



Multicultural communication in the Middle East: How a ‘young’ profession in a young but ancient region is adapting to the challenges of cross-cultural communication in an increasingly digital world (iCCCC)

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This paper provides first-hand insight into senior public relations (PR) professionals’ views on and attitudes towards digital communication in the UAE, a regional and global hub of cross-cultural and multicultural public relations and commerce. This study is part of a longitudinal and transnational project investigating PR professionals’ attitudes towards digital communication. The study began in 2010 in Western Australia and the original authors have since widened their focus (and collaboration with others) to include Singapore and now the UAE. When the study started in 2010 in Western Australia, the term ‘new media’ was used and some practitioners were not convinced of the strategic impact or importance of ‘new media’. Since that time, the explosion in digital communication and social media use by citizens (and the shrinking news desks of many media outlets) have meant communication practitioners can no longer ignore digital media. ‘New’ media is not so new anymore.

It has been suggested that while PR is a global practice (Curtin and Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003), scholarly literature examining public relations, including how it has adapted to digital or online technologies, has been characterised by a prevailing US focus, with only some efforts to go beyond the US-centric approach to public relations. The challenges felt in a multicultural nation within public relations practice are examined in this paper through the eyes of senior practitioners working in the UAE. The paper responds to the need for a focus on culture and more qualitative approaches in PR scholarship (L’Etang, 2011; Pal and Dutta, 2008).

The focus of this study is based on interviews with 13 PR professionals in Dubai, UAE from 21 February, 2019, to 11 August 2019. Interviews were held with six professionals from global PR agencies, two mid-level and three boutique agencies. Two in-house brand professionals were also interviewed. All interviewees had a minimum of five years to over a decade of experience in the PR field. The interviewees were all working in senior managerial positions, as account directors, or higher. This allowed the study to gain a top-down, strategic view of the industry and current trends. Interviews were transcribed and analysed for themes.

The UAE is of interest as a site for the study of contemporary public relations practice for several reasons. An ancient land, the country of the UAE was only founded in 1971 (Saseendran, 2016; CIA, 2019). It is a Muslim and Arab country, but more than 200 nationalities live and work in the UAE, which makes it one of the most multicultural countries in the world. The expatriate community outnumbers the population of UAE nationals, with immigrants making up 88% of the population (CIA, 2019). Dubai is the favoured city as the Middle East and Africa regional headquarters for the world's largest 500 companies (McAuley 2017). Having built its wealth on oil, it is now a popular tourist destination for visitors from across the world; it has a high per capita income and is driven by commerce (CIA, 2019). Some would suggest it is a country of paradoxes: the UAE is based on ancient land, but it's a relatively new nation, with the world's highest uptake of the internet.

Public relations, as a profession, came to the region with the influx of multinational businesses and has grown exponentially since the country was founded in the 1970s (Kirat, 2006). Many major international public relations agencies are represented in Dubai. The Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA), which was only formed in 2001 and is based in the UAE, has registered consultancies and a partnership with the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations. Our study is also important as there is a limited number of published studies on PR practice in the UAE and these are now mostly more than five years old (see, for example, Al-Jenaibi 2013; Kirat 2006; Kirat 2007). A

study on the impact of paid endorsement by social media influencers from a user perspective conducted in the UAE is a notable exception (see Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

The following key themes were distilled from the interviews: Online platforms have taken over traditional media (newspapers, magazines) in the UAE. As one practitioner explained: “Influencers have become the new ‘editors’ and their blogs/social media channels the new magazines.” Practitioners felt that even though public relations is a relatively young profession, the speed of change means that constant professional development and training is paramount. As found in earlier studies in Singapore, and to a lesser extent in Western Australia, the role of social media influencers has been an ongoing challenge but is now a very important consideration for practitioners. Almost all the PR professionals interviewed work with influencers, reflecting a recent industry study that 94% of in-house marketers in the UAE believe social media influencer marketing is now very significant for the success of their brands (Stockwell, 2017). However, the practitioners are all aware of how metrics, followers, likes and engagement could be bought, highlighting the ethical challenges of working with social media influencers. The UAE is believed to be the first country to introduce rules that influencers need to be licensed as media agencies, and participants felt the new rules had benefited practice. When hiring, a knowledge of social media platforms, and influencers was important, but so were the (perhaps age-old) requirements of creativity and a fundamental understanding of the local region’s political, economic and social landscape. To summarise, with the continued rise of influencers, and the changes in the media landscape, the complexities of communication will be discussed in detail, based on first hand insights by senior PR consultants’ in the UAE.

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