

The relational–functional foundation of public relations as a tool for building the corporate image

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Abstract---This research examines the mechanism of public relations as a function that contributes to the construction of the corporate image and the consolidation of the institution's standing among its various publics. Its role is no longer confined to the transmission of information or the management of communication; instead, it has become a strategic activity based on establishing an integrated system of functional relationships through which trust and credibility are reinforced. This foundation is grounded in the principle that the corporate image is shaped through continuous, balanced interaction between the institution and its communicative environment, which necessitates adopting modern approaches that focus on relationship management rather than merely on message management. Within this framework, public relations works to develop a network of reciprocal links through planning, research, and two-way communication mechanisms, thereby enabling the creation of mutual understanding of the institution's identity, values, and performance. This relational dynamic constitutes the cornerstone of contemporary public relations functions, particularly in light of developments occurring within competitive environments characterised by digital transformation and heightened public sensitivity towards organisational conduct. This study aims to explore the relational–functional foundation of public relations from an analytical perspective to understand how organised communicative practices contribute to the formation and enhancement of corporate image by strengthening ties with the public and transforming communication into added value that generates long-term trust and frames the institution's identity within the public consciousness.

Keywords---public relations, institution, corporate image.

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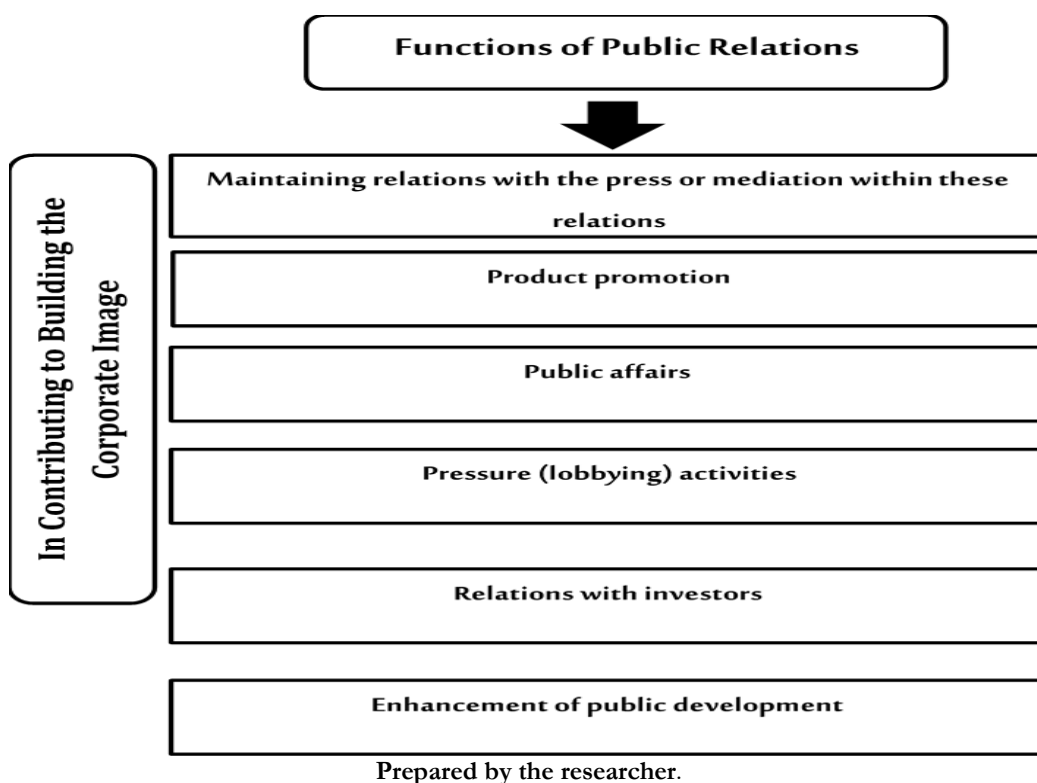
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First, the Functions of Public Relations in Shaping the Corporate Image:

Public relations is an important tool for promotion and communication, although it is used less frequently than other media. Nevertheless, it has considerable potential to increase public awareness, build product preferences, and reposition and sustain products in the market. The main tools of public relations include publications, presentations, news, speeches, public service activities, written or audiovisual materials, means of building corporate identity, and telephone services. Planning public relations activities also involves defining public relations objectives, selecting appropriate messages and the means to convey them, and evaluating outcomes.¹

Publicite). Public relations may appear as a specialised profession that provides diverse services to its organisational clients in their interaction with internal and external publics. However, in reality, the substance of public relations should be based on a balance between organisations and their publics. It serves the public just as it serves the organisations whose interests are linked to it. The essence of its capacity as a specialised profession lies in its ability to function effectively within this intermediate sphere between organisations and their publics.² In this context, public relations activities are considered a principal mass promotional tool, as they work to build good relationships with different categories of the public, obtain positive media representations, create an image of the institution in the public, and exercise prudent management of the adverse effects of rumours, narratives, or unfavourable events that may harm the company. Public relations may also play a partial or comprehensive role in any of the functions illustrated in the following diagram:



¹ Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center, and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2

² Muhammad Muhammad Al-Badi, *Ilm al-Alaqa al-Amma: Ila Ayna?* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 2016), 85.

- **Maintaining relations with the press or mediating such relations:** creating and disseminating valuable information that is deemed newsworthy to attract attention to a person, product, or service.
 - **Product promotion:** the use of public communication tools to disseminate a company's products.
 - **Public affairs for business:** building and strengthening relationships with the local or national community.
 - **Pressure (lobbying) activities:** establishing and maintaining relationships with legislators and government officials to influence legislation and regulations.
 - **Relations with investors:** maintaining strong relationships with shareholders and members of the financial community who are concerned with the organisation's performance.
 - **Enhancement of public development:** establishing relationships with donors or members of nonprofit organisations to obtain financial support or assistance in the form of voluntary work.
- Public relations activities are used to promote a wide range of entities, including products, individuals, places, ideas, activities, organisations, and even states. Companies rely on public relations to build positive relationships with customers, investors, the media, and the local communities in which they operate.³

Public relations can also exert significant influence on public opinion at a much lower cost than commercial advertising does, provided that the institution can offer information that is sufficiently interesting to be disseminated through various media outlets, thereby producing an effect similar to paid promotion. The outcomes of prudent public relations management can sometimes be remarkable.

Second: Principal Tools of Public Relations:

Public relations practitioners employ specialised tools, among which the news is regarded as a powerful instrument. Professionals endeavour to identify or even create positive news about the company, its products, or, at times, its personnel. News topics may emerge naturally in some instances, whereas in others, public relations specialists may propose events or activities to generate such news. Public speeches may also increase institutions' media coverage. It has become common for senior corporate executives to respond to journalists' questions or speak at conferences and meetings, thereby enhancing the company's image. Other tools include special events such as press conferences, journalists' visits to company sites, inauguration ceremonies and light shows, multimedia presentations, and events involving celebrities or educational programmes aimed at attracting the interest of target audiences.

Mobile marketing through promotional tours that bring the brand directly to consumers is also considered an effective way to build personal relationships with targeted customers.

The preparation of written materials, such as annual reports, brochures, articles, press releases, and company-published magazines, is another tool that public relations specialists use to influence target markets. Audiovisual materials, such as films, presentations, and compact discs, are likewise employed as communication tools. Corporate identity materials can help create a company identity that is easily recognizable to the public, such as logos, letterheads, brochures, standardised forms, business cards, buildings, uniforms, and company vehicles, all of which become marketing tools when they are attractive, distinctive, and memorable. Companies may also gain public sympathy through financial and voluntary contributions to public service activities. The company's website can also serve as an effective means of maintaining public relations, as the public can access it to obtain information or participate in recreational activities. Websites also represent ideal tools for crisis management.

In general, the roles of public relations are diverse, ranging from strategic communication to building a corporate image and reputation, crisis and emergency management, social responsibility, and the representation of the institution in the best possible manner.

Third, the Use of Public Relations in Enhancing the Positive Image of the Institution:

As with other promotional tools, management must analyse when and how public relations should be used to promote a product. This includes defining the objectives of public relations activities, selecting

³ Anne Gregory, *Planificarea si Managementul Campaniilor de Relatii Publice* (Iasi: Editura Polirom, 2009), 154.

appropriate messages and suitable means for conveying them, implementing a public relations plan, and evaluating the results. Public relations activities must also be harmonised with all other promotional efforts as part of an integrated marketing communication strategy.

Public relations comprises a variety of programmes aimed at enhancing or protecting the image of a company or its products in the market, and its impact depends on its distinctive characteristics:

- **A high level of credibility:** news and reports appear more credible than commercial advertisements.
- **The ability to reach the audience:** public relations can reach potential customers who may avoid sales representatives and advertisements.
- **The ability to present:** public relations, such as advertising, can provide a presentation of the company or the product.

Public relations activities may contribute to the achievement of the following tasks:

- Assisting in the launch of new products in the market.
- Assisting in the repositioning of products that have reached the maturity stage.
- Increasing interest in a particular product category.
- Influencing specific targeted groups.
- Defending products that face problems from the public.
- Building a positive image of the institution that strengthens its products.⁴

Fourth: Methods for Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Relations:

Among the most important key decisions in public relations are the following:

- **Defining marketing objectives:** public relations can contribute to achieving objectives such as informing the public, enhancing credibility, motivating the sales force and distributors, and maintaining low promotional costs.
- **Selecting public relations messages and media:** At this stage, the specialist identifies or prepares stimulating news about the product.
- **Implementing the public relations plan.**
- **Evaluating the results:** the contribution of public relations is difficult to measure because other promotional tools are used simultaneously. If public relations is used before other tools are used, its contribution can be more easily evaluated.

The principal objective of public relations activity is to create a climate of trust among a large segment of the public towards the company and its ability to meet the needs and requirements of different categories of consumers and users. This type of activity is characterised by an increasing focus on strengthening relationships with individuals and legal entities, seeking to inspire trust and mutual understanding, addressing public opinion through different audience segments, adopting a dual-direction orientation toward the public and from the public, or attempting to gain the sympathy or attachment of potential consumers.

There are an unlimited number of events, economic, scientific, cultural, and sporting, that a company can create and utilise to its advantage to highlight its offerings or to enhance its image. It should be added that public relations activity, through specific forms and techniques, contributes to the achievement of the company's various objectives, which may include strengthening consumers' trust in the company's offerings; launching new products in the market; repositioning and relaunching products in the market; creating or maintaining consumers' or users' interest in a particular category of products or services; reinforcing the company's position in different markets; expanding the power of advertising and the various forms of promotion; informing consumers of the increased possibilities of using its products or services; adding advertising messages; informing, influencing, and attracting opinion leaders; strengthening sales promotion campaigns; shaping the corporate image; enhancing the company's standing and improving its presentation through attracting sponsors for promotional

⁴ Ioana Olariu, "The Use of Public Relations in Projecting an Organisation's Positive Image," *Studies and Scientific Studies: Economics Edition*, no. 25 (2017): 99–104, <http://sceco.ub.ro>

activities; differentiating the company's offerings from those of competitors; and stimulating demand for goods and services.⁵

Regardless of the means and techniques employed, public relations activity must be linked to the other promotional variables and integrated within a unified programme guided by a comprehensive vision. Moreover, the efficiency of public relations activities strongly depends on the quality of the company's overall operations. The most important of these methods is as follows:

- **Number of media exposures:** the easiest method for measuring the effectiveness of public relations activities.
- **Increase in awareness/knowledge/change in attitudes:** studying changes in consumers' awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards the product.
- **Contribution to sales and profits:** The impact on sales and profits is considered the most satisfactory indicator if it can be measured.

Fifth: Planning and Managing Public Relations Activities

– Public relations play a vital role in the strategic planning of organisations. Public relations consultants provide advice on establishing organisational principles, formulating strategies to achieve objectives, and monitoring the organisation's environment. The public relations department must define its objectives and its specific communication objectives, which may be linked to the organisation's plans. Even in the absence of clearly defined plans, the public relations department must have a general communication plan suited to the organisation's annual activities, in addition to a crisis management plan.⁶

In public relations, there are specific types of relationships that focus on building and maintaining ties with various stakeholders.

Public Relations with Media:

This function aims to build strong relationships with the media and to identify entities that may be interested in the organisation's stories or news. The term "public relations" is often associated with publicity in many people's minds, underscoring the importance of this media dimension, as organisations initiate publicity campaigns and provide the media with appropriate information. A successful relationship between a public relations officer and media editors depends on the officer's reputation for honesty, accuracy, and professionalism. If this reputation is damaged or lost, the public relations officer loses the ability to serve as an effective bridge between the company and the media.

Employee Relations:

This focuses on effective communication with employees and the transmission of important information to them. This function falls within the scope of both public relations and human resources management, and such programmes are often referred to as "internal marketing."

Financial Relations

This includes all communication efforts directed at the financial community, such as issuing press releases to trade publications, holding meetings with investors and financial analysts, and preparing the annual reports required by the government from companies listed on the stock exchange.

Corporate Relations:

This focuses on enhancing the organisation's image and reputation. The objective here is to persuade the public to view the company positively. According to the public relations expert Fraser Seitel, "Building a positive image for a company takes a long time, but a single mistake may lead to the distortion of the company's reputation in the eyes of the public." The aim of reputation management in corporate relations programmes is to strengthen stakeholders' trust in the organisation. Since corporate reputation is based on perceptions, it is built through actions rather than through advertising.

Public Affairs:

⁵ Ioana Olariu, "The Use of Public Relations in Projecting an Organisation's Positive Image," *Studies and Scientific Studies: Economics Edition*, no. 25 (2017): 99–104, <http://sceco.ub.ro>

⁶ Ioana Olariu, *ibid.*, 104.

This focuses on communication with governments and the public on issues related to regulations and government policies. This function is also known as "issues management." In addition to government relations, public affairs programmes monitor public opinion on issues of concern to the organisation and develop programmes to communicate with the public on these issues.⁷

Sixth: Most Important Public Relations Practices

The social dimension

According to Friedman (1970), the sole social responsibility of companies is to maximise profits. Friedman maintains that fulfilling this economic task contributes to meeting society's needs, in contrast to the roles that governments, educational institutions, and nonprofit organisations must play in promoting social welfare.

Following the publication of Friedman's thesis, researchers began developing a theoretical framework for corporate social responsibility in the late 1970s. Carroll (1979) proposed one of the most prominent models, which remains widely accepted. Carroll's model comprises the company's economic responsibilities (profit generation), legal responsibilities (compliance with local and international laws), ethical responsibilities (meeting unwritten social expectations), and discretionary responsibilities (philanthropic initiatives and activities that society regards as desirable).

Ethical and public obligations

Ethical and public obligations reflect the organisation's fundamental values and are embedded in its vision, strategic objectives, and corporate culture. These obligations must be comprehensive, encompassing legal, economic, and ethical dimensions, as well as the rights of citizenship.

When an organisation lacks commitment to ethical standards due to excessive focus on short-term profits, its reputation may be damaged. This may occur for two reasons: first, as consumers become more aware, they may turn away from companies perceived as selfish; second, other companies within the supply chain may seek partners who are more committed to ethical standards.

Legal Issues

Corporate social responsibility is not a concern only for companies; it is also significant to governments, particularly in welfare states and developing countries. Corporate social responsibility can help governments achieve their social and political objectives. Self-regulation is combined with society's interests, strengthening argument-based decision-making rather than those based on economic or political power.

The Economic Dimension

According to Gray (1996), a company's economic responsibility lies in generating profits for shareholders by providing high-quality products at reasonable prices to customers. This concept has been expanded to define seven principal economic responsibilities:

- Satisfying customers by providing goods and services of genuine value.
- Achieving a fair return on the investments made by shareholders.⁸
- Creating new wealth that can benefit nonprofit institutions that hold shares in public companies.
- Assisting people experiencing poverty through raising wages and creating new employment opportunities.
- Reducing feelings of envy by promoting social mobility and giving individuals a sense that their economic conditions are capable of improvement.
- Encouraging innovation
- Diversifying the economic interests of citizens to avoid the dominance of the majority.

In general, applying the definition of a strategic issue reveals that companies face a variety of issues that need to be identified and assessed in both internal and external environments, as economic issues are

⁷ Mark Neal and John Morgan, "The Professionalisation of Everyone? A Comparative Study of the Development of the Professions in the United Kingdom and Germany," *European Sociological Review* 16, no. 1 (2000): 9–26.

⁸ Gildine Gatwiri Karani, *The Role of Public Relations in Enhancing Institutional Image: A Case Study of the Ministry of Lands* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, November 2012), 65–78.

only one of these. Therefore, treating social issues as strategic ones is crucial for fully integrating social responsibility into corporate strategy, as strategy is about identifying, evaluating, and responding effectively to them.

Discretionary Leadership

The concept of discretionary leadership emerged from research conducted by the Tavistock Institute in London, which revealed that managerial work is significantly influenced by hierarchical position within the organisation, particularly in the choices involved in exercising discretionary authority in leadership roles.

"Discretionary elements" refer to the choices the role holder must make to define the form and identity of his or her role and, consequently, to determine the shape of the part of the organisation as a whole for which he or she is responsible. For example, a human resources manager may need to develop a clear understanding of the organisation's size, the investment required for production and research and development, the revenue potential of distribution channels, and appropriate financial performance measures such as margins and profit. With this comprehensive business vision, he or she can determine how to develop the ability of human resources to support other functions.

These choices may be influenced by operational or strategic issues or by anticipated future concerns. They may also be driven by emotional experiences such as feelings of vulnerability or anger or even "difficult-to-justify" feelings of an inability to adapt. Even if the cognitive and emotional capacities of senior managers are substantial, conclusions regarding the organisation's shape, size, and direction will remain similar, thereby shaping the configuration of each role's responsibilities.

Seventh: The Relationship between Social Responsibility and Corporate Image:

Institutions need to understand the relationship between economic performance and the assumption of social responsibility to maintain a positive corporate image that enhances customer trust and admiration. Numerous international studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between corporate social responsibility practices and corporate image, as reflected in customers' responses.⁹

The corporate image held by stakeholders affects their willingness to provide or withhold support. If customers form a negative impression of the institution or its products, its sales and profits will inevitably decline. Government regulatory agencies, another important group of stakeholders, possess discretionary authority in how laws are interpreted and applied. If they hold a positive image of the company, they are likely to be less stringent in monitoring it (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Although the term "corporations" is usually associated with large multinational companies, all businesses can adopt social responsibility practices. The voluntary sector can also employ the concept of social responsibility to achieve its objectives. If companies adopt policies that address issues of equality and demonstrate their commercial success, this will benefit both business and equality (Berens et al., 2005).

Recent studies have shown that the relationship between social responsibility and ethical consumption is not always direct or clear. Numerous factors influence the translation of social responsibility activities into consumers' purchasing decisions, including trade-offs between price and quality, brand dominance, product quality, and consumers' personal support for social responsibility (Mohr et al., 2001; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Nevertheless, social responsibility remains a fundamental component of reputation management for many companies. Firms are more exposed to public scrutiny and criticism than they were in the past, increasing pressure to integrate social responsibility into their values and operations rather than treating it merely as a public relations tool. Addressing issues such as transparency, human rights, and supply chain requirements from a corporate image perspective can identify additional positive impacts of social responsibility.¹⁰

⁹ Gildine Gatwiri Karani, *The Role of Public Relations in Enhancing Institutional Image: A Case Study of the Ministry of Lands* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, November 2012), 65–78.

¹⁰ Gildine Gatwiri Karani, *The Role of Public Relations in Enhancing Institutional Image: A Case Study of the Ministry of Lands* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, November 2012), 65–78.

Eighth: Means and Tools Adopted by Public Relations

As previously discussed, the selection and effective utilisation of the communicative and mass media available to the institution are of paramount importance in building, improving, and renewing the institution's mental image among its publics.

Numerous traditional, modern, and digital communication channels support and enhance corporate image. Among the traditional means of communication that may be relied upon are the following:

- *- **Printed media**, including newsletters, brochures, and volumes, as well as periodic and annual reports, direct mail, publications, releases, and press interviews, and various printed means that enhance the morale of both internal and external publics.

- *- **Visual media**, including photographs, films, television, and television interviews.

- *- **Exhibitions** in their various forms.

- *- **Personal communications**.¹¹

The institution must also create special events to activate its relationships with the general public and highlight its responsibility to society. Event-based communication contributes to improving corporate image through special events, such as receptions organised for members of the press, exhibitions, the organisation of visits and the provision of facilities, the holding of celebrations on public or private occasions, the organisation of competitions, the sponsorship of guest relations, the presentation of commemorative gifts, and the production of films about the institution, in addition to other visual means such as slides and video recordings.¹²

In summary, the mass media play a central role in shaping the images imprinted in their audiences' minds, as they constitute the window through which publics look out upon the world and the events that occur within it. They are the natural extension of our eyes and ears, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, as these media greatly magnify such images and impress them powerfully upon the mind.¹³

Technology has introduced new media, such as the internet, which is now used extensively in various communicative activities of the institution, particularly in building its mental image. "The internet's capacity to make data and information available is very great, in addition to the ease of communication through this network at the lowest costs and in the shortest possible time. The internet has provided communication tools and techniques that have become accessible to everyone as long as a computer is available. Any individual or institution can create a website on the internet; use electronic mail and instant messaging; download images and video clips; and disseminate everything related to the institution, in addition to communicating with related individuals, organisations, and institutions worldwide. The internet is simply a network of interconnected computers." The most important of these uses can be outlined as follows:

- *-The organisation's website on the Worldwide Web represents a fundamental and vital tool for communicating with the institution's public and with the external world in general and reflects a positive image of the institution. Technical aspects must be taken into consideration in the website's design, and all information about the organisation, its various activities, and related daily events should be published regularly with continuous updates.

- *-Using online databases to obtain information, data, and news; to keep abreast of developments in various fields; and to make use of these in the preparation of the organisation's bulletins, brochures, and publications in general.

¹¹ Shahd Muhammad Mahmud Al-Namir, "The Role of Advertising in Improving the Mental Image among the External Public: An Analytical Descriptive Study Applied to the Tax Authority of Khartoum State (2018–2020)" (Master's thesis, Faculty of Media and Communication, Department of Media, University of Gezira, 2021), 95.

¹² Khuzaym Salim Al-Khalidi, "Al-Alaqat al-Amma fi al-Muassasa al-Haditha: A Modern Perspective," *Journal of Middle East University for Graduate Studies* (Jordan, n.d.), 8.

¹³ Ben Issa al-Shaykh, "Bina al-Sura al-Dhihniyya fi Wasail al-Ilam," *Majallat Buhuth wa-Dirasat fi al-Midiya al-Jadida* 1, no. 4 (2020): 23.

*-Using electronic mail (E-mail) as a means of personal internal communication among members of the institution and as a means of communication between the institution's management and its targeted external public.

*-Conducting research on the internet through online interviews.

*-Providing e-mail services and voting services on the institution's website, discussion groups in forums, written communication through chat, and telephone communication via the internet at minimal cost.

*-Identifying the institution's image through what is published about it by the media, competitors, users, and others on the internet.¹⁴

Notably, the success of institutions today has become rooted in their presence across all digital platforms, websites, and social media networks that now permeate our societies, whether we desire it or not. The presence of these platforms has thus become obligatory for institutions to preserve their position.

Institutions use social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Viadeo), which serve as interactive platforms where presence has become indispensable for communicating with the public and presenting services and content. Communication with the public adds value to the organisation by building and managing its image through content that guides the institution's services to different segments of society. Social media networks have become necessary for building a corporate image, as they fulfil a range of functions, summarised as follows:

*-Disseminating the institution's news.

*-Introducing the institution's website.

*-Building and maintaining the institution's image.

*-Keeping pace with technological development and reaching new segments of society.

*-Explaining the nature of the products and services offered by the institution and introducing them to the public.

*-Conducting public opinion surveys, identifying public views regarding the institution and its products, and receiving suggestions and complaints to develop its strategies.

*-Correcting misconceptions about the institution.¹⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has become clear that the public relations function constitutes a fundamental pillar in the conduct of operations at the institutional level, in building the corporate image and shaping public perception of it through its central roles in communication management, relationship coordination, and trust enhancement. The effectiveness of public relations depends on the use of diverse tools, including corporate media and digital communication, as well as the organisation of events and the production of targeted communicative content, thereby enabling the formation of a positive and coherent mental image among different audience segments. The applications of public relations in enhancing the institution's positive image further highlight its role in projecting identity, reinforcing reputation, and managing crises in a professional manner that safeguards the institution's standing within its environment. By measuring the effectiveness of public relations practices via quantitative and qualitative indicators, planning and management processes become more precise and realistic, enabling the development of strategies and improvements in communicative performance. Professional and ethical responsibility remains a fundamental element in every communicative practice, as it enhances the institution's credibility and the sustainability of its relationships. Thus, the functions, means, and

¹⁴ Abd al-Razzaq Dilmī, *Al-Alaqa al-Amma wa-Idarat al-Aẓmat* (Amman: Al-Yazuri Publishing, 2019), 77.

¹⁵ Jamila Qadim, "Al-Alaqa al-Amma al-Raqmiyya wa-Sinaat al-Sura al-Dhihniyya lil-Munazzamat al-Haditha: An Analytical Reading in the Virtual Environment," *Majallat al-Ilam wa-l-Mujtamaa* 6, no. 1 (June 2016): 183.

practices of public relations integrate to form a practical relational–functional framework that renders public relations a strategic tool in building a strong, balanced, and sustainable corporate image.

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