called Publicity Bureau illustrated the emergence of public relations as an increasingly topical area of practice (Bernays, 2013). The transformation of the public relations profession is closely connected with the evolution of the public relations education. The statement that the profession of a public relations specialist is distinct from the public relations education has been articulated in the academic literature a long time ago (Kruckeberg, 1998). At the same time, the establishment of a close connection between them remains one of the foreground priorities of both academics and practitioners. As with the case of the public relations education, the profession of a public relations specialist has been evolving in line with the global trends of broadening the focus of public relations. In the beginning, organisations considered such employees as specialists with a set of

specific technical skills that could help create and maintain productive relations with stakeholders (Satir et al., 2011). At that time, they primarily managed relationships with the external partners whilst paying little or even no attention to the internal stakeholders (Welch, 2015). Changes in the global business environment made organisations reconsider the role of public relations.

Currently, public relations specialists are an unalienable part of most organisations. Simultaneously, the ambiguity surrounding the term “public relations” does not allow for formulating a clear set of responsibilities and tasks that are relevant to this profession. For instance, in contemporary South Korea, public relations specialists can perform the following roles: strategic counsellors, non-strategic technician specialists, and business managers. Strategic counsellors assist senior management with a variety of tasks, aligning all the operations with the overall public relations strategy and ensuring that an entity maintains a desirable reputation and image. The non-strategic technician role implies completing some specific objectives by managing the positioning of certain events or activities. Finally, the role of a business manager refers to the cases when public relations specialists start their own firms and make public relations their key priority (Jeong & Park, 2017). In a similar way, Chilean public relations specialists can also assume varied positions at organisations, playing the long-term strategic, short-term technical, passive-complaisant, or active-vigilant roles (Mellado & Barria, 2012). In light of the examples reviewed above, it seems justified to conclude that the job roles of public relations specialists in the modern world, to a large extent, depend on the specifics of a particular country, industry, and organisation.

Nonetheless, despite the existence of significant differences between the job roles of public relations specialists, it seems rational to assert that there are also a number of similarities between them. First, the scope of public relations has been broadening; therefore, the responsibilities of public relations specialists at most organisations have been changing accordingly. For instance, the gradual evolution of advertising from a separate domain into a segment of public relations requires new knowledge and skills from public relations graduates (O'Donnell, 2019). Second, this profession is now more dependent on theoretical constructs than ever. Considering that the area of public relations has turned into a strategic dimension, it is barely possible now to use public relations instruments in a fragmentary manner. Successful public relations specialists must have deep knowledge of the basic public relations theories and constructs, and be able to apply them in practice (Madigan, 2017). This requirement has increased the importance of the public relations education in the modern world.

An analysis of the recent studies on the problem under investigation allows for identifying two critical issues that are now relevant to the profession of a public relations specialist in the modern world. First, it is of paramount importance to overcome the gap between the public relations education and public relations practice. Unfortunately, this gap still exists in all the modern countries. Some studies have even directly concluded that public relations graduates are not ready for the profession of a public relations specialist. For instance, the research conducted by Peltola (2018) showed that flaws in the US public relations education, such as the lack of practical integration and the absence of uniformity in the content of curricula, have contributed to the high unemployment levels amongst students graduating from public relations departments. Second, many organisations struggle to evaluate the effectiveness of their

public relations specialists. The significant difference between the job requirements and work conditions accepted by different organisations does not allow for creating consistent standards for the public relations profession. The available evidence provides a premise to believe that the goal of solving these two problems remains crucial for stakeholders and that only the combined efforts of representatives of various industries and professional fields can help achieve it.

2.4 The Models, Roles, and Levels of Public Relations Profession

A comprehension of the nature and distinctive features of the profession of a public relations specialist requires a deep understanding of the existing models, roles, and levels of the public relations practice.

2.4.1 The Models of Public Relations

To date, specialists have formulated four models and two additional patterns explaining the value of public relations in organisations and the ways in which this function can be performed. The press agency model is considered as the earliest concept of public relations; the first cases of its usage could be dated back to the 19th century. In line with this model, public relations is the systematic effort to attract or divert public attention (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It works exclusively in one way, transmitting information from a sender to a receiver. The tasks of a public relations specialist under this model imply influencing public opinion by a variety of means, using mass media as a tool of affecting the target audience. The ethical component of this model is questionable as practitioners pay little attention to the credibility of the news spread by them, trying to achieve the eventual goal by any means possible.