

An Integrated Framework for Developing Digital Public Relations and Online Reputation Management in Saudi Universities: Evidence from International University Practices

Osman Bakur Gazzaz^{1*}

¹Associate Professor of Public Relations, Department of Administrative and Humanitarian Research, Umm Al Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4081-5047> | Email: obgazzaz@uqu.edu.sa

***Corresponding Author:** Osman Bakur Gazzaz | Email: obgazzaz@uqu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study aimed to develop an integrated framework for digital public relations and online reputation management tailored to Saudi universities, by analyzing and drawing evidence from the practices and experiences of leading international universities.

Methods and Tools: The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach to achieve its objectives and used a questionnaire as a data collection instrument. Two integrated research tools were developed:

- SWOT Analysis: to diagnose the current state of digital public relations in Saudi universities by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- Delphi Method: to explore the views of a sample of international experts through two successive rounds, with the aim of determining the strategic, technological, and ethical requirements for reputation management based on international experiences.

Results: The SWOT analysis revealed the presence of strong digital infrastructure and leadership support (strengths), contrasted with gaps in digital performance governance and repetitive content patterns. The Delphi results indicated a strong consensus among experts (with relative weights exceeding 95%) on the necessity of simplifying content, activating digital trust indicators, and employing artificial intelligence for proactive crisis monitoring. The findings also showed that reputation management in international universities relies on platform-specific content customization and absolute transparency in addressing sensitive issues.

Conclusions: Based on the findings, an integrated framework was developed comprising four main dimensions: digital governance and ethics, content engineering and influence, technological empowerment and artificial intelligence, and impact measurement and continuous improvement.

Keywords: Digital public relations, online reputation, Saudi universities.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world has witnessed significant progress toward digital transformation. Digital transformation has become the core driver of change and the central axis for keeping pace with rapid developments by converting data and information from traditional formats into digital forms. In this regard, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has made considerable and evident efforts to align with global trends. This is clearly reflected in Saudi Vision 2030, in which digital transformation represents one of its fundamental pillars. The Kingdom has achieved remarkable advances in digital transformation in an effort to keep pace with continuous developments in this field and to activate its applications across various sectors and institutions. With the aim of building an information society and a digital economy, as well as improving

service quality across all sectors, the National Committee for Digital Transformation was established in 2017, with key responsibilities including developing policies, strategies, and plans necessary for implementing digital transformation.

Saudi universities are among the institutions upon which technological advancement has imposed new roles and responsibilities. Universities are now required more than ever to address the challenges of the modern era by transitioning from traditional universities to smart universities that rely on digital systems across all services they provide. This transformation involves replacing traditional services with advanced technological functions and integrating technology across all organizational levels, activities, and services within the university.

Public relations management is considered one of the most important organizational levels within institutions, as it represents the organization's external interface and its communication window to the world. Public relations constitutes a key interdisciplinary field that combines administrative sciences with communication studies. This field has been significantly influenced by developments in information and communication technologies over recent decades, placing public relations institutions and departments in the face of numerous challenges. Among the most prominent challenges is the need to keep pace with rapid digital developments and to invest in information technologies and emerging digital tools in order to fulfill the responsibilities imposed by the new digital environment.

One of the most notable developments that has had a clear impact on the field of public relations is the rapid expansion of internet services. Statistics in recent years indicate a continuous increase in internet users worldwide. In the Arab region, the number of internet users rose from approximately two million in 2000 to more than 208 million by the end of 2017, representing 51.7% of the total population of 410 million (World Internet User Statistics, 2018).

This transformation has driven public relations to move from its traditional form toward a digital model, becoming a new, vital, and strategic function within institutions—particularly those that recognize the importance of digital public relations in managing their online reputation. Online reputation has become a key indicator guiding institutions through the digital references and impressions available across internet platforms. Managing online reputation represents the ultimate goal of digital public relations in achieving competitive advantage, enhancing audience satisfaction, securing institutional positioning, and building strong communication networks and relationships among organizations (Reema & Shira, 2024).

Numerous studies have confirmed the growing role of public relations following its integration with internet technologies and the ability of digital public relations to transcend geographical boundaries. Managing reputation and establishing a positive image among diverse audiences with varying needs and preferences can only be achieved through continuous engagement. Consequently, digital public relations has become a primary approach for organizing and managing modern institutions and represents one of the essential pillars within the digital communication environment (Qadem, 2022).

Accordingly, there is a growing need for decision-makers to assess current realities and identify weaknesses and challenges that may hinder Saudi universities in employing digital public relations effectively. The present study seeks to achieve this by analyzing selected successful international experiences in digital public relations, with the aim of benefiting from them and examining the extent to which their key components are available from the perspectives of stakeholders in Saudi universities.

Because digital public relations has become a vital tool for universities in the contemporary era to achieve objectives related to reputation building, communication, marketing, and the development of strong and sustainable relationships with their various audiences, several studies have collectively emphasized the importance of developing digital communication activities through specialized training in digital media practices using computer applications, alongside strengthening digital content to align with the growing

importance of digital communication activities in engaging university public relations audiences. They further emphasized that digital public relations contributes to building a positive and credible online image for universities by publishing engaging and valuable content, maintaining positive interaction with audiences, and effectively managing negative content.

A close examination of previous studies indicates that the concept of online reputation differs in higher education institutions compared to other organizations. Universities manage core missions that require interconnected reputational dimensions. Universities are responsible for education and learning, where reputation is influenced by graduate outcomes, curriculum quality, and academic accreditation. They are also responsible for scientific research and innovation, where reputation is shaped by research productivity and global university rankings. Furthermore, institutional reputation is influenced by universities' contributions to addressing societal issues and supporting development.

University reputation is deeply rooted in academic history and legacy, and institutional decisions often produce long-term effects extending over decades. Therefore, building a strong university reputation cannot be achieved overnight; rather, it is the cumulative outcome of sustained achievements over time. This perspective motivated the researcher to integrate the Kingdom's ongoing efforts under Vision 2030 with international experiences in this field, positioning leading foreign universities' practices in managing online reputation through digital public relations as a reference model for Saudi universities aspiring to enhance their global competitive standing.

Research Problem

Digital public relations represents the most central and influential channel in shaping and managing the online reputation of any organization, particularly within the highly competitive higher education environment. If online reputation serves as a digital mirror reflecting public perceptions across cyberspace—such as social media platforms, news websites, and online forums—digital public relations acts as the driving force behind this mirror. Saudi universities represent some of the most important national institutions that view effective online reputation management as a pathway toward achieving competitive advantage. University reputation is considered one of the most valuable intangible assets that institutions must possess. However, universities still face significant challenges in managing their reputation due to the difficulty of measuring it. Moreover, universities do not directly own or fully control their reputation, as it is largely shaped by external stakeholders' evaluations. Consequently, universities are required to continuously develop their digital public relations strategies in order to effectively manage their online reputation.

The researcher's awareness of the research problem was shaped through several key sources. Saudi Vision 2030, officially announced on April 25, 2016, included the launch of several national programs, most notably the National Transformation Program, one of whose core dimensions involved integrating digital transformation mechanisms into the institutional infrastructure across various sectors. Consequently, all institutions—particularly universities—were required to rapidly transition toward digital platforms. In light of this vision, Saudi universities aim to have at least five institutions ranked among the top 200 universities worldwide by 2030.

The researcher's perception of the problem also stemmed from direct observation of the growing interest of Saudi institutions in digital public relations, which prompted an examination and analysis of digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities. An exploratory study was conducted involving a number of digital public relations employees within Saudi universities to assess the current state of digital PR practices in managing institutional reputation. The findings revealed several key challenges, including: reliance on traditional monitoring methods and limited use of professional AI-supported tools for accurate sentiment

analysis, which reduces the ability to detect crises at early stages; an urgent need for a clear and documented procedural guide outlining escalation and response steps in reputation crises; and noticeable variations in engagement levels despite universities' broad presence across major digital platforms.

Previous studies further emphasized the importance of employing digital public relations in universities. Mahasneh (2023) found that the suboptimal use of electronic technologies hindered the effectiveness of digital public relations, and recommended the necessity of developing and enhancing digital public relations strategies within Saudi universities. Al-Sharbini (2023) examined the role of digital public relations in managing the reputation of Egyptian private universities, concluding that university reputation represents the true capital that institutions strive to build and maintain. Takroni and Al-Shamsi (2021) recommended sustaining and enhancing digital PR performance and keeping pace with technological developments. Mousa (2021) emphasized the importance of investigating the challenges associated with employing digital public relations in Saudi Arabia, and Mohamed (2017) identified that one of the most important advantages of digital public relations lies in its role as a source of information that positively reflects on university reputation.

Based on the above, the research problem can be formulated in the following main question: What is the integrated framework for developing digital public relations and managing online reputation in Saudi universities, in light of the practices adopted by leading international universities?

Research Questions

1. What is the conceptual framework of digital public relations strategies?
2. What is the conceptual framework of online reputation?
3. What are the key features of international universities' experiences in employing digital public relations strategies to manage their online reputation?
4. What is the current reality of employing digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities to manage their online reputation?
5. What is the current reality of international universities' experiences in employing digital public relations to manage their online reputation?
6. What are the main features of the integrated framework for developing digital public relations and managing online reputation in Saudi universities, in light of the practices adopted by leading international universities?

Research Objectives

1. To identify the conceptual framework of digital public relations strategies.
2. To identify the conceptual framework of online reputation.
3. To determine the key features of international universities' experiences in employing digital public relations strategies to manage their online reputation.
4. To examine the current state of employing digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities for managing their online reputation.
5. To explore the current experiences of international universities in employing digital public relations for managing their online reputation.
6. To develop An Integrated framework for enhancing digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities to manage their online reputation in light of the experiences of selected international universities.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research lies in its alignment with global trends toward digital transformation, a policy increasingly adopted by governments and institutions worldwide. Furthermore, the study highlights the efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in its continuous pursuit of keeping pace with technological developments and positioning itself among the world's leading nations through the adoption of digital infrastructure across all state institutions.

Theoretical Significance:

The current study contributes to enriching educational and communication research in the field of digital public relations and online reputation management in universities, thereby enhancing practical understanding of digital PR mechanisms. The study addresses a contemporary and pressing issue—namely digital reputation management within a highly competitive environment—which gives it direct value for university decision-makers. Utilizing international experiences as a reference framework enhances the quality of findings and ensures that the proposed framework is grounded in scientific foundations and global best practices.

Practical Significance:

The study contributes to providing practical solutions that support the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly the goal of placing Saudi universities among the top 200 universities globally through enhancing their online reputation. The proposed framework serves as a roadmap for public relations and media professionals in Saudi universities, enabling them to shift their practices from traditional content publishing toward strategic reputation management. The study helps emerging universities build a strong digital identity that enables them to compete with well-established universities both locally and internationally.

Research Methodology and Tools

Based on the research problem and its questions, the descriptive-analytical approach was considered the most appropriate methodology for this study. This approach involves presenting and analyzing selected international experiences related to the research topic in order to derive indicators that may contribute to building the proposed framework. The study also included reviewing and analyzing relevant Arab and international literature, in addition to presenting and analyzing the results obtained from research tools (questionnaires), with the aim of utilizing these findings to develop a proposed framework for improving digital public relations strategies in managing the online reputation of Saudi universities.

Study Population and Sample

The study sample is divided into two groups. The first group consists of experts and public relations practitioners from the universities of Zurich, Leicester, and the American University in France. Their expertise is derived from successful models and experiences that can be utilized in developing a proposed framework for digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities. The second group consists of public relations practitioners in Saudi universities (King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Umm Al-Qura University), representing the Saudi higher education environment. This group aims to provide insights into the current status of digital public relations strategies in Saudi universities and the challenges they face in managing their online reputation.

Research Boundaries

Subject boundaries include digital public relations strategies, online reputation, environmental analysis of Saudi universities, and exploring expert perspectives from international universities using the Delphi method. Spatial boundaries include Saudi universities (Umm Al-Qura University, King Saud University, and King Abdulaziz University) and international universities (University of Leicester, University of Zurich, and the American University in France). The temporal scope of the study is limited to the academic year 2025–2026.

Research Instruments and Their Validity and Reliability

Two complementary research instruments were developed. The first is a questionnaire administered to 45 public relations employees from three Saudi universities (15 from each), aiming to identify the requirements for developing digital public relations strategies to build the university's electronic reputation. The sample

was composed of 24.4% with less than three years of experience, 20% with 3–5 years, 37.8% with 6–10 years, and 17.8% with more than ten years of experience.

Table 1. Description of the Study Sample According to Study Variables

Study Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
University	Umm Al-Qura University	15	33.3%
	King Saud University	15	33.3%
	King Abdulaziz University	15	33.3%
	Total	45	100%
Years of Experience	Less than three years	11	24.4%
	3–5 years	9	20%
	6–10 years	17	37.8%
	More than ten years	8	17.8%
Total		45	100%

The validity of the questionnaire was established through face validity by a panel of expert reviewers, and construct validity was confirmed through internal consistency analysis conducted on a pilot sample of 15 participants. Correlation coefficients between each item and the total score of its corresponding dimension were statistically significant at the 0.01 significance level, indicating strong internal consistency. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha on a sample of 30 participants outside the study sample, yielding a coefficient of 0.985 for the questionnaire as a whole, with dimension coefficients ranging between 0.887 and 0.977, indicating very high reliability. The self-validity coefficient reached 0.992.

The second instrument adopted the Delphi Technique to explore the opinions of 24 experts from three leading international universities (University of Leicester, University of Zurich, and The American University of Paris). The process was conducted through two rounds. The first round used an open-ended survey to gather experts' ideas regarding key foundations for developing digital public relations and reputation management. The second round used a closed-ended questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to reach consensus. The study was concluded at two rounds because statistical analyses indicated that relative weights of all items reached very high levels (ranging from 91.6% to 99.2%), with statistically significant Chi-square values, confirming that informational saturation had been reached.

Theoretical Framework

Dialogic Communication Theory

Dialogic theory is associated with several academic disciplines; however, Kent and Taylor (2002) successfully linked it to public relations based on Martin Buber's philosophy of existential dialogue. Buber argued that individuals relate to others through specific relationships that enable them to understand both themselves and others within the 'I–Thou' framework. Accordingly, dialogue represents a means of fostering authentic relationships rather than merely producing knowledge (Bentley, 2012).

Kent and Taylor emphasized that dialogic communication plays a central role in building relationships between organizations and their audiences. They explained that the dialogic approach creates opportunities for meaningful exchange among individuals and promotes a collaborative orientation characterized by openness, honesty, and respect. Due to its focus on open, cooperative, and negotiated communication, the dialogic approach has been considered an ethically grounded framework for relationship building within public relations management (Taylor & Xiong, 2019).

Kent and Taylor (2002) identified several core principles of dialogic communication: Commitment (dedication of both organizations and audiences to maintaining dialogue and ongoing communication); Proximity

(maintaining close and immediate communication with audiences); Empathy (recognizing audience opinions even when they conflict with organizational objectives); Risk (willingness to reconsider viewpoints or be influenced by others); and Reciprocity (acknowledging that relationships are based on equality rather than power, treating audiences as partners rather than consumers).

When dialogic principles are applied, digital public relations evolves from merely being platforms for publishing news into interactive spaces. The use of empathetic and approachable language in digital responses helps break institutional rigidity and creates more human-centered communication with audiences, thereby directly enhancing reputation management. When audiences perceive that organizations accept differing opinions and genuinely listen to criticism, reputation shifts from being a constructed image driven by advertising into sustainable trust built through transparency and credibility in handling crises and digital interactions.

Digital Public Relations: Concept and Characteristics

Digital Public Relations (Digital PR) represents the natural and evolutionary development of traditional public relations. It is a strategic process aimed at building brand awareness, improving reputation, and increasing the digital visibility of institutions and individuals through the use of internet-based digital channels and platforms. Ahmed (2024) defines digital public relations as the utilization of electronic communication applications to establish strong relationships with target audiences within a reciprocal framework, aiming to build a positive mental image that enhances trust and addresses challenges. Phillips (2023) defines it as the managerial and communication-oriented approach to conducting public relations activities through the use of the internet and digital technologies to achieve effective communication practices and formats. Yinoun and Rashidi (2023) describe it as the utilization of internet technologies and social media networks to implement both internal and external organizational communication, narrowing the communication gap between organizations and their audiences through immediacy, speed, interactivity, and effective activity management.

Digital public relations is characterized by several distinguishing features. Interactivity reflects the shift from one-way communication to interactive communication, where audiences become active participants rather than passive recipients. Reach and Immediacy eliminate time barriers between events and their announcement in the digital environment. Digital Measurability enables quantification of outcomes through measurable and analyzable big data indicators. Temporal Flexibility allows users to receive messages at any time convenient to them. Speed of Publishing and Interaction enables institutions to rapidly publish official statements and engage with audiences, especially during crisis situations. Decentralization allows independence in the use of communication technologies, as no single entity can entirely control or disable internet services globally.

Online Reputation: Concept and Management

Online reputation refers to all information available about an organization's activities on the internet, including content found through search engines, websites, blogs, social networks, and email. This reputation is formed voluntarily and individually by users and other institutions, and it generally reflects the image held by internet users toward organizations (Salhi et al., 2021). Online or digital reputation is defined as what others believe or think about an organization or product based on the traces it leaves—consciously or unconsciously—through content published across the internet and various digital networks and social media platforms (Reema & Shabra, 2024).

Digital reputation management is defined as a continuous process of monitoring and engagement within the digital space aimed at increasing positive interactions surrounding a brand, while simultaneously ensuring

real-time interaction with audiences. This process relies on pre-planned strategies designed to seize available opportunities, strengthen positive aspects of institutional reputation, and confront risks while minimizing potential negative impacts on the organization's overall reputation (Ghallab & Nouwari, 2021). Key requirements for successful online reputation management include inventory and evaluation of digital reputation, objective goal setting, anticipating digital crises, and analysis of digital risks and opportunities.

International Universities' Experiences in Online Reputation Management

In recent decades, the global academic and higher education environment has undergone a profound transformation. Digital transformation has emerged as a driving force that reshapes the relationship between educational institutions and their diverse audiences. The study examined three leading international universities to understand their digital public relations practices.

The American University of Paris (AUP) is a private, independent liberal arts institution and is considered one of the oldest American higher education institutions in Europe. Digital public relations play a central role in managing the reputation of AUP. As an international American university located in the heart of Europe, AUP relies on digital public relations to reinforce its image as a liberal and global institution through building a distinct global brand using its official website as a primary communication hub, active engagement through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube, supporting digital student media outlets to enhance credibility, and employing reputation monitoring tools such as Google Alerts and social listening tools for sentiment analysis and crisis management.

The University of Zurich, founded in 1833, is the largest university in Switzerland and is widely known for its research leadership, ranking among the top 100 universities worldwide with twelve Nobel Prize winners. The university emphasizes innovation, scientific rigor, and multilingual communication by adopting a bilingual strategy (German/English) that balances local and international audiences. Its digital PR approaches include strategic content creation and dissemination highlighting major research findings and scientific publications, managing multi-platform presence with specialized content for each platform, building a digital community of current students, alumni, and faculty members, and employing specialized tools for digital listening, crisis management, and data analytics.

The University of Leicester, founded in 1921, is widely known as a leading institution in scientific research and a pioneer in distance learning. The university emphasizes digital innovation through a comprehensive digital strategy that forms an integral part of strategic planning for reputation management. Its approaches include highlighting research achievements as 'changing the world,' developing evidence-based decision-making tools through predictive modelling using student data, enhancing stakeholder experiences through digital campus development, and using digital channels to invite alumni to remain connected to the university's global community.

Field Study Results and Analysis

Environmental Analysis (SWOT) of Saudi Universities

The SWOT analysis of Saudi universities regarding their employment of digital public relations yielded the following findings:

Strengths: The degree of achievement of the strengths of Saudi universities regarding the employment of digital public relations was high, with a relative weight of 76.05%. The top-ranked strength was 'Digital strategies are an essential and integrated part of the university's overall communication identity' (mean = 3.98, relative weight = 79.6%), reflecting the success of Saudi universities in activating digital work systems. This was followed by 'Digital content is available in multiple formats' (mean = 3.91, relative weight = 78.2%), indicating that public relations departments recognize the importance of multimedia in attracting digital audiences. The lowest-ranked strength was 'The use of artificial intelligence tools has positively contributed to improving the accuracy of online reputation analysis' (mean = 3.64, relative weight = 72.8%), suggesting

that the application of AI in digital public relations still relies on relatively simple analytical tools, highlighting the need to invest more in intelligent algorithms.

Weaknesses: The degree of achievement of weaknesses was moderate, with a relative weight of 63.4%. The most prominent weakness was 'Digital strategies are not updated immediately based on measurement and analysis results' (mean = 3.44, relative weight = 68.8%), indicating a problem related to organizational flexibility within Saudi universities, creating a disconnect between measurement and monitoring tools and strategic decision-making. The second-ranked weakness was 'The digital public relations team lacks training in rapid crisis-response protocols' (mean = 3.27, relative weight = 65.4%). At the lowest level were weaknesses related to 'difficulty in identifying the target audience' and 'difficulty coordinating between different university departments' (mean = 2.96, relative weight = 59.2%), reflecting a relatively positive situation regarding audience knowledge and interdepartmental communication.

Opportunities: The degree of achievement of available opportunities was high, with a relative weight of 68.4%. The highest-ranked opportunity was 'The increasing number of influencers in the educational field represents an opportunity to enhance the credibility of the university's message' (mean = 3.76, relative weight = 75.2%), reflecting a deep understanding of social validation concepts. This was followed by 'Access to the experiences and practices of leading foreign universities represents an opportunity to develop our strategies' (mean = 3.64, relative weight = 72.8%), indicating a positive tendency toward international benchmarking. The lowest-ranked opportunity was 'The emergence of new artificial intelligence tools represents an opportunity to improve the accuracy of online reputation monitoring' (mean = 3.04, relative weight = 60.8%).

Threats: The degree of achievement of threats was high, with a relative weight of 64.2%. The most prominent threat was 'The risk of security breaches or falsification attacks targeting data or leadership' (mean = 3.47, relative weight = 69.4%), reflecting practitioners' awareness of modern digital risks, especially deepfake technologies. This was followed by 'Intense competition from regional and international universities for online reputation' (mean = 3.44, relative weight = 68.8%). The lowest-ranked threat was 'Imposing restrictions on freedom of expression or publishing on the university's digital platforms' (mean = 2.78, relative weight = 55.6%), suggesting the presence of a reasonably balanced level of freedom.

Table 2. Summary of SWOT Analysis Results for Saudi Universities in Employing Digital Public Relations (N = 45)

Dimension	Key Findings	Mean	Rel.Wt%	Degree
Strengths	Strong digital infrastructure; leadership support; multi-format content availability	3.80	76.05%	High
Weaknesses	Delayed strategy updates; insufficient crisis-response training for PR teams	3.17	63.4%	Moderate
Opportunities	Growth of educational influencers; international benchmarking; AI tool adoption	3.42	68.4%	High
Threats	Security breaches; global competition; rapid spread of digital misinformation	3.21	64.2%	High

Note: Mean based on 5-point Likert scale. Relative Weight = (Mean ÷ 5) × 100.

Requirements for Developing Digital Public Relations Strategies

Organizational Requirements: The degree of need for organizational requirements was high, with a relative weight of 83.8%. The top-ranked requirement was 'Establishing a flexible and coordinated organizational structure linking the digital public relations team with all other university departments' (mean = 4.44, relative weight = 88.8%, very high), highlighting the issue of bureaucracy and the need for administrative fluidity. This was followed by 'Applying standards of transparency and clarity in digital communication' (mean = 4.29, relative weight = 85.8%, very high), confirming that communicative honesty is a top priority. The third-ranked requirement was 'Applying digital risk analysis methodologies to identify cyber threats' (mean = 4.24, relative weight = 84.8%), indicating that practitioners demand a proactive approach that protects reputation before crises occur.

Human Requirements: The degree of need for human requirements was very high, with a relative weight of 84.13%. The highest-ranked requirement was 'Implementing periodic digital crisis simulations (Mock Crises) to train work teams on rapid and professional response' (mean = 4.33, relative weight = 86.6%), indicating a fundamental shift in training philosophy toward practical rather than purely knowledge-based training. Equally ranked second were 'Providing specialized staff with high-level skills in digital data analysis and sentiment analysis' and 'Providing staff skilled in crafting influential and engaging digital content' (mean = 4.29, relative weight = 85.8%), reflecting a mature understanding that building online reputation requires human resources capable of both analyzing audience trends and transforming data into creative messages.

Strategic and Technical Requirements: The degree of need was high, with a relative weight of 76.4%. The top-ranked requirement was 'Using advanced AI-based monitoring tools to proactively detect threats and opportunities' (mean = 4.07, relative weight = 81.4%), indicating respondents' awareness of proactive monitoring as a critical technical aspect. This was followed by 'Applying a proactive listening strategy to anticipate problems before they emerge' and 'Benefiting from international expertise in designing tested response protocols for dealing with rumors and negative news' (mean = 3.87, relative weight = 77.4%), reflecting the methodological framework through which technical tools should be managed.

Table 3. Summary of Requirements for Developing Digital Public Relations Strategies in Saudi Universities (N = 45)

Category	Top-Ranked Items	Mean	Rel.Wt%	Degree
Organizational Requirements	Flexible org. structure (4.44); Transparency standards (4.29); Digital risk analysis (4.24)	4.19	83.8%	High
Human Requirements	Crisis simulations (4.33); Sentiment analysis staff (4.29); Content creation staff (4.29)	4.21	84.13%	Very High
Strategic & Technical Req.	AI-based monitoring tools (4.07); Proactive listening (3.87); Crisis-response protocols (3.87)	3.82	76.4%	High

Note: Degree of Need based on 5-point Likert scale: VH (Very High) = Mean > 4.20; H (High) = 3.40–4.20.

Differences According to University Affiliation and Years of Experience

One-way ANOVA results indicated statistically significant differences in strengths, weaknesses, available opportunities, threats, environmental analysis, human requirements, and strategic and technical requirements according to university affiliation (F values significant at 0.05 level). The Scheffé post-hoc test revealed that in strengths and weaknesses, differences were in favor of Umm Al-Qura University; in available opportunities, differences favored King Abdulaziz University; in threats, differences favored Umm Al-Qura University; in human requirements, differences favored King Abdulaziz University; and in strategic and technical requirements, differences favored King Saud University. No statistically significant differences were found in organizational requirements. Regarding years of experience, ANOVA results showed no statistically significant differences across all dimensions, indicating that perceptions of the requirements for developing digital strategies are relatively consistent regardless of years of experience—linked more to the contemporary digital environment than to professional experience length.

Delphi Findings: International Experts' Views

Experts' responses regarding digital public relations strategies were rated as very important, with an overall relative weight of 96.3%. The top-ranked strategy was 'Developing an integrated and platform-specific digital content strategy (Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube)' (mean = 4.96, relative weight = 99.2%), indicating that content customization is a key success factor in managing electronic reputation internationally. The second-ranked was 'Collaborating with digital influencers in the educational field' (mean = 4.92, relative weight = 98.4%), reflecting foreign experts' strong awareness that messages directed through specialized influencers gain greater credibility than direct official communication.

Experts' responses on university electronic reputation management were also rated as very important, with an overall relative weight of 96.23%. The top-ranked items were 'Developing a guideline for the ethics of social media use' and 'Launching a periodic initiative to measure the university's Trust Score on its digital platforms' (mean = 4.92, relative weight = 98.4%), reflecting the value-based reputation approach adopted by foreign universities that aims to establish a value framework regulating digital behavior while providing a precise measurement tool to assess outcomes.

Regarding requirements for developing digital public relations, experts' responses were rated as very important, with an overall relative weight of 97.06%. The top-ranked requirements were 'Restructuring the Public Relations Department to accommodate the new roles imposed by technological advancement,' 'Developing artificial intelligence algorithms to personalize media messages according to each audience segment,' and 'Using Artificial Intelligence systems to analyze Big Data related to the university's reputation' (mean = 4.92, relative weight = 98.4%), reflecting the transition toward a stage of technological empowerment and digital foresight.

Table 4. Summary of Delphi Expert Consensus Results — International Universities (N = 24)

Delphi Theme	Highest-Ranked Items	Mean	Rel.Wt%	Level
Digital PR Strategies	Platform-specific content strategy (99.2%); Educational influencer collaboration (98.4%)	4.82	96.3%	Very Imp.
Online Reputation Management	Social media ethics guideline (98.4%); Trust Score launch initiative (98.4%)	4.81	96.23%	Very Imp.

Development Requirements	Restructuring PR dept. (98.4%); AI message personalization (98.4%); Big Data analysis (98.4%)	4.85	97.06%	Very Imp.
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Note: All items rated Very Important (Relative Weight > 91%). Round 2 of the Delphi process.

An Integrated Framework for Developing Digital Public Relations Strategies

The philosophy of the Integrated framework is based on transferring the global expertise of leading universities in digital reputation management and reformulating it within a practical strategic framework that ensures Saudi universities' excellence in their digital environment. The framework emphasizes that it is not limited to mere transfer, but rather to adaptation and localization through consideration of the internal context of Saudi universities and cultural and organizational considerations. This philosophy seeks to achieve three main objectives: shifting from reaction to proaction; strategic integration, emphasizing that digital public relations is an integrated strategic unit that serves the university's major educational and research objectives; and sustainability and measurement, establishing a concept based on continuous measurement tools to link digital performance with the university's institutional value.

The proposed framework was developed based on four main sources: Saudi Vision 2030; findings of previous studies and scientific research related to digital public relations and electronic reputation management in universities; results of the field study concerning the environmental analysis (SWOT analysis) of Saudi universities; and results of the field study related to the opinions of digital public relations experts in foreign universities.

Axis One: Digital Governance and Ethics (Legislative Foundation)

Digital governance and ethics aim to establish an institutional framework ensuring that the use of digital technologies—from data management to Artificial Intelligence—is conducted responsibly, transparently, and fairly, thereby enhancing the university's reputation and strengthening societal trust. Implementation mechanisms include: first, formulating a University Digital Ethics Charter as a legal and ethical document regulating the conduct of university affiliates on social media platforms when referencing the university, including defining publication standards (objectivity, accuracy, integrity), establishing a protocol for handling digital criticism, and regulating the use of the institutional brand in personal accounts. Second, launching a Digital Trust Index Initiative as an institutional program aimed at measuring and enhancing the level of trust within the university's digital environment through developing an electronic survey measuring dimensions such as credibility, competence, and transparency, utilizing Artificial Intelligence tools to analyze discourse about the university within the digital space, and converting the results into an index score included in the university's annual report.

Expected outcomes of this axis include unifying the communication tone across all accounts of colleges, departments, and leadership; increasing public credibility in news issued by official platforms; and reducing legal risks resulting from digital misconduct by university affiliates. This axis directly addresses the weakness identified in the SWOT analysis regarding the absence of governance, and leverages the available opportunity of leadership support to transform reputation into measurable intangible assets.

Axis Two: Content Engineering and Influence (Executive Arm)

This axis aims to transform academic and research achievements into engaging and customized digital narratives that contribute to building a modern and interactive mental image of the university. Implementation mechanisms include: first, launching a Science Simplification Lab as a joint unit between the Public Relations Department and the Deanship of Scientific Research to translate complex research outputs into content accessible to the general public, through converting distinguished theses and research projects

into infographics, short videos, and motion graphics, launching a periodic podcast hosting researchers, and linking research content to developmental and societal issues. Second, implementing a Digital Reputation Ambassadors Program to attract digitally influential faculty members and students as informal representatives of the university, providing technical and training support for academic influencers, organizing 'Digital Takeovers,' and collaborating with external digital influencers in the educational field. Third, developing a Content Personalization Strategy to eliminate the copy-and-paste approach across platforms and develop platform-specific content tailored to each audience segment.

Expected outcomes include transforming the university's image from a 'rigid institution' into a dynamic knowledge community, increasing genuine interaction rates (comments, shares) instead of passive viewing, and expanding global reach through publishing university research in multiple languages to attract international researchers and investors. This axis addresses the issue of content uniformity identified as a weakness in the SWOT analysis and capitalizes on the opportunity of 'Reputation Ambassadors.'

Axis Three: Technological Infrastructure and Artificial Intelligence (Technical Enabler)

This axis aims to transform Artificial Intelligence and digital infrastructure into an intelligent engine that supports reputation-related decision-making, enhances influence efficiency, and positions the university as a modern and credible institution. Implementation mechanisms include: first, establishing a Smart Digital Operations Room as a centralized technical unit utilizing Artificial Intelligence algorithms to monitor all content written about the university in multiple languages around the clock, activating an early warning system for negative tone detection, employing Digital Fact-Checking technologies to verify rumors, and analyzing frequently used keywords among audiences. Second, developing an Immediate Response System (AI Chatbots and Automation) through AI-powered chatbots to serve both local and international audiences, providing instant and accurate responses around the clock and integrating with the university database. Third, implementing a University Audience Data System (University CRM) to unify digital interaction records for each user, integrating social media accounts with email and the official website to create a unified beneficiary profile and deliver personalized content.

Expected outcomes include proactive control of digital crises at 'zero hour' before they escalate; operational efficiency through reducing reliance on human resources in responding to repetitive inquiries by up to 80%; and technological leadership that positions the university as a technologically advanced entity. This axis directly addresses the threat of rapid rumor dissemination identified in the SWOT analysis and leverages the opportunity presented by Artificial Intelligence technologies.

Axis Four: Impact Measurement and Continuous Improvement (Supervisory Compass)

This axis represents the primary safeguard ensuring that the university remains on the correct strategic trajectory by transforming the results of the 'Trust Index' and 'Monitoring Reports' into corrective decisions, thereby ensuring the sustainability and continuous development of the university's electronic reputation. Implementation mechanisms include: a Reputation Reporting System issuing analytical reports (quarterly and annual) to monitor the development of the university's image locally and internationally, conducting benchmarking comparisons with competing universities, and presenting the 'Reputation Gap'; a Smart Feedback Loop ensuring that public opinions and digital criticisms reach university decision-makers to inform policy adjustments and organizing open digital forums between university leadership and the public; and an Annual Evaluation of Digital Transformation in Public Relations measuring the success of human teams in utilizing proposed technological tools through measuring Response Time to crises and evaluating the quality of personalized content.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the proposed framework include: a Trust Index achieving an annual

increase of no less than 10% in digital survey results; a Sentiment Score ensuring that positive and neutral sentiment accounts for at least 90% of total content published about the university; Response Efficiency of responding to crises or sensitive inquiries within no more than 30 minutes; and International Reach through increasing the proportion of followers and interactions from outside the Kingdom.

Implementation Phases

The framework can be implemented through three sequential phases. The Foundation Phase (1–3 months) involves drafting the Digital Ethics Charter, selecting technical monitoring tools, and establishing the foundational governance structure. The Launch Phase (4–9 months) involves activating the CRM system, training 'Reputation Ambassadors,' and converting at least 30% of research outputs into digital content formats. The Empowerment Phase (Advanced Stage) involves integrating Artificial Intelligence with real-time monitoring systems and issuing the first annual Trust Index report. Through these stages, the university moves from structured preparation to operational activation and ultimately to full digital empowerment and strategic maturity.

Conclusion

This proposed framework is not merely a technical plan; rather, it represents a new institutional reality that must establish itself within the academic community. By implementing these four axes, Saudi universities will transition from the stage of digital presence to the stage of digital leadership, thereby supporting their advancement into the ranks of prestigious global universities. This progression is grounded in a highly valuable asset: their electronic reputation.

The study revealed that Saudi universities possess significant strengths including strong digital infrastructure and leadership support, alongside certain weaknesses such as the absence of unified crisis response protocols, limited AI investment, and lack of content personalization strategies. The SWOT analysis confirmed that key opportunities lie in the national digital transformation climate under Vision 2030, educational influencers, and international benchmarking, while primary threats include security breaches, intense global competition, and rapid spread of digital misinformation.

International experts from the University of Zurich, University of Leicester, and The American University of Paris demonstrated through the Delphi process a very high consensus (relative weights exceeding 95%) on the necessity of platform-specific content strategies, collaborating with educational influencers, employing AI for proactive crisis monitoring, developing digital ethics guidelines, activating trust indices, restructuring public relations departments to accommodate technological roles, and developing AI algorithms to personalize media messages. These findings collectively provide a comprehensive and scientifically grounded foundation for the proposed framework.

The study recommends that Saudi universities adopt the proposed framework as a strategic roadmap for transforming digital public relations from a purely media function into an integrated strategic management approach. Universities should invest in establishing specialized digital operations rooms, develop human capabilities through practical crisis simulation training, build content personalization capacities, and align digital public relations strategies with the indicators used in global university ranking systems. These steps are essential for achieving Saudi Vision 2030's goal of having at least five Saudi universities ranked among the top 200 universities worldwide.

Proposed Future Research

Upon concluding this study and exploring its related dimensions in depth, the researcher proposes the following areas for future investigation:

1. Evaluating the effectiveness of implementing the proposed framework for developing digital public relations strategies in managing the electronic reputation of Saudi universities: A case study conducted one year after implementation.

2. Employing Generative AI applications in producing interactive content to enhance the performance of digital public relations in universities.
3. Designing and developing a composite index for measuring the electronic reputation of Saudi universities in alignment with international ranking criteria.

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**إطار عمل متكامل لتطوير العلاقات العامة الرقمية وإدارة السمعة عبر الإنترنت في الجامعات السعودية:
أدلة من ممارسات الجامعات الدولي
عثمان بكر قزاز
أستاذ مشارك بقسم البحوث الإدارية والإنسانية بجامعة أم القرى
مكة - المملكة العربية السعودية**

obgazzaz@uqu.edu.sa

ملخـص

- الأهداف:** هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تطوير إطار عمل متكامل للعلاقات العامة الرقمية وإدارة السمعة الإلكترونية، مصمم خصيصاً للجامعات السعودية، وذلك من خلال تحليل ممارسات وتجارب الجامعات العالمية الرائدة واستخلاص الأدلة منها.
- المنهجية والأدوات:** اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي لتحقيق أهدافها، واستخدمت استبياناً كأداة لجمع البيانات. وتم تطوير أداتين بحثيتين متكاملتين:
- تحليل SWOT: لتشخيص الوضع الراهن للعلاقات العامة الرقمية في الجامعات السعودية من خلال تحديد نقاط القوة والضعف والفرص والتهديدات.
 - أسلوب دلفي: لاستكشاف آراء عينة من الخبراء الدوليين عبر جولتين متتاليتين، بهدف تحديد المتطلبات الاستراتيجية والتكنولوجية والأخلاقية لإدارة السمعة استناداً إلى التجارب الدولية.
- النتائج:** كشف تحليل SWOT عن وجود بنية تحتية رقمية قوية ودعم قيادي قوي (نقاط قوة)، في مقابل وجود ثغرات في حوكمة الأداء الرقمي وأنماط محتوى متكررة. أشارت نتائج دراسة دلفي إلى إجماع قوي بين الخبراء (بأوزان نسبية تتجاوز 95%) حول ضرورة تبسيط المحتوى، وتفعيل مؤشرات الثقة الرقمية، وتوظيف الذكاء الاصطناعي في الرصد الاستباقي للأزمات. كما أظهرت النتائج أن إدارة السمعة في الجامعات الدولية تعتمد على

تخصيص المحتوى بما يتناسب مع كل منصة، وعلى الشفافية التامة في معالجة القضايا الحساسة.
الخلاصة: بناءً على هذه النتائج، تم تطوير إطار عمل متكامل يتألف من أربعة أبعاد رئيسية: الحوكمة الرقمية والأخلاقيات، وهندسة المحتوى والتأثير فيه، والتمكين التكنولوجي والذكاء الاصطناعي، وقياس الأثر والتحسين المستمر.
الكلمات الدالة: العلاقات العامة الرقمية، السمعة على الإنترنت، الجامعات السعودية.