Towards Examining the Effects of Cultural and Contextual Factors on Ethical Signaling in Digital Public Relations (PR)

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Abstract-

The transition of Public Relations (PR) practices from conventional to digital resources can be observed. Despite these platforms catering to the primary needs of Communication, they also necessitate a need for ethical practices to avail maximum benefit from them. This research also focused on the effect of cultural and contextual factors on how ethical behavior is considered in digital public relations practices in Kuwait. Data was gathered from 267 Public Relations (PR) practitioners through Qualitrics.com and analyzed using Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Results revealed that Cultural Factors significantly affect Digital Signaling in Public Relations Practices, indicating respondents practice communication relying on their perceptions about Public Relations (PR) practices, privacy disclosure, and the guidelines provided by their organizations. Further, the effect of Contextual Factors also remained significant, showing the impact of organizational social media policy, guidelines, and training on the Public Relations (PR) practices among them. Besides, ethical approaches regarding socially responsible behavior, client-centred approaches, and organizational monitoring of PR practices also remained prominent. It is concluded that digital signaling holds a growing significance in Public Relations practices. It is important to skillfully navigate the factors affecting these practices to uphold ethical standards and ensure meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Hence, skillfully cultivating cultural and contextual facets remains crucial for sustaining ethics and driving effective stakeholder involvement as the digital sphere evolves within contemporary Public Relations.

Keywords: public relations, digital signaling, contextual factors, organizational factors

1. Introduction

Public Relations has shown a strong ability to adapt and transform in response to cater for Communication over the past years, tailoring its practices to meet the growing needs of its audience (Al Olaimat et al., 2022). The advent of technology has substantially impacted Public Relations (PR) operations and their interactions within society. Large and smaller organizations have adopted digital Public Relations, depending extensively on online platforms. According to (Hagelstein et al., 2021), the digital revolution always introduces new technologies that significantly influence personal and public Communication. Over recent years, the ascent of social networking platforms and public wikis has been observed, along with the beginning of profiling algorithms, big-data analytics, and social bots. Both organizational public relations departments and PR agencies have started incorporating and using these technologies in everyday functions. These nascent communication tools and methods improve the reach and effectiveness of organizational content. This encompasses using websites' credibility and microblogs' quick engagement. As a result, Public Relations practitioners now necessitate a dynamic and constantly evolving digital appearance to excel in their expertise (Permatasari et al., 2021). As (Theaker, 2013) stated, there has been a significant shift in the expansion of Public Relations from the conventional to the digital era. This change is evident in the functions, roles, and chores that define various eras, from PR 1.0 to PR 4.0. As a result, the use of social media for Public Relations (PR)practices has acquired much attention from scholars. This use is considered a robust part of strategic Public Relations (PR), emphasizing ethical implications for the practitioners. Despite the potential advantages of emerging digital platforms, scholars in the field of public relations have emphasized the ethical obligations of these new communication tools and approaches,

especially their moral intricacies. Scholars like (German & Drushel, 2011) and (Phillips & Young, 2009) were the first to highlight the digitalization and the expansion of social media, intensifying existing ethical concerns and giving rise to ethical issues. Similarly, (Bachmann, 2019) argued that the use of digital technologies in public relations does not necessarily cultivate mutually advantageous relationships; rather, it may lead to 'developing moral apathy and moral blindness' while affecting public opinion (pp. 327–328)

Similarly, existing literature highlights the impacts and importance of practitioners' perceptions, attitudes, and other personal factors affecting Public Relations practices in the digital spaces. For instance, (Sebastião et al., 2017) conducted a comparative analysis of the impacts of cultural factors on Public Relations practices in Brazil and Portugal. Results showed some minor differences based on the respondents' demographics, yet their perceptions about ethical practices remained similar, indicating the importance of cultural factors as potentially affecting professional conduct. On the other hand, contextual factors also remain prominent in affecting the attitudes of Public Relations practitioners, affecting their perceptions about ethical conduct in professional arenas. In a similar context, existing studies also witnessed contextual factors' profound impact on ethical behavior in digital Public Relations practices. As (Han et al., 2013) (pp. 553-553) stated, ethical compliance within an organization is complex and distinct from general scenarios. Decision-makers in organizational settings deal with multiple factors, encompassing corporate social responsibility and the impacts of stakeholders' interests. This includes handling conflicts of interest among diverse stakeholders like clients, employees, shareholders, and competitors. Also, organizations inevitably face ethical dilemmas, not just in reconciling their designated duties and obligations to different stakeholders amidst conflicts of interest but also in negating the interests of their organization against their personal interests. There is a growing need for obligating ethical practices in the contemporary landscape of evolving persuasive communication strategies. These include native advertising, the confluence of paid practices through digital media, protecting client privacy, and fighting digital promotion fraud (Meng, 2022).

Research Objectives

This research examines the effect of cultural and contextual factors on how ethical behavior is considered in digital public relations practices. Specifically, it aims to comprehend how these factors affect social identity signalling and how they contribute to stakeholder perceptions of ethical conduct. Notably, several studies examine cultural impacts (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Kuşay, 2019) and contextual practices (Criado et al., 2017; Tong, 2022), yet these studies focused on other different geographical regions. Secondly, most of these studies examined these impacts under different theories, primarily the Dialogic Theory of Communication (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Tong, 2022), indicating a vital theoretical gap. Based on the relevant gaps, this research is based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, scrutinizing the impact of cultural and contextual factors in the Kuwait-based Public Relations practices. Thus, this research addressed the following research question.

RQ1. How do Cultural and Contextual Factors Affect Ethical Signaling in Digital Public Relations (PR)?

Study Significance

This research is significant in both academic and practical realms. By examining the complex interplay of cultural and contextual factors on ethical behavior in digital public relations within Kuwait, it offers an in-depth understanding of the dynamics shaping modern communication practices. This is especially important in an era where the digital landscape is rapidly developing, and ethical considerations are important. This study's focus on the Kuwait provides specific insights that can be directly applied in this distinct cultural and contextual milieu, filling a critical empirical gap in existing research. Consequently, this research provides practitioners, organizations, and scholars with tailored knowledge to steer ethical dilemmas and construct communication strategies that resonate effectively with stakeholders in the relevant cultural context. Also, applying Technological Determinism as the theoretical framework significantly improves studying ethical behavior in digital public relations. This transition from the principal use of the Dialogic Theory of Communication introduces a fresh perspective and new avenues for inquiry. It enables a deeper investigation of how cultural dimensions impact ethical considerations, possibly revealing insights that may have yet to be readily noticeable under previous theoretical approaches.

Technological Determinism Theory

The Technology Determinism Theory supports the conceptualization of current research. Notably, the relevant theory proposes digital technology as an autonomous force, indicating its adoption as affecting society (D. S. Kang & Mastin, 2008). Based on these premises, current research is supported as it presents a lens to comprehend the intricate relationship between culture and technology in digital signalling. This theory argues that technological progress can significantly shape norms, behaviours, and cultural practices. In the context of digital signalling in Public Relations, this implies that the instruments, platforms, and mediums utilized for signalling ethical behaviour are not neutral; rather, they embody the cultural values and standards of the societies they arise from. This indicates how organizations share

their ethical perspectives in the digital sphere as they work within a technological ecosystem with cultural implications.

Further, Technological Determinism provides discernment concerning how digital platforms mediate the Communication of ethical values. Different digital platforms offer distinct characteristics, functionalities, and methods of interaction. These affordances impact the content of ethical signalling besides the style and structure of Communication.

Similarly, the Technology Determinism Theory emphasizes the globalizing influence of digital technology (Mardiana & Daniels, 2019). As digital platforms surpass geographical boundaries, they promote the dissemination of values on a global scale (Edafejirhaye, 2022). This means that organizations engaging in digital signalling must be conscious of the diverse audiences they are accessing, each with its cultural differences and interpretations. Also, the confluence of technologies in the digital space contributes to the blurring of cultural boundaries, forming a vigorous and evolving environment where ethical signalling happens (Aboagye Da-Costa et al., 2021). This dynamic nature calls for a flexible and adaptive approach to Public Relations practices that recognizes the complex relationship between culture and technology in the digital era. Thus, based on the theoretical discussion, the operationalization of the primary constructs is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions of Study Constructs

Construct	Definition	Source
Digital Public Relations	Digital Public Relations strategically manages and shares information through digital channels and platforms. It encompasses approaches that use technology and online Communication to engage with stakeholders, share messages, and maintain ethical standards. Digital Public Relations concerns the application of communication techniques in the digital landscape to build and strengthen relationships with different stakeholders. It uses online platforms and technologies to communicate messages, manage reputation, and steer ethical considerations.	(Permatasari et al., 2021; Verčič et al., 2015)
Ethical Signaling	Ethical signalling in digital public relations is the intentional and transparent Communication of an organization's commitment to ethical principles and patterns through digital channels. It involves communicating messages, actions, and initiatives that show an online commitment to ethical conduct, virtue, and social responsibility. Ethical signalling serves as a mechanism to build trust, credibility, and positive relationships with stakeholders. Ethical signalling in digital public relations refers to the strategic communication actions undertaken by organizations to transparently share their adherence to ethical principles, values, and practices in the digital realm. It involves the purposeful dissemination of messages, content, and actions that are a genuine commitment to moral conduct, integrity, and social responsibility within the online environment.	(Banks et al., 2023; Zerbini, 2017)
Cultural Factors	Cultural factors in digital public relations are the profoundly rooted beliefs, values, practices, and norms that shape the behavior and opinions of individuals within a distinct societal context. These factors greatly affect how ethical behavior is perceived and employed in digital PR efforts, including considerations regarding language, traditions, communication styles, and societal expectations that influence the efficacy of ethical messaging and social identity signalling in digital Public Relations. *Cultural factors* in digital public relations are the socio-cultural elements affecting the ethical considerations and communication strategies used in digital PR campaigns. These factors are based on a broad range of elements, including but not limited to language, customs, convictions, and societal norms. They are critical in shaping how stakeholders comprehend and assess ethical behavior in the digital space.	(Sanz & Crosbie, 2016; Siegert, 2007)
Contextual Factors	Contextual factors in digital public relations are the specific conditions and broader circumstances that cover and impact the practice of ethical behavior within the digital communication sphere. These facets go beyond cultural concerns, including legal frameworks, industry standards, technological advances, and organizational context. Contextual factors in digital public relations refer to the situational and environmental factors that shape the ethical decision-making procedure within the digital communication landscape. These include legal regulations, industry-specific policies, technological improvements, and organizational settings. They significantly affect how ethical behavior is practised and considered in digital PR practices.	(Perbawaningsih, 2008; Thurlow et al., 2017)

Cultural and Contextual Factors

According to (Sriramesh, 2006), Public Relations practices are deeply intertwined with promotional Communication associated with social, political, and economic changes. As a result, cultural beliefs are important in preparing and

employing Public Relations practices. The pervasive impact of neoliberal ideologies highlighting market-driven strategies, consumerism, and individualism has elevated the need to convince audiences towards what is perceived as the 'right' social, economic, and political choices. This surge in demand for Public Relations has led to the emergence of novel methods to connect consumers and producers. The recent expansion of Public Relations strategies is intricately linked to overarching societal shifts correlated with the digital, post-industrial, and globally connected era. According to Bauman, this epoch is characterized by a higher degree of fluidity and unpredictability compared to the late twentieth-century era (Aronczyk et al., 2017). Hence, this has engendered a more comprehensive and dynamic landscape upon which Public Relations practices unfold, accompanied by establishing Public Relations practices that are influenced by cultural norms and expectations (Bachmann, 2019). Throughout history, organizations have conventionally operated within hierarchical, bureaucratic systems, which provided them with relatively steady identities and public images. However, the advent of digitalization and globalization has cultivated a shift towards balanced, more flexible organizational standards, introducing an increased level of unpredictability in the global terrain. This transformation has brought fluidity to societal classes, customer features, and civic participation (Kiousis, 2011).

Consequently, Public Relations practices are now directed towards a more volatile audience, striving to cultivate a positive perception among their members. This dynamic has led organizations to constantly review and redefine their individualities, images, reputations, and labels to establish and sustain legitimacy. Compared to the more rigid structures of industrial bureaucracies, Public Relations practices are more communicative, performative, and emotionally deep. Notably, in today's digital Communication, organizations adopt tactics akin to celebrity promotion, engaging in promotional endeavours and theatricality to position themselves as the figurative nucleus of the scattered organization, seeking to present themselves as genuine and intimately connected (Kantola, 2014).

Similarly, (Macnamara, 2016) further witnessed how organizational factors, such as culture, regulations, structure, and communication systems, shape and impact Public Relations strategies and activities. For example, The organizational and regulatory environment substantially impacts communication strategies. Public Relations practitioners stay attuned to legal prerequisites when sensitive information needs to be revealed, ensuring compliance with relevant laws while preserving transparency. Under these regulatory principles, legal regulations and industry-specific rules shape how organizations engage with their audiences. This includes data protection laws, advertising standards, and industry-specific codes of conduct (Romenti et al., 2019). Public Relations practitioners can interpret and apply these regulations to ensure their communication efforts meet legal requirements.

Furthermore, the social media landscape has transformed Public Relations practices differently. This dynamic digital ecosystem provides Public Relations practitioners an exceptional platform for quick and widespread Communication with audiences. It allows organizations to share information, engage with stakeholders, and sustain their reputation. As a result, these organizations design and implement technological infrastructure to achieve their goals. According to (C. M. Kim, 2020), a strong technological foundation provides the tools and platforms required for Public Relations practitioners to implement their strategies, encompassing a broad array of resources (Allagui & Breslow, 2016), from website hosting and content management systems to analytics tools that measure the impact of Public Relations campaigns. Also, access to technology, including internet availability and device penetration, specifies the extent to which audiences can be accessed., leading to constant presence in the digital space, connectivity with the stakeholders, and better communicational outcomes.

Digital Signaling in PR Practices

Public relations experts and scholars have raised concerns regarding the effect of new and social media on the established norms and ethical values related to the field. In online and social media communication, the focus tends to lean more toward strategic goals than ethical considerations. Within the PR profession, ethical conduct is important (Holland et al., 2018). Competent Public Relations professionals serve as trustworthy advisors and strong advocates for their clients, holding a moral duty to promote trust and often considering the role of the moral compass within organizations. This dual responsibility extends to their clients and the wider public, stressing the significance of honesty and accuracy in Public Relations practice. Some proponents recognize that Public Relations practitioners should be mindful of maintaining social responsibility and obligation to serve their client's specific interests. Researchers have supported transparency as a standard practice within organizations (Kolic Stanic, 2019; Zhou & Xu, 2021). The way an organization is considered in terms of transparency has consistently been linked to promising results, including trust, progress, credibility, and a sense of accountability. With the growing importance of societal and professional movements to improve transparency in Public Relations, scholars greatly emphasize the significance of transparency in organizational communication practices. Besides, considering the organizational values in Public Relations practices also influences the communication practices, obligating the experts to follow the dominant coalition within an organization (J.-A. Kang & Berger, 2010). As a result, organizations strongly impact Public Relations practices in the digital space. (Parsons, 2016) argued that aligning organizational values is important for Public Relations professionals

in the digital space, as it establishes and supports the authenticity and credibility of an organization. When Public Relations efforts are consistent with the organization's values, it creates a sense of stakeholder trust. This trust is valuable in building positive relationships with the public, media, customers, and other critical stakeholders. Also, aligning organizational values serves as a strong tool for reputation management. When an organization's actions, messages, and policies are consistent with its stated values, it shows a genuine commitment to those principles. This consistency helps protect the organization from reputational threats and crises, as stakeholders like to give the benefit of the doubt to an organization they perceive as acting under its values (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014).

2. Research Methods

This study employed an online survey distributed through Qualtrics.com to address its primary research objective. The participants were individuals employed in Public Relations agencies within organizations (internal Public Relations) and (external Public Relations) in Kuwait. The survey link was distributed to Public Relations specialists across the Kuwait via email and LinkedIn. Respondents were selected through a random sampling method from the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), the Kuwait Public Relations Association (UAEPRA) (Kuwait Public Relations Association, 2022), and the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) (IPRA, 2023). Invitations to participate in the survey were first sent via email. Informed consent was first obtained from the study respondents. Besides, data confidentiality was ensured, and the respondents were notified that their participation would be voluntary. The online survey was operational from March 19, 2023, to October 20, 2023. A total of 267 responses were accumulated during this period. Later, the data was exported in MS Excel format for further analysis. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS and Smart-PLS to employ Partial Least Square- Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

Research Instrument

Table 2. Data Measurement Items and Sources

Constructs	Items	Sources
Cultural Factors	I take responsibility for communicating effectively with the clients.	(Boudreaux, 2005) (Trepte et al., 2017) (Deng et al., 2022)
	I design Public Relations campaigns based on my skills and expertise.	
	I maintain media contacts by using creative ideas.	
	I edit and format the communication material.	
	I believe in avoiding private disclosure of our clients.	
	I believe in disclosing the minimal details after obtaining permission from them.	
	I believe in data protection as a central privacy concern.	
	I believe that I am proficient in using digital tools for Public Relations practices.	
	I support the use of digital technology for Public Relations practices.	
	I believe that my organization is sufficiently digitalized.	
Contextual Factors	My organization provides written regulatory principles regarding communication practices.	(Ramirez, 2012) (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012) (Jabbouri et al., 2016)
	The organization guides us regarding what is necessary to share with the clients.	
	We must prefer more timely Communication for both external and internal Communication.	
	My organization has a broad social media policy.	
	My organization provides staff training to use social media for Communication.	
	My organization provides specific social media use-based guidelines.	
	My organization depends on digital platforms for the information flow.	
	My organization depends on digital resources for clients and stakeholders' Communication.	
Digital Signaling in PR Practices	My organization believes in dealing with ethical issues concerning Communication with clients and stakeholders.	(Toledano & Avidar, 2016)
	Public Relations practices are obligated to adopt socially responsible behavior.	
	As Public Relations practitioners, we take responsibility for the organizational ethical conduct for communication purposes.	(Gorenak & Ferjan, 2015)
	My organization obligates us to respect the clients and stakeholders.	
	Our organization prohibits immoral behaviour with the clients and stakeholders.	
	My Public Relations practices are client-focused.	
	My organization consistently monitors our communication practices.	

The study instrument was designed by adopting measurement items and scales employed in the existing studies (Elareshi et al., 2022; Habes et al., 2022). The first section of the questionnaire was based on demographic questions such as respondents' gender, age, educational level, and experience. Further, the questionnaire was divided into three subsequent sections regarding study constructs. Each construct was followed by relevant dimensions to examine their impacts on ethical signalling. Table 2 indicates the survey items and their sources. First, the Cultural Factors were divided into three dimensions: Cultural Communication Styles, Cultural Perspectives on Privacy and Data Protection, and Cultural Attitudes towards Technology. A total of ten questions were stated to measure the three dimensions of

Cultural Factors from the three distinct studies (Boudreaux, 2005; Trepte et al., 2017; Deng et al., 2022).

Contextual Factors, on the other hand, were also divided and measured in three dimensions, including Organizational Regulatory Environment, Social Media Landscape, and Technological Infrastructure and Access adopted from the studies by (Ramirez, 2012)(Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012) and (Jabbouri et al., 2016). Eight questions were adopted to measure the Contextual Factors in the current research study. Finally, the dependent variable, "Ethical Digital Signaling", was measured by adopting seven survey items from the studies by (Toledano & Avidar, 2016) and (Gorenak & Ferjan, 2015). The relevant construct was categorized into two dimensions: Transparency and Disclosure and Alignment with Organizational Values.

Data Normality

The normality of the data was assessed to ensure that the chosen methods were appropriate in the current research study (Shatskikh et al., 2016). The normal distribution, the Gaussian distribution, was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. The outcomes of the normality tests in this study are presented in Table 3. These results showed that the significance levels for Kolmogorov-Smirnov for each construct exceeded the threshold of >0.5. Additionally, the Shapiro-Wilk test also showed significant values greater than 0.5, suggesting that the data in this study followed a normal distribution(Habes, Elareshi, et al., 2023). Thus, it is found that the normal data distribution validates the application of parametric tests in the current research study.

Table 3. Data Normality Testing

Constructs	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		Shapiro-Wilk	
	Statistic	Sig.	Statistic	Sig.
Cultural Factors	.125	.637	.961	.535
Contextual Factors	.096	.932	.969	.273
Digital Signaling in PR Practices	.125	.199	.957	.901

Statistical Analysis and Findings

Table 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Construct Reliability

Constructs	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR	CA
Cultural Factors	CFR1	0.793			
	CFR2	0.774			
	CFR3	0.688			
	CFR4	0.630	0.645	0.800	0.706
	CFR5	0.537			
	CFR6	0.420			
	CFR7	0.532			
	CFR8	0.617			
	CFR9	0.536			
	CFR10	0.805			
Contextual Factors	CXR1	0.598			
	CXR2	0.331			
	CXR3	0.622	0.643	0.747	0.742
	CXR4	0.640			
	CXR5	0.633			
	CXR6	0.662			
	CXR7	0.103			
	CXR8	-0.036			
Digital Signaling in PR Practices	ESD1	0.765			
	ESD2	0.774			
	ESD3	0.688	0.700	0.921	0.891
	ESD4	0.793			
	ESD5	0.774			
	ESD6	0.688			
	ESD7	0.630			

This research examines the effects of two constructs, including cultural and contextual factors, thus employing a two-step approach commonly used in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), known as the "inner model and outer model assessment." Initially, the preliminary focus was assessing the inner model's validity and reliability, encompassing an

examination of the measurement tool (Ali et al., 2021; Habes et al., 2021). Following this, the study examined the effects of cultural and contextual factors on digital signalling. The first step involved analyzing the inner model's validity and reliability in this context. Convergent validity was analyzed to confirm the internal consistency among each construct's measurement items, as (Carlson, 2010) suggested. Also, discriminant validity was used to measure the extent to which the study constructs were distinct (uncorrelated), following the methodology suggested by (Shiu et al., 2011).

The findings of the convergent validity assessment are presented in Table 4. Notably, most of the Factor Loads for the measurement items surpassed the suggested threshold of >0.5 (Chin & Yao, 2014). Further, the Average Variance Extracted Values (AVE) exceeded the threshold of >0.5, indicating robust internal consistency across all items (Cultural Factors 0.645, Contextual Factors 0.643, and Digital Signaling in PR Practices 0.700). Further, the construct reliability was also assessed in the relevant study, indicating that all the Cronbach Alpha values (Cultural Factors 0.706, Contextual Factors 0.742, and Digital Signaling in PR Practices 0.801) and Composite Reliability value (Cultural Factors 0.800, Contextual Factors 0.747, and Ethical Signaling 0.921) as sufficiently surpassing the threshold value 0.7(Habes, Tahat, et al., 2023; Hatamleh et al., 2023; Tawafak et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this study evaluated the model fit after removing items with lower loading values (CFR5, CFR6, CFR7, CFR9, CXR1, CXR2, CXR7, CXR8, ESD3, and ESD7) as presented in Table 5. According to (Mérigot et al., 2010), assessing goodness of fit helps ascertain how closely the measurement model aligns with the expected model. The refined measurement model for this study is presented in Figure 1. After excluding items with lower loading values, the goodness of fit analysis indicated a Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR) value of 0.146, falling below the designated threshold of <0.80. The Non-Fit Index (NFI) was also reported at 0.931, within the range of 0 to 1. The Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI) remained at 1.844, exceeding the recommended threshold of >0.90. Also, the chi-square value was reported at 1.839, which remained under the suggested threshold of <3.00, indicating a good fit for the study. Table 5 represents the results of model fit in the current study.

Table 5. Results of Model Fit

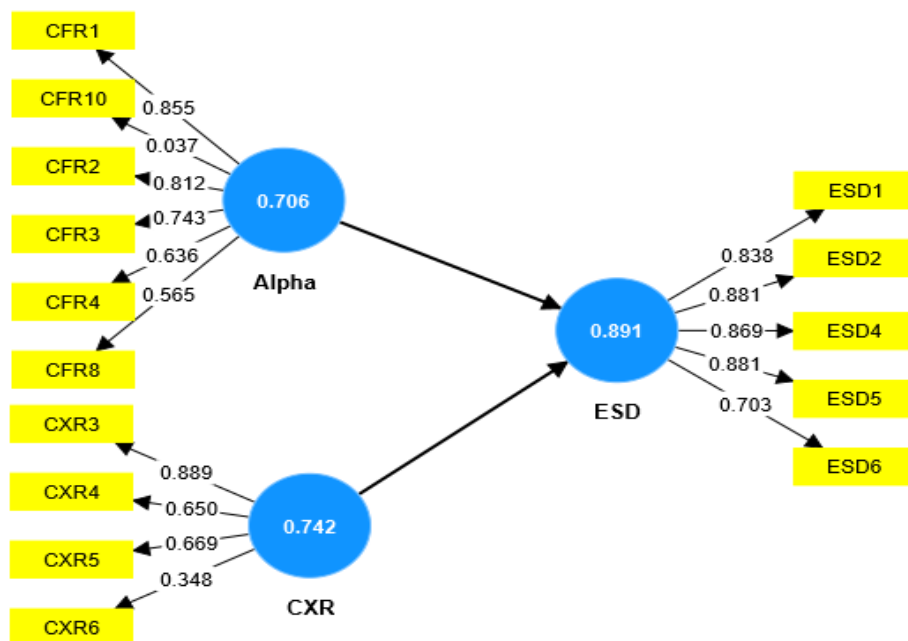|	Saturated model	Cut-off Value
SRMR	0.146	<0.85
TLI	1.844	>0.90
Chi-square	1.839	<3.0
NFI	0.931	b/w 0-1

Figure 1. Final Measurement Model

This study also conducted a multicollinearity analysis to examine potential correlations among the predictors. According to (J. H. Kim, 2019), multicollinearity in regression-based research occurs when two or more independent variables in a regression analysis are correlated, leading to difficulties in correctly evaluating each variable's contributions. Therefore, the researchers performed a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test. Table 6 outlines the results of

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) testing. The findings indicated that the VIF values for each predictor remained less than the designated threshold of 3.0 (ranging from 1.132 to 2.308).

Table 6. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Analysis

Constructs	VIF
CFR1	2.087
CFR2	1.745
CFR3	1.608
CFR4	1.398
CXR3	1.139
CXR4	1.786
CXR5	2.308
CXR6	1.698
CXR3	1.132
CXR4	1.786

The next step phase examined the measurement tool's discriminant validity through a two-step procedure using both the Fornell-Larcker scale and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) suggested by (Shiu et al., 2011). The results showed that the values associated with each construct are distinct, indicating the absence of a potential correlation between them. Also, the cumulative HTMT value remained below the prescribed threshold of <0.85, consistent with the suggestion by (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016), affirming discriminant validity among the constructs under study. A summary of the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio are provided in Tables 7a and 7b, respectively.

Table 7(a). Fornell Larcker Criterion

	Contextual Factors	Cultural Factors	Digital Signaling in PR Practices
Contextual Factors	0.667		
Cultural Factors	0.512	0.667	
Digital Signaling in PR Practices	0.441	0.964	0.837

Table 7(b). Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

Relationships	HTMT
Cultural Factors <-> Contextual Factors	0.604
Digital Signaling in PR Practices <-> Contextual Factors	0.378
Digital Signaling in PR Practices <-> Cultural Factors	1.115

Outer Model Assessment

Regarding the outer model assessment, first, the effect size of the independent variables (Cultural Factors and Contextual Factors) was tested. According to (Kraft, 2020), the effect size (f^2) is used to measure the strength of the independent variables in a regression-based study. It shows how much the dependent variable is predicted to change when the independent variable shifts by one unit, maintaining all other factors constant (Samartha & Kodikal, 2018). In this context, an effect size of 0.025 or below is considered small, 0.20 is considered moderate, and 0.40 or higher is ordered as large (Lorah, 2018). Consequently, the effect size indicating the influence of Contextual Factors on Digital Signaling in PR Practices is notably high at 1.055 (large). Meanwhile, the effect size of Cultural Factors on Digital Signaling in PR Practices is 11.044 (medium). These values indicate a strong impact of the independent variables on the dependent variables, as outlined in Table 8.

Table 8. Effect Size (f^2)

	f-square	Size
Contextual Factors -> Ethical Signaling	1.055	Large
Cultural Factors -> Ethical Signaling	11.044	Large

Furthermore, the path analysis was conducted to examine the preliminary research question probing the effects of cultural and contextual factors in ethical signalling in digital Public Relations (PR). First, the relevant analysis revealed a significant effect of Cultural Factors on Digital Signaling with a significance value of $p < 0.000$, beta coefficient value β 0.391 and t-statistics 11.731. Also, the effects of Contextual Factors on Digital Signaling remained significant with the

significance value *p*< 0.000, beta coefficient value *β* 1.063 and *t*-statistics 35.202. Furthermore, the path between Contextual Factors and Digital Signaling remained comparatively stronger (1.063) than between Cultural Factors and Digital Signaling. Table 9 represents the results of the path analysis.

Table 9. Hypotheses Testing

Relationships	Mean	STDEV	|O/STDEV|	β	P values	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Cultural Factors -> Digital Signaling in PR Practices	1.365	0.727	11.731	0.391	0.000	2.266	3.180
Contextual Factors -> Digital Signaling in PR Practices	0.361	0.761	35.202	1.063	0.000	1.128	1.262

Finally, according to the gathered data, the Importance Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) was conducted to examine the overall performance of the Cultural and Contextual Factors (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). Figure 2 shows the results of the Importance Performance Map Analysis (IPMA). Results revealed the performance of Cultural Factors (1.034) as comparatively better than the Contextual Factors (0.071).
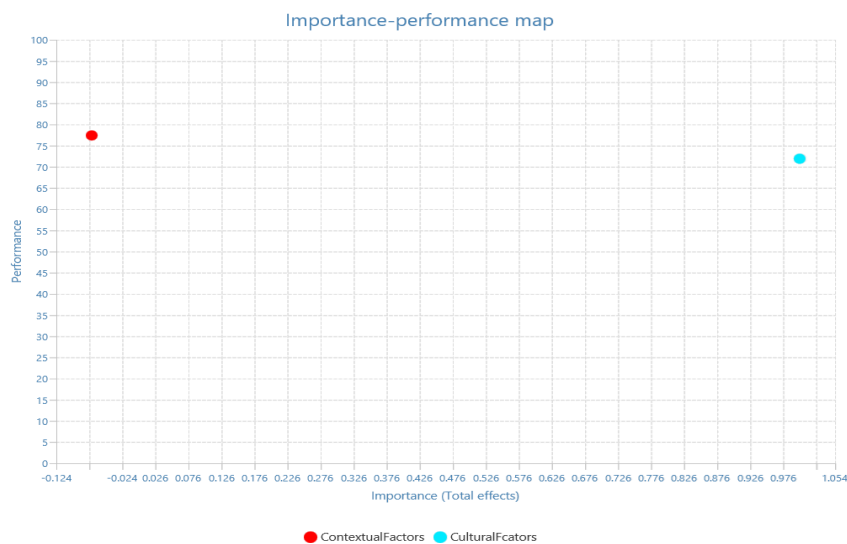

Figure 2. Importance of Performance Map Analysis

3. Discussion on Results

This research examined the impact of cultural and contextual factors on Digital Signaling in Public Relations in Kuwait. Theoretically supported by Technology Determinism Theory, the data gathered from 267 respondents was analyzed by the Partial Least Square- Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Overall, the results remained supportive, showing both cultural and contextual factors as significantly affecting ethical signalling. According to (Smith, 2020), digital signalling in public relations (PR) practices has experienced a transformative change with the birth of digital media platforms. It has helped organizations to engage with their audiences in real time, stimulating instant feedback and response. However, this prompt exchange of information raises crucial ethical considerations. As a result, authenticity and translucency become important in a digital signalling terrain, as misinformation can spread rapidly, potentially harming reputations and deteriorating trust.

Table 10. Descriptive of Study Data

Constructs	Mean	SD	VAR	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Cultural Factors	3.972	0.552	0.305	3.89	4.03
Contextual Factors	3.816	0.710	0.505	3.72	3.90
Ethical Signaling	3.937	0.727	0.529	3.84	4.02

Similarly, the respondents from this research indicated their general agreement about the role and impact of cultural factors, further leading to maintaining transparency and accountability in communicating with the clients (Table 10 summarises the descriptives in the current research study). According to them (respondents), they take responsibility for communicating effectively with the clients and designing Public Relations campaigns based on their skills and expertise.

Respondents also revealed that they maintain their media contact by using creative ideas, editing and formatting the communication material and avoiding disclosing the private information of their clients. As noted by (Sriramesh, 2012), privacy concerns are foremost for Public Relations practices today, as gathering and using user data for targeted Communication can raise questions about permission and trust. Keeping a balance between leveraging digital signalling tools for effective PR and maintaining ethical standards is a crucial challenge encountered by professionals in the field.

Further, the respondents revealed that they believe in disclosing minimal details even after obtaining clients' permission, as data protection and privacy are important to them. Besides, the respondents revealed that they are proficient in using digital tools for Public Relations practices and support using digital technology for Public Relations practices. Also, the respondents believed that their organization is sufficiently digitalized. These findings are consistent with the study (Vasquez & Taylor, 1999) examining the relationship between social culture, corporate culture, and the communication techniques of public relations professionals in the United States. Findings showed that the relevant practitioners usually comply with one-way communication models, even when their organizational policies do not implement this approach. Also, those in the field of public relations who hold collectivist values strive to employ two-way communication models. This emphasizes the significant impact of cultural values on the communication practices employed within public relations.

Furthermore, according to the study respondents, their organization provides written regulatory principles regarding communication practices that further inform what is necessary to share with the clients. According to the respondents, they are obligated to prefer more timely Communication for both external and internal Communication. Besides, they revealed that their organization has a broad social media policy, provides staff training to use social media for Communication, and also provides specific social media use-based guidelines. Further, they revealed that their organization relies on digital platforms for the information flow, communicating with the clients, and delivering information. As (J.-A. Kang & Berger, 2010) argued, the accessibility and reach of digital platforms strengthen the possible impact of PR messaging, necessitating increased impacts of organizations on Public Relations practices. The power dynamic between organizations and their stakeholders increases with the possibility of viral content. The findings obtained in the current research study align with the study (Yang, 2007) as they investigated the impact of organizational guidelines on communication practices to sustain the organizational reputation further. Results indicated a strong, significant impact of organizational guidelines on communication practices, as Public Relations results further indicate a positive organizational reputation. Finally, the respondents revealed that their organization believes in dealing with ethical issues concerning Communication with clients and stakeholders, as Public Relations practices are obligated to adopt socially responsible behavior. According to the respondents, they take responsibility for the organizational ethical conduct for communication purposes as Public Relations practitioners. Also, their organization obligates them to respect the clients and stakeholders and immoral behaviour with them is prohibited as their communication practices are client-focused and constantly monitored by their organization. Notably, these results reflect the argumentation by (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), assuming Public Relations as a "Relationship Approach" focused on having strong relations with the clients and stakeholders to attain a good reputation. Also, Ledingham and Bruning emphasize implementing this relationship approach in various parts of the Public Relations practices, as also found in the current research study.

4. Conclusion

This study's clear focus on the Kuwait presents unique regional insights, especially relevant to the swiftly evolving digital landscape of Kuwait. It highlights the imperative for practitioners and organizations to be sensitive to the cultural and contextual nuances of their digital communications strategies. As the digital landscape persists to play an increasingly critical role in modern Public Relations, adeptly steering these factors will be important for maintaining ethical standards and assuring effective stakeholder engagement in this dynamic environment. Thus, as the digital realm continues to evolve within modern Public Relations, adeptly leveraging cultural and contextual factors will be crucial for maintaining ethical standards and promoting effective stakeholder engagement in this dynamic environment.

5. Study Implications

Considering the technology determinism theory, this research suggests important theoretical implications. Investigating digital public relations practices intrinsically aligns with the assumptions of technology determinism. As digital platforms and technologies develop, they significantly influence Public Relations communication approaches and ethical considerations. The integration of technology determinism theory suggests that the digital landscape and its mechanisms are not neutral entities. They are infused with intrinsic values and norms, shaping how ethical behavior is perceived and integrated into digital Public Relations. For example, how information is shared, received, and assessed within the Kuwait's digital sphere is likely impacted by the deterministic influence of technology. Also, the study's focus on social identity signalling in digital public relations practices shows an awareness of the role of technology in

mediating and forming social identities. The digital environment provides a distinctive platform for individuals and organizations to signal their cultural associations and values, and these signals are subject to the impact of technological affordance. The impact of social and cultural values and customs on ethical behaviors in digital public relations, in addition to the role of digital platforms and the technology used in shaping public relations practices. Finally, examining stakeholder perceptions of ethical conduct in the Kuwaits digital public relations landscape highlights the significance of considering the broader societal implications of technological advancements. This aligns with the technology determinism theory's assumptions that technological shifts have far-reaching effects on different facets of society, including ethics and norms.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

Although this research is based on a novel topic, it has some primary limitations. First, this research is conducted in the Kuwait-based Public Relations practices that limit the generalizability of results. Future researchers can conduct relevant studies in other geographical regions to overcome this limitation. The second limitation involves using a single methodological approach (quantitative design). Future researchers can conduct mixed-method designs to delimit this scope. Finally, the third limitation examines the effect of only two factors (cultural and contextual factors). Future studies can further examine the impact of other factors, i.e., motivation, power distance, and others, to further expand the scope of their studies.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Mohammed and Dr. Salem were responsible for study design and revising. Prof. Mohammed was responsible for data collection. Prof. Mohammed drafted the manuscript and Prof. Salem revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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