

# The effectiveness of public relations programs in promoting social responsibility: The economic sector in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as a case study

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## Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the role of public relations departments in the economic sectors in promoting social responsibility, as the existing efforts in this field are among the main functions that contribute to building a positive and interactive image of companies and institutions with the internal and external public.

To answer the problem of the study, the survey method and several methodological tools are used that included the interview, content analysis and questionnaire to collect and analyze data of a sample of 230 items, which included public relations and social responsibility employees in companies, institutions, and community members in the eastern region .

The study came out with a set of results, the most important of which are:

- The economic institutions in the Eastern Region focus on performing public relations functions related to improving the mental image as a priority in their work.
- The majority of the economic sector institutions in the eastern region implement many community partnerships, but some of them are few and unsustainable, while few of them do not exist.
- Community work is carried out by a large percentage of public relations departments in economic institutions in the Eastern Region according to a strategy and plans prepared to strengthen community partnerships.
- The public relations departments of many economic institutions in the Eastern Region implementing social programs and initiatives within the context of their missions and functions contribute effectively.

**Keywords:** Public Relations; Social Responsibility; Communication Practices; Community Partnerships; Economic sector.

## Introduction:

With the development of public relations tools and methods, implementing social responsibility programs and initiatives has become an important and influential part of the work of companies and institutions, and has even become part of their value and reputation in social circles.

Corporate social responsibility has evolved in recent decades in line with the development of companies and institutions and their tendency to contribute to improving lives and consolidating social and human values in communities. It has become based on an ongoing commitment by companies and institutions that now act according to ethical values, respect their employees, and care for community development in order to contribute to achieving sustainable development.

With this commitment and focus on social responsibility programs and initiatives, the role of public relations has become more important and capable of developing the connections between companies and institutions and their internal and external audiences. This is because fulfilling its role in social responsibility largely ensures the support of all members of society for its developmental goals and mission, and contributes to achieving its objectives as planned.

Through working in such areas, social responsibility can contribute to creating a highly valuable and important communication field for the company, institution, or organization. This is essentially an interactive field that connects public relations professionals with social events. Therefore, "the relationship between corporate social responsibility and public relations extends beyond the community relations function of public relations. Communication is an integral part of the success of any company's social responsibility activities, and this key component is provided by public relations through assisting in identifying and implementing corporate social responsibility activities." (David McKie, Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 2017, p11)

Corporate social responsibility programs and initiatives shorten the path to achieving the goals of a company, institution, or organization by "building closer ties with the public and maintaining communication channels with them, as each of these entities seeks to understand the impact of its decisions and activities on society and the surrounding environment, thus enabling it to operate in accordance with a culture that is compatible with sustainable development and the well-being of society." (Hohnem, Paul and Polts, Jason, 2007)

## 2 .Related Studies:

2.1 The study by Chai Lee Goi and Kah Hian Yong (2009) on **the contribution of public relations to corporate social responsibility (CSR): A Malaysian Perspective, aimed to review current CSR activities implemented in Malaysia**. The study concluded that the objectives of implementing public relations and CSR are primarily related to "business social responsibility, which encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary aspects that society has of organizations at a given time." The study found that CSR has attracted significant attention from the government and public and private companies in Malaysia, as evidenced by various governmental and non-governmental efforts to raise awareness and offer initiatives to listed and private companies to align their business objectives with CSR concerns. The study's findings revealed that while several CSR studies have been conducted in Malaysia, most focus on CSR and management, specifically executives' and managers' attitudes toward CSR.

2.2 Rachmat Kriyantono's 2015 study on **public relations and responsibility in Indonesia, the first country in the world to adopt a mandatory approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR)**, aimed to reveal the implementation of CSR in Indonesia. The study surveyed 87 practitioners and found that CSR was implemented by focusing on securing social welfare through public relations.

The study concluded that with a mandatory approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR), the primary aim is to benefit society. It found that in most Indonesian companies, the public relations officer is responsible for handling CSR requirements, thus CSR can be viewed as a communication tool for reputation building. The study also emphasized that CSR should be beneficial not only to the company's profits but also to its employees, stakeholders, the environment, and society as a whole.

2.3 A study by Musa, Ali Mahmoud (2011) on **corporate social responsibility and its role in building future institutions**: This study aimed to identify the role of institutions in terms of their commitment to corporate social responsibility, given their integral role within the community they serve. It also sought to overcome obstacles hindering the implementation of corporate social responsibility within institutions and to encourage them to fulfill their social responsibilities. The study's significance stems from its emphasis on the role of organizations in fulfilling their social responsibilities as components of the local community in which they operate.

The study concluded that corporate social responsibility contributes to economic development and works to improve the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as the local population and society in general.

2.4 A study by Al-Salmi, Afnan bint Awadallah (2020) on **the role of public relations in practicing social responsibility at King Saud University and its relationship to the university's reputation among female students**. The study aimed to identify the relationship between the role of the public relations department in practicing social responsibility at King Saud University and the university's reputation from the students' perspective. This was achieved by examining the overall performance of the university's public relations department, monitoring its use of media to promote social responsibility from the students' point of view, and evaluating the extent to which the public relations department implements social responsibility at the university, also from the students' perspective.

The study concluded that the application of the economic dimension of social responsibility, from the students' perspective, ranked first: the university's contribution to holding training courses and programs for female students in various fields with equal and fair opportunities for all.

2.5 A study by Al-Zahrani, Abdulhadi Mohammed (2021) on **the communicative role of public relations in highlighting social responsibility and its impact on public image** aimed to reveal the communicative role played by public relations at Saudi Telecom Company (STC) in highlighting the company's social responsibility and its impact on public image. The study's theoretical framework and research questions were based on understanding the company's public image regarding its social responsibility towards the public, as determined by the communicative role of the company's public relations.

The study's results showed that the majority of the public felt the credibility of the communication messages they received from public relations highlighting the company's social responsibility. The study also indicated that the majority of the public described the communication messages they received from public relations highlighting the company's social responsibility as being of high quality.

2.6 A study by Sulaimani, Laila (2021) on **public relations and its impact on establishing the principles of social responsibility for economic institutions**, which aimed to highlight the role of public relations and its impact on supporting and implementing the principles of social responsibility through its various functions (communication function - marketing function - administrative function - social function) by answering the question: How do public relations activities contribute to supporting and establishing the principles of social responsibility for economic institutions? The study revealed the close link between the concepts of social responsibility and public relations in a dialectical and complementary relationship that seeks to achieve comprehensive, efficient and effective performance for the institution, such that in its application of social responsibility it relies on the methods and means of public relations through which it seeks to highlight the positive image of the institution as a responsible institution that bears all the social and environmental impacts associated with its activities in order to achieve the satisfaction of its customers and its surroundings in general.

The study showed that social responsibility is an approach and principle that public relations operate under, by relying on ethical rules in carrying out tasks and activities and being honest and transparent in what it broadcasts and publishes of information and facts that the public relies on in making related decisions.

2.7 A study by Al-Muqrin, Mohammad bin Abdullah (2021) on **social responsibility in public relations departments** addressed the concept of social responsibility, its historical development, the benefits of companies adopting social responsibility, and the function of social responsibility in public relations management. The study aimed to clarify the concept of social responsibility and understand its historical development. It concluded that social responsibility in public relations is one of the most prominent aspects of the work, as it directs this mission toward serving humanity.

### 3 .Problem of the study

The relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and public relations departments has gained significant importance with the structural developments in contemporary companies and institutions. This necessitates a more interactive and integrated role, enriching the need for companies and institutions to connect with their target audiences, especially given that the development of social media has made information dissemination faster and more impactful. This implies a role that reinforces positive aspects within companies and institutions, while simultaneously addressing any harmful dissemination or circulation of information that could negatively affect their public image.

Several studies have confirmed shortcomings in some public relations departments' ability to promote corporate social responsibility within companies and institutions.

The public relations function is directly and inversely related to social responsibility, as evidenced by its role in building and maintaining a positive public image, or conversely, in causing damage to it. This is demonstrated in numerous studies and experiences of companies. For example, a study in the United Arab Emirates found that "companies in the UAE strive to develop their programs and contributions in the field of social responsibility, recognizing the importance of this activity for both the company and society". (Rettab, Belaid, Ben Brik, Anis and Mellahi, Kamal (2009): pp. 1-5)

This prompted this study to attempt to identify, describe, and analyze the role of public relations in promoting social responsibility within the economic sector in the Eastern Region. The study's problem, therefore, lies in defining the relationship between social responsibility and public relations, and in finding ways to overcome shortcomings in the utilization and investment of community programs and initiatives. In other words, it seeks to optimize the use of social responsibility by public relations departments to fulfill their roles and achieve the objectives of the economic sector in the Eastern Region through effective communication with beneficiary audiences.

#### 4 .Study Objectives

This study aimed to examine the nature of the relationship between public relations and social responsibility (CSR). Specifically, it sought to:

- Identify the role of public relations in promoting CSR within the economic sector in general, and within economic institutions in the Eastern Province in particular.
- Determine the extent of the human and social interaction between public relations activities in the sampled companies and institutions and CSR programs and initiatives.
- Demonstrate the importance of strategic coordination between public relations activities and CSR practices, and the need for companies and institutions to enhance their reputation and public image through CSR initiatives and programs.
- Identify shortcomings in the use of public relations to promote CSR by economic sector institutions in the Eastern Province.

#### 5 .Methodology

Because the study falls under descriptive study, which aims to "study current facts related to the nature of the phenomenon" (Samir, 1998, p. 123) and "collect the necessary information to provide a description of the dimensions and variables of the phenomenon under study by defining the nature of things" (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2017: 16), the comprehensive survey method was adopted. This method is defined as "a systematic attempt to analyze, interpret, and report on the current state of a particular system. It helps in discovering specific relationships between different phenomena within the study framework, and it is a process through which we obtain accurate information related to the study topic." (Badr, 1986, p. 300)

This approach aims to "record, analyze, and interpret the phenomenon in its current state after collecting the necessary and sufficient data about it and its components through a set of organized procedures that define the type of data, its source, and the methods of obtaining it." (Abdul Majeed, 1992, p. 93)

The descriptive statistical method was used to collect data and information related to the phenomenon or study problem under study. This data and information was then arranged and organized in accordance with the scope of the study, the study issues, and the study's objectives, as well as within a sufficient timeframe to allow for the occurrence of the phenomenon under study. (Tayeh, 2001, p. 242)

#### 6 .Study Tools

- **Content analysis** tool to describe the reality of public relations in economic sector institutions in the Eastern Province by monitoring their communication activities aimed at achieving and supporting community partnerships and analyzing a sample of their content.
- **Questionnaire** tool to collect data and information from public relations and social responsibility officers in the companies and institutions included in the sample, in addition to members of the community.
- This tool is important for monitoring public opinion trends towards economic institutions in the Eastern Province and the extent of their success in utilizing public relations to achieve and enhance community partnerships.

#### 7 .Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its fulfillment of the pressing need and strategic imperative to monitor and analyze the current state of public relations and its optimal application within economic institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in general, and the Eastern Province in particular, to strengthen their partnerships and fulfill their social responsibility.

The importance of this study stems from the growing role of social responsibility in achieving effective communication between companies, institutions, and organizations with communities, and the impact of programs and initiatives on improving and maintaining a positive public image.

The importance of this study lies in the following:

- The crucial role of public relations in contemporary companies, institutions, and organizations in utilizing and developing social responsibility as a means to enhance corporate communication with beneficiaries.
- The growing awareness of the importance of social responsibility in aligning with state institutions to achieve social solidarity and the goals of comprehensive and sustainable development.
- The emergence of social responsibility within the structures of several companies, institutions, and organizations, as independent departments working to implement programs and initiatives that foster communication with communities.

## **8 .Study Community**

The study population refers to all the units that the researcher wishes to study. In this study, it is the companies and institutions of the economic sector in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The study community is also defined as: "The total number of individuals that the researcher aims to study to achieve the study's results. It represents the target audience that the researcher intends to study and on whose individual members the study's results are based. However, it is difficult to access due to its large size; therefore, the focus was on the accessible population from which the sample was selected." (Abdul Hamid, 2000, p. 158)

Another definition states that it is: "The set of terms that the researcher aims to study in order to achieve the study's objectives, representing the target audience that the researcher intends to study to generalize the study's results to all its members." (Al-Abd & Al-Abd, 2007, p. 97). The study population consists of public relations and social responsibility officers in companies and institutions within the economic sector in the Eastern Province.

For content analysis, a sample of communication activities undertaken by the public relations departments in the sampled units to achieve and promote community partnership was selected for content and message analysis.

## **9 .Study Sample**

To monitor public opinion trends towards economic institutions in the Eastern Province and their success in utilizing public relations to achieve and enhance community partnership, a questionnaire was used as the sampling tool, employing a simple random sampling method. This method ensured that all members of the community had equal opportunities to participate without adhering to any specific order or intentional system. (Shafiq, 2000, p. 198)

The study sample comprised 100 public relations, corporate communications, and corporate social responsibility employees in companies and institutions (internal audience) and 230 members of the community (external audience) in the Eastern Province.

## **10 .Theoretical Framework (Systems Theory)**

Within the framework of this study, which addresses a clear problem, it was necessary for us to place it within its theoretical and cognitive framework. For this purpose, systems theory was adopted, through which public relations and its multiple functions in companies and institutions are explained, as well as the possibility of public relations managing the flow of information to and from the public.

### **10.1 Systems Theory**

This theory contributes to explaining public relations processes and functions in companies and institutions. It explains the ability of public relations to manage the flow of information to the public and vice versa. It is also called the theory of adaptation and compatibility (Al-Jamal, Ayad, 2005). According to the theory, the public relations department works to establish a sub-organizational system within the larger organizational system it operates under, which in turn belongs to a larger societal system with which it interacts and influences. The public relations department may operate within one

of two systems: a closed system, in which performance becomes dependent, or an open system, which enables the department to perform its role with the required efficiency and effectiveness.

However, in the case of an open system, the public relations department may not be given the opportunity to play this role. Instead, it may be treated as a system that receives information but does not send it, is influenced but does not influence. Even if it has the opportunity to influence, it is limited to the narrowest possible extent, which hinders and restricts the department's potential. This is a characteristic of most organizations in developing societies (Shiba, 2005).

This theory aligns with the study of the impact and interaction between public relations and the social environment, and the systematic use of data to achieve benefits for companies and institutions on the one hand, and society on the other. This allows for the development of social responsibility initiatives and programs within a structured framework that enables flexible and systematic approaches to challenges and changes.

This theory appears particularly important in the field of public relations, which has become a rapidly evolving science that incorporates such theories to keep pace with the evolving structural frameworks of institutions and organizations. It can add organizational dimensions to their structures and empower them to effectively address challenges related to administrative and operational organization.

## 11 .Sample Analysis

A random sample of 53 public relations managers and officers from economic institutions in the Eastern Province were contacted to discuss the scope of public relations activities and functions, and its role in strengthening community partnerships.

Public relations contribute to connecting economic institutions with the communities in which they operate. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and programs play an effective role in enhancing the community role of these institutions, thereby boosting their positive public image and creating a fruitful relationship with the community. This is because any social activity has a direct impact on evaluating the performance and acceptance of the products and services of economic institutions.

Based on the public relations performance analysis, economic institutions in the Eastern Province demonstrated a significant interest in the public relations function, which in many cases was entrusted with CSR tasks and roles. It was evident in many organizational structures that public relations departments existed, either as independent units or linked to other departments, performing public relations and CSR functions in a cohesive manner that enhances the public image of these institutions.

## 12 .Results

- Economic institutions in the Eastern Province prioritize public relations functions related to improving their public image. This includes supporting their activities in programs and initiatives both within the workplace and in the wider community. Consequently, these departments are found at advanced management levels in some institutions' organizational structures, and at middle management levels in most. In a small percentage of these institutions, public relations departments are either absent or located at the lowest levels.
- Regarding their community role and fulfillment of social responsibility initiatives, the majority of economic sector institutions in the Eastern Province implement numerous community partnerships. However, some of these partnerships are few and unsustainable, while a small percentage do not have any at all.
- Regarding community engagement, a large percentage of public relations departments in economic institutions in the Eastern Province operate according to strategies and plans designed to strengthen community partnerships. While some may have unsustainable partnerships, a small percentage lack such a strategy, though this doesn't necessarily mean that all of them implement or participate in community programs or initiatives.
- The public relations departments in many economic institutions in the Eastern Province effectively implement social programs and initiatives within their core functions.
- The dynamism of social activity in the region, and the interaction with the activities of humanitarian and charitable organizations, demonstrate the wide range of initiatives and programs implemented by private sector institutions in the field of social responsibility.

- The humanitarian and charitable performance of economic institutions in the Eastern Province is diverse in terms of the social responsibility initiatives and programs they implement or participate in. This has resulted in a high level of public satisfaction with these institutions' efforts in social responsibility.
- Many of the public, based on their view of the public relations strategies in economic institutions in the Eastern Province and their adequacy in connecting the community with those institutions, see that they are insufficient to achieve results that effectively contribute to connecting them with those institutions.

### 13 .Recommendations

- Economic institutions in the Eastern Province must recognize the importance of public relations and its functional role in community engagement and the implementation of social responsibility activities.
- Public relations departments should be allocated sufficient and appropriate budgets, given their multiple functions. Significant budgets are required, especially when implementing social responsibility activities.
- Economic sector institutions in the Eastern Province should plan and implement sustainable, integrated, and diverse community events on a broad scale that achieve impact and support the social solidarity efforts of the state and society.
- Develop methods to attract the Eastern Province public to public relations programs and initiatives in economic institutions that contribute to strengthening community partnerships.
- Companies and institutions must develop methods that enhance community engagement and increase the effectiveness of their social responsibility strategies in addressing community needs.

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