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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Role of Media in Promoting Cultural Norms of Optimal Water Consumption: A Strategic Approach in Public Relations of Iranian Governmental Organizations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Water scarcity in Iran is considered one of the most complex and fundamental environmental and social challenges of the present century. The consequences of this crisis are observable not only in

critical sectors such as agriculture and industry but also in the daily lives of people. In this context, promoting a culture of optimal water consumption is a key strategy to address the crisis. Studies indicate that Iran's water resources are at a critical level, primarily due to overexploitation in agricultural and urban sectors, compounded by factors such as population growth, recurring droughts, and inefficient water resource management.

Media, through awareness campaigns, interactive and emotional messages, can reinforce responsible water consumption behaviors. Various media platforms—including television, radio, print, and digital media—have a unique capacity to reach wide audiences and convey messages that can drive positive behavioral change. Social media, in particular, can increase environmental awareness and social responsibility, promoting behaviors aligned with sustainable resource use.

Radio and television, as the most widely consumed media in Iran, play a significant role in promoting efficient consumption patterns. Mass media, through educational programs and practical guidance, can influence citizens' attitudes and behaviors. Government public relations offices, as intermediaries between the state and the public, are responsible for utilizing media capacities and designing targeted cultural messages. The adoption of modern approaches, such as two-way communication and digital media, enhances the depth and effectiveness of cultural promotion.

The rise of social media and influencers provides additional opportunities to increase the effectiveness of cultural messages. However, systematic research on the impact of media on water consumption behavior in Iran and the development of effective media strategies is limited. This limitation has hindered the full utilization of media capacities and the institutionalization of a culture of optimal water use. Therefore, accurately understanding media capacities in promoting water consumption culture is essential for designing effective policies and strategies. The aim of this study is to examine the role of media in government public relations and identify strategies to promote cultural norms for optimal water consumption. The primary research question is: How can media promote cultural norms of optimal water consumption, and how can Iranian government public relations leverage these capacities?

Theoretical Framework: Given the increasing importance of the water crisis in Iran and the need to institutionalize correct consumption patterns, this study adopts Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory as its main framework. This theory examines how ideas, behaviors, or innovations spread within a social system through communication channels over time. In the context of water consumption, behaviors such as saving water, using low-consumption devices, and changing daily habits represent a form of cultural innovation that must pass through five stages of adoption: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation.

Method:

This study employed a qualitative content analysis method to investigate the role of media in promoting cultural norms related to optimal water consumption. Content analysis allows researchers to identify recurring concepts, semantic patterns, and conceptual structures within interview texts, leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The study population consisted of 17 government public relations managers and communication professors actively engaged in promoting water consumption culture. Participants were selected using purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning interviews continued until no new information, ideas, or codes emerged, and the analysis stabilized.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to capture guided responses as well as participants' spontaneous remarks, revealing unexpected or unknown aspects. Interview questions focused on the main axes of the study, such as the experience and perspectives of managers and professors regarding the role of media in promoting water consumption culture.

Data Analysis was conducted in three coding stages:

Open Coding: Interview texts were analyzed line by line, and prominent, recurring concepts were extracted as initial codes. These codes were typically short descriptive phrases representing behaviors, attitudes, or suggestions regarding water consumption management.

Axial Coding: Extracted codes were grouped based on semantic similarities and conceptual relationships into five main axes: media relations, community engagement, organizational collaboration, research and expertise in communication, and financial resources and managerial support. This stage helped identify causal, contextual, and consequential relationships among concepts.

Selective Coding: Conceptual axes were integrated to form the final themes of the research. These themes addressed the main research question and completed the study's theoretical framework.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, several techniques were applied: data triangulation (combining different sources), member checking (verification by participants), parallel analysis by media experts, and researcher self-review. These steps ensured that the findings were accurate, reliable, and reflective of the actual conditions.

Results:

The findings indicate that media serve as the primary channels for information dissemination and behavior change in promoting water consumption culture. Digital media and social networks, particularly influencers, have increased youth participation in educational programs and campaigns. National media has had the greatest impact on raising awareness among adults. Utilizing multiple media channels, combined with targeted planning and audience segmentation based on innovation readiness, facilitated the institutionalization of optimal consumption behaviors.

Two-way media engagement with society and inter-organizational collaboration enhanced social responsibility and program coherence. Public relations activities, leveraging media and digital tools, designing creative and specialized campaigns, engaging diverse social groups, and managing financial and organizational support, played an effective role in embedding a culture of water conservation.

Conclusions:

The study demonstrates that media are not merely information channels but a critical component in shaping and reinforcing cultural norms related to optimal water consumption. Public relations offices, acting as active intermediaries between society, government institutions, and media, can induce sustainable behavioral change by designing targeted, interactive, and research-based messages. The success of these efforts requires a multi-dimensional approach: simultaneous use of traditional and digital media, active community engagement, inter-organizational coordination, expertise and creativity in campaign design, and the provision of financial resources and managerial support. This multi-level framework highlights that institutionalizing optimal water consumption behaviors cannot be achieved through a one-dimensional approach; strategic use of

media by public relations offices can play a pivotal role in mitigating the water crisis and strengthening social capital.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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