PUBLIC RELATIONS MEDIATION IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT FOR OMAN'S NATION-BUILDING

THE CASE OF OMAN VISION 2040

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the functions and impact of public relations, represented by governmental public relations, in the context of mediating citizen engagement for nation-building in Oman. The thesis aims to situate public relations, which is scarcely studied in this country, in the wider critical, socio-cultural paradigm, placing public relations at the heart of societies. The thesis also seeks to clarify the concept of engagement, which is frequently used but lacks a precise definition, within the context of government communication. The study is significant in its response to gaps found in public relations studies of engagement, which despite its popularity, "tends to be mostly concerned with social media and online engagement, studied from management/functional and relational perspectives, focussed on organizations, anchored in western traditions and dominated by quantitative methodology" (Jelen-Sanchez 2017: 934). Unlike these perspectives, using a qualitative methodology, this study addresses engagement as a government communication practice from the lens of nation-building, taking a critical stand to evaluate public relations roles in societies, specifically in Oman; far from the Western political, economic and cultural traditions.

Employing Oman Vision 2040 as an instrumental case study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with governmental officials who worked in communication and public relations-related fields and members of the general public (citizens). This has helped to provide a well-rounded argument supported by the perspectives of both parties. A thematic analysis has been conducted to examine how engagement in the context of nation-building is articulated, the functions of public relations in engagement initiatives for Oman Vision 2040 and most importantly the outcomes of the engagement mediated by public relations.

The key finding of this study suggests that public relations has a dual impact, acting as a tool utilised by the government for its own advantages while concurrently fostering increased citizen empowerment. The study suggests that within the Omani context, engagement embodies a form of local democracy, characterized by adherence to communication normative standards such as active listening, dialogue, and reciprocal interaction. Public relations, through engagement with citizens, serves as an intermediary work driving this local democracy, thereby yielding significant impacts on the nation's democratization process. These impacts encompass the enhancement of citizens' political capital, the promotion of a culture of participation and active citizenship, the flourishment of public opinion and the enrichment of the public sphere.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved husband, Salim Al Hamdani and our two precious boys, Faris and Yusuf.

For every night I returned home late, after immersing myself in my PhD, only to find you peacefully asleep, and for the question I will never forget: "Mom, when are you finishing this? We miss you!". Your innocent curiosity has fuelled my determination, your support and boundless love have been my guiding light. This work is a tribute to the three of you, to the sacrifices you made, the patience you showed, and the joy you bring to my life. In your warmth and embrace, I found the strength to pursue my dream. Thank you for being my constant source of inspiration and for making every moment worthwhile.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Declaration

This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Questions such as "What is a nation? How are nations created? When does a nation cease to exist?" (Taylor and Kent 2006: 299) have been always core inquiries in nation-building studies. Such questions are not easy to answer. Traditionally, nations and their core elements such as national identity are considered natural and permanent reality according to the Primordialists' approaches (Bayar 2009; Bilgen 2021). However, this view has lost its popularity to the extent that it becomes "now virtually impossible to find a social scientist who openly defends a primordialist position" (Coakley 2018: 327). The modernist constructive perspective which regards nation, national identity and nationalism as dynamic, changing, socially constructed and reconstructed has become more accepted in the academic literature. The groundbreaking book of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* is one of the most popular contributions that fall into the modernist viewpoint (Zajda 2009). Anderson's argument that nations are socially constructed is central to this thesis.

From another perspective, nations are not built merely based on political independence or infrastructure building but profoundly need interactions between the state, citizens and other nations for their existence and survival (Taylor and Kent 2006). The two viewpoints that: (1) nations are imagined and their identity is socially constructed, and (2) nations need for interactions between its parties, necessitates the importance of viewing communication as an integral part of nation-building efforts. Mass communication, in particular, has been studied and well-situated for decades in this dynamic (e.g., Anderson 1983; Adibe 2016; Bornman 2013; García 2012) which mainly has origins in the development communication literature. According to Taylor and Kent (2006: 299), "nation-building is a strategic process that involves various resources and policies, and communication is one of the most important of those resources". Public relations as a strategic communication practice is therefore a resource that cannot be overlooked, especially with its inherent functions of publicity, information diffusion and relationship management (Taylor 2000; Taylor and Kent 2006). However, along with these functions, public relations like any other practice respond to the changing nature of nation-building requirements. Rider (1998) stated:

> Nations are changing before our eyes to meet the pressures and requirements of a world in which communications is immediate and widespread. Enlightened leadership in the building or re-building of a nation requires the re-examination of the systems which have been used to bind the people together, and the principal means by which this must be done is to enlarge and increase participation levels of all citizens. It is a quest for creative, fair, objective use of mass media as an instrument of society in the 21st Century. (Rider 1998: 257)

Increasing participation requires a participatory communication approach that empowers citizens, grants a bottom-top, two-way communication and considers nation-building as a shared responsibility of both governments and their citizens. The participatory approach has come as a response to the criticisms of development communication, particularly the modernization premise. Scholars adopting a shift in the paradigm towards participation have refused the modernization principles dominating development communication until 1970 and its communication style that mainly featured one-way, passive communication (Mody 2003). Moreover, the participatory approach as a democratic governance style has received recognition from scholars, practitioners and governments, not only in communication but also in political sciences (Howlett 2009). Hence, the two subsequent decades have witnessed an increasing number of studies on the participatory approach to development communication and governance. Public relations has also responded to the change in the paradigm resulting in an increasing number of studies concerning engagement and participation.

With that being stated, this study seeks to position itself within the critical debate surrounding the role of public relations which is widely accused of being merely a persuasive tool serving the interests of specific groups, mostly the powerful (e.g., Beder 1997; Dinan and Miller 2007; Potter 2010; Stauber and Rampton 2004). The role of public relations is examined in the specific context of nation-building, locating public relations at the heart of societies. This examination focuses on citizen engagement as a means to address the national development needs and promote democratization in a developing country, that has a recent history of modernization; Oman. The study aims to focus on how citizen engagement is articulated in the local context of Oman, recognising therefore that engagement can be practised differently in various nations (Rider 1998). It also aims to examine public relations functions in the context of citizen engagement and attempts to provide an overview of the impact of public relations therefore in nation-building and

democratization but also in changing the communication landscape in such context, traditionally known as a closed context (Koch 2013a) as will be explained throughout the thesis.

1.2 Why research public relations in Oman?

Sriramesh and Verčič (2002) argue that educators of public relations suffer from the lack of an established body of knowledge about public relations in different countries around the world, beyond the US model and the Western studies that dominate the profession. In their paper, the authors strongly suggested the need to establish cross-cultural knowledge in public relations based on empirical evidence and case studies from different parts of the world. Many scholars such as Culbertson and Chen (2013) and Sriramesh and Verčič, (2002) have acknowledged the need for understanding the global practice of public relations and that many studies that come from around the world can greatly advance the public relations field. Some scholars such as Coombs et al. (1994) who compared the functions of public relations in Austria, Norway and the US have gone further to suggest that public relations practices greatly vary based on the country in which it operates. Hodges (2006: 89) suggested that the profession needs "a socially constructed approach which explores the occupational culture, redefines public relations as culturally relativist practice that might not privilege Western, corporate models over the rich varieties of practice that exist in other regions of the world".

With that being said, however, public relations studies in Oman are scarce and most of those who have conducted public relations research in this context have failed to go beyond the functional description of public relations (see for example: Hilmi and Emenyeonu 2014; Prasad 2011; Zahra and Al Balushi 2017). Not to mention that to the best of my knowledge, there has been no study conducted on governmental public relations or government communication in Oman in relation to nation-building. Few studies have examined public relations in the Omani public sector (e.g., Al-Hinai 2012; Al-Zadjali 2012; Al-Qamshoi 2015; Al-Kindi 2019) but they mostly remain limited in their empirical investigation. For example, Al-Kindi (2019) studied public relations units in the Omani civil service sector. This study, however, is descriptive with no empirical data presented, citing mostly Masters or PhD unpublished papers, describing public relations and its functions very briefly and generally. Communication in general and public relations specifically has not been studied from the lens of nation-building in this

context. Oman with its recent history of modernization and its unique political and economic traits constitutes a critical addition to the literature to depict the roles and impact of public relations in mediating engagement for nation-building in emerging developing countries. Thus, in this study, I aim to critically examine government communication (government public relations) and its role in mediating citizen engagement and its impact, employing a multi-disciplinary conceptual framework. I aim to depart from the dominant normative description of public relations to a critical one that places public relations intermediation in citizen engagement at the heart of the complex matrix of Oman's history, development, politics, economy and society, putting more focus on the impact, rather than the functions as has been traditionally done.

However, one should be careful of what Botan (1992) warned about adopting an ethnocentric approach in which home countries' assumptions about public relations and how it works are central to the researcher. The author suggested that there is increasing pressure on public relations scholars to respond to the demands placed because of the rapidly changing political and economic events. The author also proposed an alternative approach to prevent falling into the ethnocentric approach as a result of these rapid demands.

> The alternative is using these new demands as motivation to expand our research into how cultural and historic factors shape different roles for public relations. This would make possible using international public relations to both learn about cultures, including our own, and to expand our understanding of what public relations is and can be. (Botan 1992: 157)

Using this perspective, I tried to offer an understanding of public relations in conjunction with the history in the specific context of Oman and provide as many details about the political, social, economic and cultural aspects of the country throughout the thesis. For example, in Chapter 4, I provide a story about public relations throughout the history of modern Oman since 1970 and Chapter 5 is then dedicated to setting the context of citizen engagement by articulating engagement as viewed and practised in Oman before delving into the details of public relations functions and impact in intermediating engagement. In this way, I value offering an opportunity to understand how public relations functions in this specific context, given its unique history of development, politics, economics and

society fabrics. I believe that this study, hence, is rich in its contextual meanings which are necessary to understand the field of public relations in this part of the world.

1.3 The main questions of the study

The study's central aim as mentioned earlier is to examine the public relations role in mediating citizen engagement for nation-building and the impact of this mediation. The main question therefore is:

How does public relations mediate citizen engagement for Oman's nation-building?

Stemming from this question are the following sub-questions which cover three main areas: citizen engagement articulation in Oman, public relations role and impact in intermediating citizen engagement and the outcomes of this mediated engagement.

The sub-questions are:

1. What does citizen engagement in Oman look like, and how does it influence the normative communication values associated with engagement?
2. What does public relations in the context of Oman and particularly for Oman Vision 2040 entail?
3. What is the role and impact of public relations in mediating citizen engagement for national development?
4. What are the outcomes and impacts of the mediated citizens' engagement for Oman's democratization and nation-building?

Each question covers relevant concepts as will be seen in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. The first three questions are mainly answered from data collected from the government (see Chapters 5 and 6) while the last one is answered based on data generated from members of the general public; citizens (see Chapter 7). In this way, I tried to offer a holistic critical examination of how citizen engagement, mediated by public relations, works for the nation-building of Oman, providing perspectives of the most important parties in this dynamic; the government and citizens.

It is crucial at this point to clearly state that public relations is conceptualised, in this thesis, as a strategic communication process primarily focused on relationship management, communication, and information management aimed at fostering mutual understanding and participatory relationships between the government and citizens. In the context of this study, public relations, as a government communication practice,

extends beyond mere image management for the government. It is rather linked to broader practices of government communication, development communication, public engagement and sociopolitical change, particularly within the framework of nation-building in Oman. The study adopted the philosophy of Bentele (2004: 488) who suggested that public relations should be understood from a sociological perspective, defining public relations as "not only an organizational activity, but also as a social phenomenon, that is, as a phenomenon which has societal functions and impacts on the society and its subsystems like the political system, the economic system, the cultural system or the media system". Heath (2018) has emphasized this definition in his reasoning for adopting an engagement approach in public relations studies. In this sense, therefore, this study regards public relations as a communication practice which is affected by but can also affect the politics, culture, economy and society in which it operates.

1.4 The significance and contribution of this study

The significance of this study stems from three main factors. First, while there are many public relations studies in the context of nation-building, Oman seems to have been largely neglected in the academic literature. The context of this study is of significance because public relations as a social practice aimed at social change in developing countries, is rarely addressed in the literature (Macnamara 2015). Oman with its unique features as an oil-based economy, monarch system, and non-democratic country, constitutes an opportunity to widen our understanding not only about public relations but also citizen engagement in the context of nation-building, offering a new perspective beyond the Western, democratic contexts that dominate public relations and therefore contributing to our understanding of the international public relations.

Second, the interdisciplinary conceptual framework of this thesis as will be explained in Chapter 2 is also significant as it allows for (1) responding to the need to offer comprehensive details and examination of public relations in different parts of the world in order to count as a contribution to the global public relations (Botan 1992), (2) providing a holistic critical analysis of public relations mediating citizen engagement in Oman where, to the best of my knowledge, no study has been conducted (3) contributing to the critical studies that go beyond the normative simple description of public relations which dominates not only public relations scholar work but most social science studies

coming from the Arab and Middle Eastern world (Hammad and Al-Ani 2021) by offering a critical account of public relations, capturing the complexity of the context under study.

Lastly, while many studies are conducted to examine public relations as an intermediary work or in the context of nation-building, most of them adopt the practitioner's perspective (e.g., García 2013; Hodges 2005; Kasimon 2020). Few researchers have examined the other part of the story- consumers, audience or citizens. This study is trying to fill this gap by incorporating citizens' perspectives. That does not only contribute to the public relations literature but also to public engagement literature in which comprehensive evaluations of the engagement practices and their consequences are scarce (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). Besides the academic contribution, for the research to achieve social impact, it is essential to incorporate citizens' views, especially in matters where their voice is of importance (Cabré-Olivé et al. 2017). These views can help in "contributing to unmasking social theories which have been created without taking into account neither the international scientific community – in its multiple disciplines – nor citizens, exposing how, far from having social impact, such theories fall short in helping understand and improve society" (Soler-Gallart and Flecha 2022: 7). Therefore, this study is significant from these two perspectives: (1) it broadens the scientific knowledge coming from the international community by examining a nation in which such studies are scarce, (2) it incorporates citizens' perspective by trying to offer a well-rounded explanation of citizen engagement mediated by public relations for nation-building. Therefore, as indicated by Soler-Galart and Flecha (2022), the research can have both a scientific but also a social impact.

With that being clarified, the study is hoped to contribute to the knowledge of governmental public relations (government communication) in the context of citizen engagement for nation-building, particularly, addressing a nation that greatly differs from those dominantly overwhelming the literature. Personally, I also hope that this study will contribute to extending our understanding of government communication and citizens' perspectives on the government practices of engagement and communication in the contemporary "stable Oman", despite its political closeness as compared to the democratic nations around the world. This understanding hoped to outspread our knowledge of Oman's communication strategies of engagement and nation-building which can be also extended to countries that share similar characteristics such as the neighbouring Gulf States.

1.5 The scope of the thesis

Theoretically, this thesis employs a multi-conceptual framework featuring a sociological and cultural-centred approach. Having said earlier (see section 1.3) that public relations as a government communication act intertwined closely with concepts of participation, development and socio-political change, it comes as no surprise that concepts from communication, political and sociological literature have been used to understand the complex dynamics of public relations in mediating nation-building through citizen engagement. Democracy as central to both nation-building and citizen engagement has been also discussed in this dynamic. Therefore, to capture the complexities and interrelations of the concepts: (1) a multi-conceptual framework is used, (2) each of these concepts: public relations, nation-building, citizen engagement and democracy, has been introduced as core subjects in this research and as intersecting in many ways. Hence, while the study focuses mainly on the impact of public relations in intermediating citizen engagement, the study also focuses on citizen engagement, democracy and nation-building as discussed in their respective literature, for example, political, governance and development literature, besides the communication literature. It is also vital to acknowledge that citizen engagement is used interchangeably here with public engagement. Although political overview is used throughout the thesis as it is impossible to neglect it, the study's main motive is targeting engagement as a government communication practice while extending the discussion to examine its impact on the wider developmental, communicative and political aspects. Government communication in the context of this thesis is also used interchangeably with governmental public relations as will be explained in Chapter 6. Practically, the engagement examined here refers to the activities done at the level of national development. That is why Oman Vision 2040, as a timely, ongoing, huge development project has been chosen as an instrumental case study for the specific target of this research (see Chapter 3 for details). Lastly, as mentioned before, in this study, I hope to provide a comprehensive understanding from the perspective of both the government and citizens; something that many studies failed to combine in their scope.

1.6 The Methodology

Given the constructionist-interpretivist philosophy of this research (see a full discussion of methodology in Chapter 3), a qualitative research design has been employed. Oman Vision 2040 has been used as an instrumental case study through which the 2040 Vision is used as a point of reference to extend the discussions around government communication, engagement and nation-building. Since the study aims to examine the perspectives of both the government and citizens, interviews have been conducted with the two segments. A thematic analysis has been followed to analyse the data collected from the interviews. Figure 1 shows the overall results of the analysis of the interviews which constitute the main findings of the study.
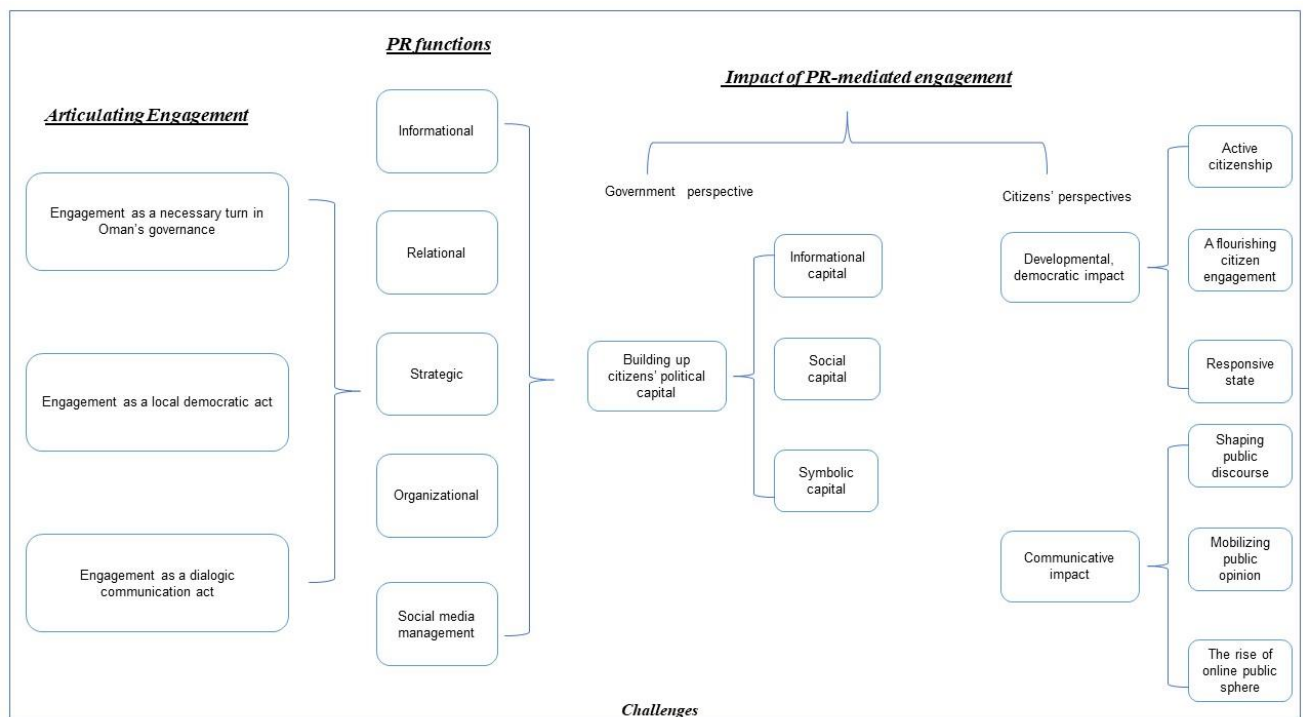
Figure 1 Public relations intermediation in citizen engagement for Oman's nation-building

1.7 The structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters as described below:

Chapter 2 highlights the debates, discussions and literature relevant to the context of this study. The first section primarily discusses the conceptualisation of nation-building and the relevance of public relations and government communication in the nation-building process setting, therefore, the wider context of this study. The second section then highlights citizen engagement and democracy as interrelated themes to nation-building but also to government communication. In this context, therefore, the public relations role in engagement and democracy is also addressed. In the last section, the theoretical

framework is set through discussing public relations intermediation in the political-social environment, emphasizing the need for a multi-conceptual framework to capture the complexity of this intermediation.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion and justifications about the methodological choices including the research design, piloting methods, data collection procedures, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 provides the contextual information needed to understand the context of this study (Oman). The chapter aims to give general information about Oman as a context for this study, including its geography, political, economic and media systems. Yet more importantly, it aims to set out the context of this study by examining the role of public relations in nation-building since the establishment of modern Oman in 1970. This examination is seen as critical to understanding the historical rise and development of public relations in Oman as well as its role in the nation-building efforts.

Chapter 5 aims to articulate citizen engagement as perceived by the government, depending on data collected from the interviews with governmental officials. I perceive articulating engagement in the local context of the study as important to examine later the role of public relations in mediating this engagement. This is why I dedicate this chapter to understanding engagement as a communication and political act in this specific context.

Chapter 6, utilizing the empirical data from interviews with governmental officials, aims to address the functions and role public relations play in mediating engagement and the impact this mediation has on public communication and the relationship between the government and citizens. In doing so, I also address the power and agency issues that are associated with this mediation.

Chapter 7, considers citizens' perspectives on specifically the impact of the government communication-mediated engagement. The aim of this chapter stems from the need to incorporate the audience perspective as both consumers but also creators of meanings and therefore as an equally important asset in the mediation process.

Chapter 8 summarises the main arguments of this thesis and outlines the significance and contribution of the study, its limitations and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOCIETY; PR INTERMEDIATION IN NATION-BUILDING AND DEMOCRACY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to review and evaluate the existing literature in the context of public relations and nation-building. Within the nation-building approach, the chapter also aims to provide a review of the debates about public relations' role in society, citizen engagement and democracy. The chapter is structured around themes, aiming at conceptualising the relevant concepts to this specific study. For that, it is divided into three main sections. The first explores the relationship between nation-building and public relations. The second aims to address public relations in the context of citizen engagement and democracy. The last section addresses the conceptual framework of public relations intermediation in politics. It is important to acknowledge that this chapter does not only review the existing literature but at the same time sets the theoretical framework for this study which follows a muti-concepts approach, encompassing discussions from communication, political and sociological disciplines.

2.2 NATION-BUILDING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Nation-building is not a new concept in the literature, yet, it still lacks clear definition and objective interpretations. That's mainly because it is understood differently based on the different development needs of the different contexts as well as the different perspectives of governments. This section explores the relevant concepts of nation-building that do not include only physical and political infrastructure but go beyond that to take into consideration intangible elements such as national identity and national unity. It will then explore the relevance of public relations in the nation-building context.

2.2.1 Conceptualising Nation-building

Nation-building has been understood subjectively by different scholars, with a variety of perspectives and contextual factors shaping their comprehension. Therefore, it is hard to find an agreed definition of the concept. Reviewing the literature, however, some central themes can be identified. Among these themes are: state formation, nationalism, national identity, national unity, development, modernization, and democratisation.

In the context of nation-building, state formation is one of the key critical components. State formation in itself has been understood differently based on the situational factors of the context. For example, historically, state formation can be described as involving the use of armed force as suggested by Dobbin (2003), to make a transition from conflict to democracy, which definitely involves the establishment of the state. Similarly, among the several facets of nation-building identified by Ibrahim Gambari (2008) as cited by Okeke et al. (2022), is the creation of a political entity responsible for specific defined geographical boundaries, which has a legal framework and a specific governance structure. Fukuyama (2004: 17) described nation-building in terms of creating states and analysed the extent to which the strength of the states can influence the development of the nation, defining state-building as "creating new governmental institution and strengthening the existing one". Similarly, Huntington (1971) defined nation-building as the creation of political institutions in newly built states. The role of these institutions lies in supplying the basic needs and demands of the population, for example, education, healthcare, transportation, and media systems. State formation is therefore linked to development and modernization, particularly in developing nations where much of nation-building is perceived as development projects (Kothari 1972). This is where the "state provision of modern housing, education, healthcare, and other social services" becomes vital for state-building (Kpessa, Béland and Lecours 2011: 2122). This also parallels the view of Derichs and Heberer (2006) who described nation-building as linked to development, for example as in East and Southeast Asia in their study. Nation-building that leads to forming institutions is also significant for the modernity of the communities. The emphasis on institutions as described above by many scholars, represents the modernization process in part. That includes the educational system, health system and other services, the bureaucracies and the judiciaries.

While nation-building and state formation are intertwined, it is important to understand that state formation represents the physical establishment of a state with a particular geographic border, encompassing the establishment of a central government, and a legal and administrative structure. However, state building is not the only component. Many scholars have identified other intangible resources that go beyond the creation of a state apparatus, for example, national identity and national unity. This provides another perspective for understanding nation-building as the efforts by which nationalism, national identity and national unity are created by connecting the disconnected parties

who, through developing a sense of nationalism and having collective national goals, can be unified. This is what Morrison (1989) as cited in Taylor (2000:185) meant when he defined nation-building as "the efforts by which diverse societies, regions, and groups within a country are linked into a national–state system".

Accordingly, national identity and national unity form an important part of the story, where resolving the differences in the social system and bringing people's attention towards common national goals and future become vital. The deliberate construction of national identity is key for national unity, and both are prerequisites for nation-building (Mylonas 2010; Taylor and Kent 2006). National identity as defined by Scott (1961) is a mindful identification of people with common national objectives. This identification requires "a sense of belonging and imagination" (Derichs and Heberer 2006), and that is linked closely to one of the most commonly-held theories in this vein, the imagined community developed by Benedict Anderson. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson described a nation as socially constructed by a group of people who may never meet, yet who imagined belonging to a wider group (community in this case). A detailed description of Anderson's concept of the Imagined communities will be provided later in this chapter. Since national identity and unity are about unifying people towards a shared set of values and destiny, many studies have considered national identity as a core aspect of nation-building, especially in a population with diverse ethnic, religious and cultural divides (Anyanwu 2019). That is why there is a huge literature that speaks about nation-building in the context of diverse divided societies (e.g. Kasimon 2020).

Another definition of nation-building is linked to the change in the political system of countries from undemocratic to liberal societies. Von Hippel (2000: 96) argued that there is a shift in understanding nation-building from the crafting of a stable state to the creation of a "democratic and secure state". This has mostly been examined in societies in transition, for example in South Africa as examined by Boyce (1999). The promotion of democracy and citizen engagement are linked to nation-building efforts. For example, Dobbins et al. (2007) suggested that nation-building includes the political and economic transformation of a post-conflict society to a peaceful society which embraces democratic governance. Political stability, economic flourishment and social justice can be promoted by engaging citizens which is necessary for nation-building efforts (Atake and Dodo 2010). Engagement here has both democratic endeavours and also a sense of unity

endeavours through promoting this collective participation towards a shared set of collective goals and destiny (Egbule 2019).

In summary, it is apparent that while nation-building has no precise definition to be adopted, there are some cornerstones identified as major in nation-building efforts, encompassing: state formation, national identity, national unity and democratization.

2.2.2 Nations are Imagined

A prominent concept found in most nation-building literature is the concept of imagined communities developed by Benedict Anderson (1983) in his book 'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism'. In his attempt to analyse nationalism, Anderson argued that nations are not simply natural entities but are rather socially constructed in the imagination of their inhabitants. This concept is clearly linked to the concepts discussed earlier around nation-building including national identity and national unity. The idea that nations are constructed imaginably is significant because it shows that nation-building is not merely establishing physical institutions but is equally about shaping national narratives in a way that will shape the collective imagination of shared destiny, unity, identity and belongingness (Gambari 2008). Based on the idea of nations as constructs, Anderson suggested that the development of print capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries played a crucial role in creating narratives about nationalism and national identity through the print media which enabled the dissemination of these narratives and helped in creating stories about nations. For Anderson, the print was the foundation for the idea of the imagined communities. The influence of the print, in accordance with Anderson's 1983, lies in the development of the national consciousness through establishing a unified platform for communication and interaction. Also, the print "gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" and finally "print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars" (Anderson 1983: 57).

Anderson's theory of the imagined community is very relevant to the role of communication and media in nation-building efforts. According to Anderson (1983), communication, particularly through novels and newspapers, plays a significant role in shaping the collective sense of belonging, shared identity, and nationalism. Effective use of such communication channels can help in the construction of communities based on

the imagination of their inhabitants. In Anderson's theory, the print media, with its ability to reach a wide audience and shape the way people perceive their nation, have this constructive role. However, in today's communication landscape, it is important to acknowledge that not only print media but also various other forms of mass communication and media, including digital and online platforms, have the same potential for constructing communities. This is why it has been tackled by many communication scholars covering different forms of mass media and communication. For example, Putri et al. (2018) studied the influence of films in constructing imagined communities, Koh (2016) studied social media as part of a networked public sphere in the context of political communication and imagined communities, Fürst (2020) investigated the way in which journalism through news reporting about global events can create myths and foster imagined communities. Based on this perspective, public relations, as a communication practice, similarly has the potential to contribute to the formation of collective imagination within communities. Just as print and digital media can influence the narrative of nationhood, public relations professionals can use their strategies to shape public perception and foster a sense of belonging and shared identity.

2.2.3 Where do communication and PR fit into the nation-building approach?

A. Communication for Development (Devcomm)

Communication and public relations in nation-building do not simply and merely fit in the imagined community theory as described earlier. Indeed, communication in the context of nation-building has origins in what is called development communication (Devcomm). Before examining the engagement as a strategic communication action directed at the development of a given country, it's useful at first to understand the relationship between communication and development. According to Sinha (1976: 7), "development is a result of the interaction(s) of many factors, development communication being only one of them". For example, the acquisition of information alone will not bring development, in agriculture, health and other development aspects which needs for sure some tangible resources. However, communication constitutes a very critical component. Development communication has been practised widely since the 1940s and flourished after World War II (McAnany 2012). However, it was clearly conceptualised by Nora Quebral in the 1970s who defined it as:

Art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and a mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth so as to achieve greater social equality (Quebral 2006: 5)

Since then, the definition has evolved and varied with time and various contexts, resulting in no agreement on its definition, characteristics and practical considerations (UNESCO 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that different approaches in Devcomm have historically appeared in parallel with the changes in the understanding of development which is itself still questioned by many researchers. The development started first with the modernization model which refers to the linear progression of nations based on what is perceived as typical development by developed nations (mostly Western nations), including industrialization, urbanization, technology transfer and changes in the socio-cultural structure from "traditional" to "modern" as viewed by these nations (Hout 2016: 23). It was followed then by the dependency approach which refers to the idea that underdeveloped nations are so because of their dependency on wealthy states due to unequal political and economic relationship (Smith 2018). The multiplicity approach has then been introduced since the 1980s which regards development as a multidimensional and relative one, differs from one society to another based on political, economic and cultural factors and adopts a participatory approach to development (Etana 2014). Devcomm has responded to the shifts in these development approaches which are mainly dominated by two paradigms; the diffusion models and participatory models (Eriksen 2005). Reflecting on the diffusion model which assumes mainly a top-down, one-way communication, Melkote and Steeves (2015) identified four major approaches that emerged to explain the role of communication and mass media in development and social change. The first is communication effects. Based on this concept, the effects of media are direct and powerful and therefore media is playing a very important role in changing the behaviours of the masses for the sake of development, particularly in developing countries. This idea of media power is also defined by the bullet theory and hypodermic needle theory. The second approach is the Mass media and modernization approach which suggests that mass media work as a tool for modernization by reporting the ideas and initiatives from the developed societies to the less developed and rural areas. Media here is seen as an educational tool for the development of undeveloped nations. The third one is the diffusion of innovations approach which views communication to be the vehicle through which a person can shift from a traditional to a modern individual through the

dissemination of information from outside the social context of the person. It focuses on the role of communication in the modernisation of local communities by spreading information within these communities. Finally, the social marketing approach promotes the strategic dissemination of messages and strategic use of media channels for social reasons; for example, awareness campaigns about family size. All these models of communication for development have been criticized for a number of drawbacks, mainly their- top-down, one-way style of communication. In response to these criticisms, the participatory communication model was adopted in the 1970s, by many scholars to put communication into the context of facilitating development and modernization process (Huesca 2003). This paradigm emphasizes the need for an individual's participation in the process of development. And that makes exploring engagement and participation as a communication activity in the context of nation-building a relevant task.

B. Public relations for nation-building

Nation-building requires interaction between the involved parties, mostly states and citizens, but also from international society. Communication is a vital element in this process. One-way or two-way, monologic or dialogic communication can be employed and the style of communication is subjective to the specific context. Reviewing the literature, I found that communication for nation-building has been tackled, either in political science or communication literature, from mainly three points of view; awareness creation, building and maintaining relationships and lastly the shift towards a participatory approach. As mentioned earlier, one of the core domains that discusses communication's role in nation-building is communication for development, which is defined by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998), who focus on the importance of the awareness to empower people to take part in the development process, as:

> The use of communication processes, techniques and media to help people toward a full awareness of their situation and their options for change, to resolve conflicts, to work towards consensus, to help people plan actions for change and sustainable development, to help people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to improve their condition and that of society, and to improve the effectiveness of institutions. (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 1998: 63)

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Awareness through publicity is one of the major themes associated with efforts to understand the role of mass media in national development (Postill 2006). The diffusion of information is what Grunig and Hunt (1984) refer to as publicity and public information as one of the communication styles in their progressive model of public relations (Grunig and Grunig 1992).

While the role of communication through mass media has mostly been examined functionally in terms of message, content, control and ownership of media, some scholars have focused on the relational aspect of communication. Taylor and Kent (2006) were among the first to conceptualize an approach that aims to locate public relations in nation-building as a relationship-building tool. They emphasised its role in connecting the unrelated population, particularly in diverse societies. This connection, from their point of view, is a prerequisite for the achievement of national identity, unity and thus nation-building. The sort of relationship that depends on trust, mutuality and understanding will result in collective work towards national goals and will support the state in accomplishing its objectives of nation-building. Public relations as described by Grunig (1992) serve as a tool for "building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission" (Bruning et.al. 2004: 436), in this case between the state and the citizens. Kent and Taylor (2002: 23) stated that PR is about "building, nurturing, and maintaining relationships".

The last approach which attempts to locate public relations in nation-building is the participatory one, which describes nation-building as a mutual task for both states and citizens. Therefore, there is a need to empower citizens, adopt two-way communication and grant a bottom-top approach in place of the previous top-down approach that considers nation-building as merely the task of the governments. This participatory approach in public relations has mostly been viewed from the perspective of facilitating democracy (e.g., Adams and McCorkindale 2013; Edwards 2016; Holtzhausen 2005; Kent 2013; Kent and Taylor 2002). The participatory approach holds a central position in this thesis for two key reasons. Firstly, citizen engagement, which is a focal point of this thesis, as seen by Von Hippel (2000) constitutes both a mean and an end to nation-building. Secondly, the thesis explores citizen engagement as an implementation of the participatory approach in the interaction between the government and citizens, while also analysing the role of public relations in mediating this relationship.

Public relations for nation-building can therefore be seen through its communicative function (for example through publicity and public communication), relational function (for example through campaigns) and empowering function (through engagement and facilitation of dialogue). In alignment with the conceptualization of public relations in this thesis, these functions demonstrate PR's strategic role in fostering participatory relationships and mutual understanding between the government and its citizens. Thus, it can be said that it has the potential to act as an intermediate for state-society relations and public engagement initiatives for national development through these defined functions.

C. The role of government communication

In the context of this thesis, communication is basically seen as how the government strategically communicate with citizens on a national level about national development matters. It's hence, crucial to look at some definitions of governmental communication to understand its role in this process. Government communication ranges in its definitions from public communication to persuasive public relations to dialogic and participatory communication. For example, Howlett (2009) views it as a policy tool used by governmental officials to affect and direct the process of policymaking through withholding or releasing information. One of the few government communication models is the one developed by Hiebert (1981) as cited in Liu and Horsley (2007) in which he also sees government communication as a process which involves four basic strategies used by the public servants; information withholding, information releasing, organizing events and persuading the public. These functions underscore public relations' role as a form of government communication.

Pfetsch (1999) perceived government communication as strategically managing news for the sake of forming a desirable public opinion which can be influenced by setting the news agenda. Other scholars (e.g., Gelders and Ihlen 2010; Lee et al. 2021; Sanders and Canel 2015; Somerville and Ramsey 2013) perceive government communication as political public relations. Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011) define political public relations as:

> The management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its

key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011: 8)

This reminds me of the main elements of public relations which are publicity, reputation, persuasion and relationship management. As Bernays (1952: 12), one of the key pioneers in modern public relations said: "the three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people". Sanders (2011), suggested that although government communication has been covered in different fields like organizational communication, administrative communication, political communication and communication management, she views public relations literature as providing an enriching understanding of government communication in terms of theories and approaches, even though the majority of public relations researches are based on the corporate world. In this thesis, however, public relations is expanded beyond a corporate framework to focus on its role in fostering participatory engagement between the government and citizens within a nation-building context.

On another hand, Singh (2008) suggests that government communication is strategic communication that depends on persuasion and it should include two types of communication; monologic and dialogic. Singh (2008; 66) defined monologic communication as persuasive communication in which the "speaking" party attempts to alter the "listening" party's stance, with little or no expectation of altering their own position. "Dialogic communication is then communication in which both parties' problem solves and arrive at mutually altered positions" Singh (2008; 66).

And speaking about strategic communication and nation-building, Taylor and Kent (2006) are among those who studied strategic communication and public relations in the context of nation-building and have emphasised the role of dialogic public relations which reflects the participatory communication approach towards effective development communication. For them, "Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interested in access than in domination". (Kent and Taylor 2002: 30). They also propose that engagement is one feature of dialogic communication in which all the participants should be willing to

encounter and take part in a discussion that is directed at the collective outcomes rather than the self-interest of any party.

From here comes the relevance of studying citizen engagement as a practice of both government communication (governmental public relations) and nation-building. Particularly when knowing that engagement becomes a common practice for governments, regardless of their political features. The modes of governance have progressively transitioned toward a more consultative approach, resulting in the adoption and enforcement of novel communication practices across many jurisdictions (Feldman and Khademian 2007). This applies to democracies, but also to the countries in transition or those which adopt engagement as a contemporary governance practice, regardless of their political system, like in the context of this study.

2.3 PUBLIC RELATIONS, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRACY

Having described public relations and communication within the framework of nation-building and explicated the significance and relevance of citizen engagement, my next step is to delve into the complex connections between citizen engagement, public relations, and the broader concept of democracy. This involves viewing engagement as a fundamental component of democracy and seeking to understand the position of public relations in the democracy debate. In doing so, I will provide a review of how citizen engagement operates as an expression of democracy and try to contextualize the role of public relations within this dynamic.

2.3.1 Engagement/ Participation

Defining engagement or participation is not an easy task, characterised by the absence of clear standardised forms and mechanisms (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). It's important, therefore, to think about the various manifestations of participation, including those involved, the types of public and the mechanisms used to establish a fundamental grasp of the concept. Furthermore, engagement can vary significantly among governments, practitioners, politicians and various demographic groups, making it challenging to make assessments of engagement in general (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). Thus, in this thesis, I intend to provide a localized depiction of engagement within the study's specific context at a later point (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, it is crucial to establish a foundational understanding of engagement as per the existing body of literature. The primary focus of this study is the examination of citizen engagement. However, distinguishing this concept

from the term "public engagement" can be challenging, as they are often employed interchangeably in the literature. Therefore, within the framework of this thesis, citizen engagement is seen as a subset encompassed by the broader concept of public engagement, and hence, the terms are used interchangeably.

Public participation as defined by Reed (2018: S8) is "a process where public or stakeholder individuals, groups, and/or organizations are involved in making decisions that affect them, whether passively via consultation or actively via two-way engagement". Scholars have been working to define participation and what forms will allow for effective participation. As a result, different typologies of public engagement have been developed. Reed (2008), suggested that the participation can range on a continuum from passive to active engagement. The level of engagement ranged from passive to active is well reflected in the typology offered by Rowe and Frewer (2005) who defined public engagement based on the flow of information as taking one of three forms; public communication, public consultation or public participation. Public communication is a one-way communication by which the information is disseminated to the passive public (for example from the government to the local community). Public consultation is achieved through a one-way communication from the public to the organizers of the engagement activity to gather information which may be used to advise policymakers. Finally, public participation involves a two-way exchange of information between all participants, resulting in dialogue and debate (Rowe and Frewer 2005).

Reed (2008) offered a typology that focuses on a theoretical base, aiming to differentiate between the motives behind the participation. It identified two types of participation; normative and pragmatic. The normative participation considers the right of the citizens to be part of decision-making, while the pragmatic one focuses on the outcomes of the participation and sees it as necessary for quality decisions and policies (Reed 2008). Another type of participation is also the 'procedural participation' or 'procedural justice' which focuses on the process of making decisions rather than the outcomes. "The primary principals of procedural justice are full participation in the process, the ability to express opinions freely and to be heard (voice), being treated with respect, being given adequate information, the impartiality of the decision maker, and decisions that are responsive to information" (Gross 2007: 2730). There is also another typology that is based on the purposes of making the participation, for example, ''research-driven'' or ''development-driven'', ''planner-centred'' or ''people-centred'' (Reed 2008).

Based on these typologies, four types of public engagement were later identified by Reed (2018). The first is the top-down, one-way communication and/or consultation: the engagement here is simply one-way dissemination of information from those with power (for example, the government or business) to the ordinary public. Usually, in this approach, a decision is made but needs to be communicated to the affected people. Rowe and Frewer (2005) called this approach public communication, not participation. The second is top-down deliberation and/or coproduction. In this type, two-way communication is led by those with power, engaging the public to be part of the decision-making process. The third is bottom-up one-way communication and/or consultation. In this approach, the lay public initiates the engagement through a means of communication with those who have the power to make decisions so that they may convince them to open the debate and engagement. The final one is bottom-up deliberation and/or coproduction which is a two-way communication that is initiated by the lay public to participate with other stakeholders to make a decision.

Beyond considering the nature and style of communication being used for public engagement, it's equally important to consider the types of public, who are to be part of the debate and how this may affect the engagement process. Braun & Schultz (2010) identified four types of public to be considered in the public engagement process. The first one is the general public which can be addressed through the opinion polls. The second is the pure public which may be encountered through citizen juries and citizen conferences directed at a small number of individuals to be informed and educated. The third is the affected public, who can provide their expertise and are engaged to complement the understanding of the policy-makers through their experiences in regular meetings, for example. The last type is the partisan public which represents organizations that speak out about their opinions on a particular issue of their interests like environmental associations. Therefore, organizations in their style of communication and engagement need to use mechanisms which are best to match the characteristics and requirements of each segment of the public.

In the context of this study, the primary focus is on citizens as the primary public of the engagement activities, hence, it is crucial not to neglect one of the most used theories in this vein, the ladder of citizen engagement by Sherry Arnstein (1969). This conceptual framework has been used extensively in public administration and political studies. Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation is a seminal work in the field of public

engagement. In her article, Arnstein theorized a ladder with eight rungs, each representing a different level of citizen participation. At the bottom of the ladder, citizens are labelled as having "no power," and at the top, they have "citizen control." The ladder, as shown in Figure 2, consists of two levels of non-participation (manipulation and theory), three levels of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation) and three levels of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). Arnstein's work emphasised the importance of moving beyond superficial forms of participation towards genuine citizen empowerment in decision-making processes (Arnstein 1969).
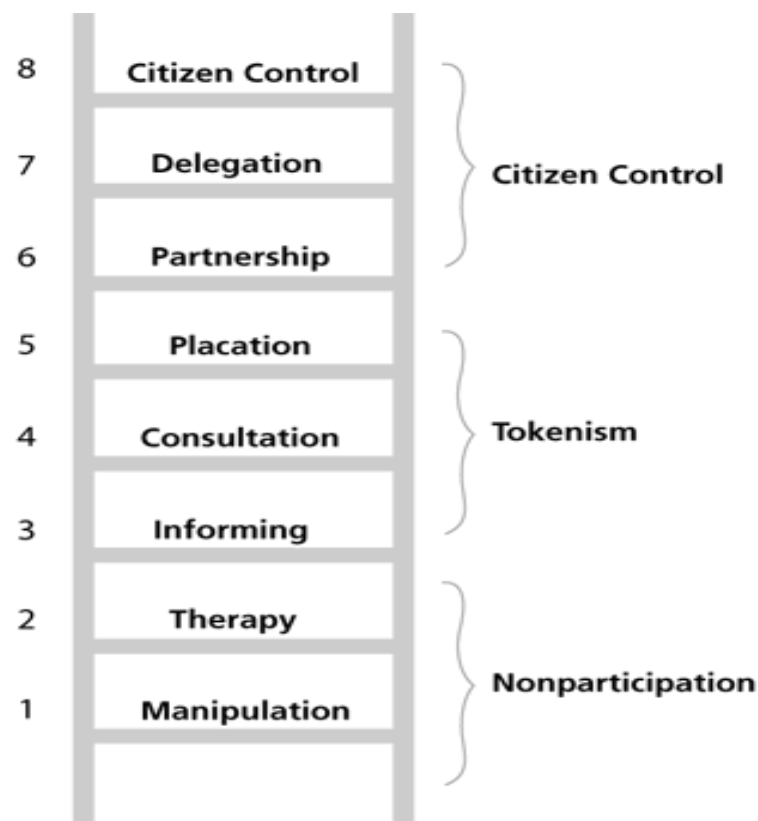
Arnstein's Ladder (1969)
Degrees of Citizen Participation

Figure 2 Ladder of citizen engagement (Arnstein 1969)

Although used widely, the ladder of engagement, however, has been criticised for many factors. Some argue that it limited and oversimplified the diverse forms of participation (e.g. Collins and Ison 2009). Others criticise that the ladder assumes a linear progression from lower to higher rungs, which may not represent the truth of citizen engagement dynamic in reality (Connor 1988). Some of these criticisms are acknowledged by Arnstein herself in her original articles as limitations of the concept. Another critique was

suggested by Collins and Ison (2006) that the concept lacks context and, importantly, does not provide a way to understand the specific context in which the ladder is applied.

Since the introduction of the ladder of citizen participation, the concept has been expanded by many scholars to deal with the complexity and nuanced nature of citizen engagement in theory and practice. One example is the attempt by Connor (1988) who proposed a new ladder, in an attempt to respond to the limitations of the original concept of the engagement ladder. According to Connor (1988: 250), the new ladder aims to "provide a systematic approach to preventing and resolving public controversy about specific policies, programs and projects whether in urban, suburban or rural settings and whether governmental or private sector in sponsorship". Other scholars have attempted to add new rungs to respond to different contexts and participation situations. For example, Botchwey et al. (2019) have added three additional rungs that they believe are crucial, especially for the involvement of the youth population. The first is incorporation which refers to the practice of seamlessly integrating and involving young people in all phases of planning and decision-making while maintaining the leadership role of adults. The second is advocacy which means the power of youth to support, argue or ask for changes in policies, systems, or decisions. When young people want to make things better, they take their ideas and suggestions to decision-makers, even if they do not ask for their input. The last rung is consent which happens when the leaders allow young people to work on a project from their perspective without necessarily disclosing their plans. Youth here get only the information they need to work on the project but are free to propose any other solutions.

In addition, Jules Pretty (1995) introduced a seven-level categorization of participation, which can be viewed as an extension of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation. While both frameworks utilised a spectrum representing varying degrees of citizen power, the endpoint of these models differs significantly. Citizen control, as outlined by Pretty, extends beyond what Arnstein's ladder encapsulates. Pretty's framework suggests the potential for altering the existing distribution of power and wealth which may or may not happen through self-mobilization, whereas Arnstein's model does not necessarily encompass such transformative potential, as indicated in the table below.

Typology	Description
Manipulative participation	Engagement involves interactions with individuals who serve as representatives on formal boards but lack both elected status and decision-making authority.
Passive Participation	Participation entails individuals receiving information about decisions that have already been made and implemented. This form of participation is characterized by one-way communications from administrative or project management authorities who do not take into account people's feedback. The information provided is typically the exclusive domain of external experts or professionals
Participation by consultation	Individuals engage through consultation or responding to queries. External actors define the issues and the methods of gathering information, thus maintaining control over the analysis. This process does not grant any role in the decision-making process, and professionals are not obliged to incorporate people's perspectives.
Participation for Material incentives	Individuals participate by providing resources, such as their labour, in exchange for compensation like food, money, or other tangible incentives.
Functional participation	External actors view people's participation as a method to attain project objectives, particularly in terms of cost reduction. Individuals may come together to fulfil predetermined aims. While this engagement can be interactive and include collaborative decision-making, it generally occurs after significant decisions have already been made by external parties. In this scenario, local

	individuals may be primarily enlisted to serve external objectives.
Interactive participation	Individuals engage in collaborative analysis, the development of action plans, and the establishment or reinforcement of local institutions. In this context, participation is regarded as a fundamental right rather than merely a tool for project objectives. The process employs interdisciplinary approaches aimed at incorporating diverse viewpoints and employs structured and systematic learning methods. As these groups assume authority over local decision-making and resource utilization, they become stakeholders in upholding local structures and practices.
Self-mobilization	Individuals engage by proactively initiating changes within systems, independently of external organizations. They establish connections with external institutions to access the resources and technical guidance required while maintaining autonomy over resource utilization. However, they may or may not change the standing distribution of power and wealth.

Table 1 Pretty's 1995 typology of participation. Adapted from (Pretty 1995; Kenny 1997)

On a more practical level, one of the critical studies conducted around citizen engagement is the 2009 OECD's study of public engagement with a focus on citizen engagement. The OECD is a distinct forum where the governments of 30 democratic nations collaborate to tackle the economic, social, and environmental issues brought about by globalization. According to OECD (2009), citizen engagement is defined as:

> All measures and/or institutional arrangements that link citizens more directly into the decision-making process of a State as to enable them to influence the public policies and programmes in a manner that impact positively on their economic and social lives (OECD, 2009: 201)

This represents an international recognition of the importance of engaging citizens to advance people's political, economic and social lives, which is a core part of this study, focusing on Oman Vision 2040, a major developmental project. Recognizing that "having a vote" is not the same as "having a say" is crucial (OECD, 2009: 202). In democratic societies, citizens are granted the right to vote for their representatives, but this does not guarantee a say in issues that matter most to them or direct involvement in decisions that significantly impact their lives (OECD, 2009). Equally, although citizens have no right to vote for the government in Oman's non-democratic society, they may participate in matters that affect their lives, such as in the case study of engagement in Oman Vision 2040. Therefore, the effectiveness of citizen engagement should not be measured against the political system of the country (for example, direct democracy, representative democracy, or non-democracy), but should rather be viewed from the perspective of how much citizens are involved, in what issue and what are the outcomes of their participation in terms of decision-making. Leston-Bandeira & Siefken (2023: 369) proposed that to understand what engagement entails, "one should differentiate between the activities that make for public engagement (e.g. information, education, participation), the effects engagement has on the citizen (e.g. feeling listened to, valued, frustrated, disillusioned) and the broader democratic outcomes that explain the need for engagement (e.g. trust, openness)". OECD (2009) indicates that governments have a critical role in promoting citizen engagement while managing expectations and avoiding misunderstandings. Their first role is to create an environment that encourages participation by removing barriers that often exclude certain groups, such as youth, the poor, or those with disabilities. The second responsibility is to define clear rules of engagement, which vary depending on the specific area of activity or service. These rules outline how the government's commitment to citizen involvement will be implemented, ensuring transparency in the decision-making process. This study has also summarised the possible outcomes of engagement into two main values: intrinsic and instrumental. Its intrinsic value lies in fostering a more engaged citizenry, enriching public discussions, promoting transparency, and enhancing accountability. It also expands the scope for citizens to make informed choices. On the practical side, citizen engagement encourages debates that build widespread consensus for government initiatives, which in turn lowers political risks and boosts the chances of success for government actions.

Having explained engagement and citizen engagement in specific, it is crucial to note that engagement in this study is seen as both developmental and democratic practice which makes it relevant in the discussion of nation-building and democracy in this thesis. In the nation-building and development context, participation refers to the process through which every individual in a community is engaged and has a say in decisions concerning development actions that will impact them (Theyyan 2018). Participation, in the context of development, has been associated with different terms and conceptual frameworks, for example, participatory governance (e.g. Fischer 2012) community development (e.g. Abbott 1995; Lachapelle 2008) and participatory development (e.g. Connell 1997; Nelson and Wright 1995).

In the context of democracy, participation is perceived as the foundation of democracy. According to Arnstein (1969: 216), "participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy-a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone". There is a widely held agreement that citizen participation in planning and implementing governance stays at the very heart of democracy. However, a wide range of opinions around the appropriate form and degree of engagement do exist. In a literature review in their article to answer the question: what sort of participation does the democratic public want? Weymouth and Hartz-Karp (2019: 2) stated that engagement ranges: "from the lack of general participation implicit in Plato's concept of philosopher-kings; to the distrust of the motives and capability of the citizenry of the American Founding Fathers, and from delegate vs trustee representation systems to the modern desire for fuller participation.". Participation for some citizens is not something they want. For example, Hibbing and Morse (2002) suggested in their book that the American public does not like political engagement, which is counterbalanced by the fear that refraining from political involvement would breed corruption and favour the political elite, compelling people to participate involuntarily. This is what the authors called the "stealth democracy". Citing Weymouth and Hartz-Karp (2019), over 50% of the Australian youth population believe that democracy is not their preferred choice of governance. It's interesting to observe that, despite decades of advocating for effective citizen engagement, not only is its precise meaning and practical implementation unclear, but it's also striking that these efforts have coincided with a significant decline in citizens' trust in their governments and democratic systems, as noted by Kettl (2000). To illustrate, in a 2021 poll, only 24% of the American population expressed trust in their government

(Bruce Stokes 2021). This decline in trust has raised a critical question: why engage in participation under these circumstances? Furthermore, it underscores the paramount importance of considering the local context in which participation occurs, which is one of the key objectives of this study. Within the scope of this thesis, the local context plays a crucial role in comprehending and defining engagement. As a result, the study will adopt an open approach, giving weight to empirical data to formulate an articulation of engagement, rather than strictly following the definitions and conceptual frameworks in the literature as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<u>Communication Engagement</u>

Having explained engagement from an organizational, developmental and political perspective earlier in this section, it is equally significant, especially for this thesis, to recognise the relevance of communication which is observed in most of the definitions and typologies of engagement provided earlier. Effective communication is a fundamental element in fostering engagement, as it serves as the channel for conveying information, facilitating dialogues, and bridging the gap between various stakeholders. The relevance of communication is clearly seen in the work of Rowe and Frewer (2005) who classify engagement based on the level of communication. Also, Arnstein's work of 1969 emphasized the importance of communication between citizens and decision-makers on the ladder of citizen participation. Additionally, the multi-level typology of participation proposed by Pretty (1995) also highlights the significance of communication, as different levels of engagement often involve varying degrees of information exchange and interaction.

Having said that, in the communication field, especially in the past decades, engagement has gained significant popularity, resulting in the development of definitions and approaches to engagement as a communicative act. Johnston and Taylor's (2018) *Handbook of Communication Engagement* highlights the widespread and dynamic nature of engagement from a communication perspective. The authors defined engagement as:

> A dynamic multidimensional relational concept featuring psychological and behavioral attributes of connection, interaction, participation, and involvement, designed to achieve or elicit an outcome at individual, organization, or social levels (Johnston & Taylor, 2018: 17).

According to Johnston & Taylor (2018), engagement can take place at various levels and can lead to different outcomes. They proposed three tiers of engagement based on the interaction level. Tier 1 refers to initial engagement activities, such as public meetings, website visits, and social media interactions. Tier 2 involves a more advanced level of behavioural engagement, fostering relationships and connections between individuals, groups, and organizations. Tier 3 represents the highest social level, where entities like activists, NGOs, and social movements collaborate on actions that can build community social capital. Engagement is also seen as "a contemporary and socially responsive approach to organizational communication practice, with outcomes aligned with concepts of a fully functioning society, ethical decision-making and the building of social capital" (Johnston 2018: 17). According to Heath (2018), communication engagement can be considered fully functioning if the society has benefited from engagement activities. In his conclusion, Heath (2018), suggested that engagement should be evaluated based on its role in contributing to a fully functioning society by fostering collective decision-making choices. The author also suggested that authentic and transparent engagement is essential to prevent crises by allowing the voices of both the marginalized and the wider public to be heard. However, engagement is not inherently democratic or responsible, especially when used by powerful organisations to manipulate public opinion. Therefore, engagement should be scrutinized, ensuring it serves the greater good rather than harmful agendas. Putting that into consideration, however, the outcomes and benefits of engagement can vary across different contexts. It is not possible to generalize that certain outcomes of engagement should be there in order to evaluate the success and benefits of engagement. For example, Gaventa and Barrett (2012) suggest that based on the variations in the context's political, economic and social maturity, the engagement outcomes can vary from a basic level of empowerment to responsive governance to full participation in decision-making. From another side, the ethical perspectives of engagement should be considered. Theunissen (2018) proposed questions about what is engagement and what are its purposes, from an ethical standpoint. According to the author, historically, to be "en-gaged" meant to be involved in a challenge or commitment but today, the meaning has expanded, including participating, capturing attention, or even starting a conflict. Despite its various meanings, however, scholars generally view engagement in a positive light, particularly in communication, where it is associated with fostering stronger relationships and making better decisions. Drawing on communication ethics, the author argues that engagement is not a neutral or universally understood

concept, but one shaped by underlying values, biases, and assumptions. Transparent, ethical and responsive decision-making is usually claimed, especially by governments, when community engagement is practised (Johnston, et al., 2018). However, ethical engagement "requires some form of involvement— cognitively and behaviorally. This suggests that engagement is not only a cognitive or emotive state of mind but also is accompanied by a willingness to be engaged, and is therefore not merely a passive antiphon to attempts from organizations or employers to create engagement. It is an active two-way process: a decisive communicative act" (Theunissen, 2018:51).

From another position, Taylor (2018) discussed engagement from a co-creational approach to public relations. This approach goes beyond focusing on functional outputs like news releases, websites, or social media interactions. Instead, it emphasizes the communication and relationships between organizations and their publics. Through communication, both organizations and groups can negotiate and reshape their relationships. The key advantage of this approach is that it views public not as tools to achieve organizational goals, but as active partners in the process of creating shared meaning. In this sense, "PR helps to create a supportive environment that ensures that people, groups, and organizations can draw upon commonly accepted values, beliefs, or experiences in an open and transparent market place of ideas" (Taylor, 2018: 111). According to the author engagement can be enacted by public relations at different levels. The first is the individual level, where co-created meaning is enhanced through direct, face-to-face communication, allowing individuals to feel connected to something bigger than themselves, which is encouraged by public relations. The second is the meso level, where PR helps individuals, groups, and organizations amplify their shared meaning into public dialogue through various media platforms, including print, electronic, and digital. Lastly, at the macro level, PR plays a role in shaping and sustaining societal systems that support collective action and engagement in public discourse.

In communication studies, engagement has also been often linked to the concept of dialogue due to the many features that both concepts share. Scholars like Kent & Taylor (2002), Kent & Taylor (2021), Taylor & Kent (2014), Lane & Kent (2018) and Sommerfeldt & Yang (2018) have situated engagement in dialogue and dialogic communication and dialogic public relations approaches. The non-academic definition of dialogue can be as simple as taking or having a conversation with others, but in scholarly works, dialogue refers to the sort of dialogic communication or genuine dialogue which

is "informed by several dozen communicative concepts that include risk, trust, empathy, positive regard, propinquity, and a willingness to be changed" (Kent & Taylor, 2021: 2). According to Lane & Kent (2018: 65), dialogic engagement should involve a number of traits: "(1) treat others as valued; (2) interactions based on dialogue and turn-taking; (3) repeated interactions; (4) relationship-based; (5) trust; (6) participants given autonomy to reach a flow or engaged state; (7) activities mutually satisfying; (8) collaboration initiated by either party; (9) no agenda or manipulation; (10) coorientative; (11) rhetorical". In public relations, Ron Pearson (1989) has set the first guideline towards effective dialogic engagement through his six rules for engagement communication. These rules as cited by Taylor & Kent (2014: 392-394) are:

1. In a dialogic interaction there should be an understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the opportunity for beginning, maintaining, and ending interactions.
2. There should be public understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the length of time separating messages or questions from answers.
3. There should be public understanding of and agreement on rules governing opportunities to suggest topics and initialize topic changes.
4. There should be public understanding of and agreement on rules for when a response counts as a response.
5. There should be public understanding of and agreement on rules for channel selection for communication.
6. There should be public understanding of and agreement on the rules for talking about and changing the rules.

In their research, Taylor & Kent (2014) have added a seventh principle because Pearson's focus was on organizational ethics, his perspective on the public was therefore framed from the organization's viewpoint. The authors think it is necessary to revise Pearson's concept of dialogue to better define the role of publics and public relations practitioners in dialogic engagement by introducing a new guiding principle which is:

7. Steps should be taken by publics to ensure that their spokespeople and leaders be trained in dialogic engagement so that they are prepared for the risks, challenges, and opportunities created by dialogue. These same steps should be taken by organizations that want to engage publics (Taylor & Kent, 2014: 394).

Engagement has been tackled from different perspectives as we have seen in the communication and public relations field. However, it is necessary to recognise that engagement should be studied at various levels: "interpersonal, organizational, community and societal level" (Taylor & Kent, 2014: 396) to enrich our understanding of the conceptualization and operationalization of engagement. This research is an attempt to respond to this need by focusing on engagement as a governmental public relations practice and delving into the details of its outcomes at the level of political-social level.

Lastly, it is important to consider how online and social media platforms have gained in significance, allowing for new forms of engagement. The digital age has not only expanded the reach and speed of communication but has also transformed the dynamics of engagement. Scholars like Dhanesh (2017); Hutchins and Tindall (2016) and Paek et al. (2013) have explored the implications of online platforms and social media, highlighting how they can empower individuals to voice their opinions, participate in public discourse, and influence decision-making processes. Hence, recognizing the big impact of communication in engagement is not only a theoretical consideration but also a practical one, specifically in the context of the growing digital environment and its impact on the participatory process.

2.3.2 Public relations in democracy debate; Political public relations and Engagement

Having described the position of public relations in nation-building earlier, this section is dedicated to explaining PR's position in the democracy debate. As noted previously, engagement is widely discussed in association with democracy, it's hence important at first to take into consideration the controversial debate about the role of PR in democracy as part of the assessment of its role in societies. That's particularly relevant when viewing PR in the context of government communication.

Many scholars and practitioners perceive public relations as a facilitator of democracy (E.g. Davis 2002; Edwards 2016; Hiebert 2005; Moloney 2006; Taylor 2000b) and this role has been explained from different perspectives like PR role in nation-building (Taylor 2000b), governmental communication (Waymer 2013), PR role in the public sphere (Hiebert 2005), PR contribution to civil society (Taylor 2000a), PR and social capital (Sommerfeldt 2013), CSR as a PR practice (Jin and Lee 2013), dialogic public relations (Taylor and Kent 2014) and the role of PR in deliberative democracy

(Edwards 2016). In contrast, many others consider public relations as a spinning practice used to achieve the desired outcomes for the organizations it serves (in this case the government) (e.g., Beder 1997; Dinan et al. 2007; Potter 2010; Stauber and Rampton 2004) and therefore PR is seen as an obstacle in the way of democracy. However, most of these studies are based on liberal democracies, revealing a gap in the literature of neglecting other local contexts with different political features that may be equally significant. Indeed, it has been acknowledged by some researchers that there is a theoretical bias in public relations in which most of PR's concepts, models and theories have been developed as practised in capitalist, Western, democratic countries (Hodges 2006). This study, therefore, stands out in its significance because it not only positions itself within the debate around public relations and democracy but also extends the debate by examining the relevance of deliberation and engagement in a less democratic, non-western nation. In this thesis, public relations is conceptualised as a strategic communication process that fosters mutual understanding and participatory relationships between the government and citizens. This conceptualization allows PR to play an essential role even in less democratic contexts, where engagement and deliberation may take alternative forms. The lack of discussion about engagement and the relevance of public relations as a strategic government communication in the literature may implicitly indicate that a democratic political system is a prerequisite for engagement and deliberation. And this assumption also, not only indirectly assumes that engagement doesn't happen in other contexts but also ignores the possibility of alternative ways of transition in these less democratic societies which was acknowledged by some researchers. For example, Jiang (2008) developed a new model to describe the deliberation practised in China which he called 'authoritarian deliberation' and he distinguished its features which differ considerably from the practised deliberation in Western democracies but still hint at a transition towards a more political opening and participation. Thus, the role of public relations in these contexts, as a tool of government communication and public engagement, highlights its ability to mediate citizen participation even outside fully democratic settings, reinforcing PR's strategic function beyond image management. Now, if we agree that engagement can be practised even in less democratic societies, the role of PR as a government communication practice, in engagement activities is a good start to understanding the role of PR in democracy and that is a core focus of this thesis. In the section below I will outline the roles of public relations in democratic practices as reviewed in the literature.

2.3.3 The role of public relations in democracy

Generally, most optimistic public relations scholars view the role of public relations in democracy through its function in the public sphere and civil society. Reviewing the existing literature, the public relations position in democracy can be understood from the perspective of two essential functions. These are the publicity function and relationship-management function as will be explained shortly. Weaver and Motion (2002: 340) noted that to realize public relations' role in communities, one should answer a set of questions: "What relationships do public relations help to construct and why? Whose meaning is being created? How is that meaning being created, and why?" The next two sections will attempt to address these questions in link to the functions of publicity and relationship-management in public relations.

A. Publicity, Media Relations and Public Sphere

The first function by which public relations can contribute to democratic engagement is publicity. Publicity is closely related to the public sphere which is very relevant when discussing democracy. To understand this, scholars examined the importance of publicity and media relations for the rise and work of the public sphere in the civil society. Publicity is about openness and accessibility to everybody. It also means "making something public or "to discuss in public" (Kleinstüber 2001: 97). The public sphere developed by Habermas (1989) is a space in which public dialogue and debate are encouraged. Publicity, then, plays an important role in "attracting attention for issues and messages in the different arenas of public communication and/or to influence the processes of public discussion" (Raupp 2004: 314) as cited by Sommerfeldt (2013). In addition, the public sphere can function effectively when multiple diverse opinions exist. The public sphere in which multiple competing voices may be heard is central to the functioning of democracy (Hiebert 2005; Sommerfeldt 2013). Similarly, Moloney (2004) considered the "pluralism of values" in the liberal-capitalist society to be a precondition for the function of democracy. He suggested that when diverse opinions are present, those with established powers like states and business organizations are challenged. Public relations, through disseminating information, can make issues to be known and therefore get public deliberation. Also, it can contribute to making conflicting interests and values known to the lay public, allowing them to position themselves in the discussion and take part in civic engagement which is necessary for the build-up of social capital (Yang and Taylor

2013). Social capital, which will be discussed shortly, is also vital to the function of democracy in civil society.

However, some scholars believe that public relations may hinder healthy democracy as publicity required for the function of the public sphere in the civil society may be dominated by wealthy corporations or the states (Hiebert 2005). Thus, inequality among the public in the public sphere might be promoted and the views of the marginalized public may not be heard. In contrast to this account, the public and counterpublics can represent their views and gain legitimacy in the public sphere if they can build good relations with the media, facilitated by a mediator such as a PR practitioner (Sommerfeldt 2013). Public relations become the voice of the public to represent their values and behaviours (Moloney 2004). For example, activist groups can gain continuous publicity through public relations programs like campaigns, media events and image events. Also, as with the use of mainstream media, they can use the alternative media which is now seen to be more trusted. One can think about how citizen journalism has raised and contributed to the publicity of news beyond the interests of the states and the dominant corporations. The alternative media have changed how public relations work. The Internet and social media can be used as a democratic yet as a propaganda tool. Although some have been arguing that online media can be used to manipulate people's minds and to mislead the public, it equally provides an arena for two-way, dialogic communication which is necessary for democracy (Kent 2013; Taylor and Kent 2014). This allows, therefore, for civic engagement in the online public sphere which often may be shifted offline.

Another criticism of public relations' role in democracy is relevant to the lack of public relations ability to meet the normative conditions of deliberative democracy. These conditions as outlined by Edwards (2016) are relevant to the publicity of the debate which should be presented openly and rationally and should involve the affected public. Public relations is accused of providing an emotional rather than rational argument through its propagandistic communication, challenging therefore the democratic conditions. Moloney (2004) however, has proposed a new way of thinking of public relations and propaganda. He termed public relations as weak propaganda and he defined it as: "means not consciously factually inaccurate, not reliant on lies and mis-information; not only emotional content, and not denying the source" (Moloney 2004: 90). Propaganda speeches are not limited to those with power. They can be heard from different kinds of

public who are striving for consideration and attention. This might involve speeches from the states, business organizations, NGOs or even the lay public. The powerless marginalised public now has acted as powerful, adopting the communication style of the powerful. As Moloney (2004: 91) stated ''they were propagandised against and now they propagandise''

To sum up, making information known to all different segments of the public is essential for the function of the public sphere to ensure a democratic process is facilitated in societies. However, issues of framing of the information, selection and representation should be considered. Also, media relations and the ability to use both old and alternative media becomes important for social members in civil society so that voices of different conflicting interests can be heard, allowing for conversation and debate to flourish and therefore public and civic engagement to be adopted.

B. Relationship Management, Civil Society and Social Capital

The building, maintaining and management of relationships is viewed as a requirement for the creation of social capital in civil society. To understand this, a definition of civil society and social capital and their relevance to democracy will be discussed first. Then the position of public relations will be demonstrated.

Civil society is a Western term that gives attention to citizen participation as a prerequisite to making a democratic society. Civil society, as defined by Mavrikos-Adamou (2010: 516), "sees citizens forming groups and associations to affect the policy making process by creating channels of communication between citizens and government, both direct and indirect channels, depending on the level of expertise and knowledge held by the group. In other words, in Western liberal democracies, civil society came to fill that space between the state and citizens with associations and organizations that acted as transmitters of citizens' interests." The civil society is also linked to the concept of the 'third sector' which is defined as "realm of informal groups-associations, clubs, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations). It derives its name from its role in a triad, where the first is the state, the second is the private sector of businesses and enterprises, and the third is the realm of citizens' initiatives" (Hemment 2004: 217)

In order for a democracy to function fully, the social actors in civil society need to be connected based on mutual trust, reciprocity, engagement and networks which are norms of the social capital (Fukuyama 2001). These norms can be cultivated through the ongoing

continuous interactions and dialogue between them. As cited by Sommerfeldt (2013: 284), according to Putnam (1994: 664–665), social capital refers to:

> The collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. . . social capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam (1994: 664–665)

Yang and Taylor (2013) suggested that social capital becomes vital to the function of the public sphere and the civil society and is, therefore, a demand for democracy. Social capital, through the accumulation of the ties between people, can empower individuals to participate in the discussion, cooperate and communicate to tackle issues of common interests and hence, foster democracy. To build up social capital, relationships and communication are required. Therefore, public relations can play a vital role here. It is through building relationships and facilitating communication among different social actors and social organizations that the profession of public relations contributes to the accumulation of social capital and supports the existence of democratic processes in societies (Yang and Taylor 2013).

Also, persuasive tools like PR campaigns can bring together divergent groups (those who belong to different cultures, classes, religions, etc.) and help them build relationships and trust in a network. If there is a gap in the network, people and organizations of the civil society cannot connect well and this may harm the sense of unity and harmony they need to function efficiently. In order to fill in the gaps, there should be a concrete structuring of relations between the unconnected social parties. This needs effective communicators who can mediate, communicate the differences of views, assist in understanding the interests of others in the network and create a system for fostering trust and relationships between members of the network (Sommerfeldt 2013). Indeed, all of this is public relations. It constitutes, in this case, a mediator between the social actors in the civil society. In the same way, public relations can empower the subaltern counterpublic through bonds and trust-building between them to form a collective unit and alliance to be able to stand for their views which might be out of concern in the predominant public sphere (Sommerfeldt 2013). The subaltern counterpublic is defined by Fraser (1990: 67) as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs". The counterpublics discourse challenges the arguments of the dominant, powerful public in the public sphere (Warner 2005). The subaltern public should recognise the need to build relationships to solve community problems (Wilson 1994). This is so-called coalition-building in public relations. For example, environmentalists can form alliances in the civil society to stand to their critical views which might be against the dominant account of the state or the business corporations. In this case, public relations prove to be an effective tool for both pluralism and inclusiveness in the public sphere (Edwards 2016), allowing both the predominant but also the marginalized public to be heard and to take part in the debate arena.

While looking at the role of public relations in promoting social capital, it's necessary to consider the question posed by Weaver and Motion (2002) about the political-economic context of the nation before assessing PR's capacity to support the democratic process. In a study to ascertain when public relations can work for the sake of democracy, Yang and Taylor (2013) found two crucial factors. The first is the socio-political and economic context of the country and the second is the level of public relations professionalization in that country. For example, they found that in authoritarian contexts, public relations is used to serve the political, social and economic agenda of the government while in some more democratic nations, public relations is used by the government and business corporations to build mutual understanding among states, business, NGOs and the subaltern public, and is used by NGOs and subaltern publics to raise their debate in the public sphere. They also found that "the professionalized public relations activities of all actors will build trust, civic participation and social capital in those societies" (Yang and Taylor 2013: 268) which will support the democratic process in the long term.

To conclude, it could be argued that public relations can play an important role in democracy. Public relations is needed to build bonds and ties and encourage understanding and trust between the social members. Relating to each other, tolerating differences, and trusting each other are preconditions for the social capital needed in the civil society and public sphere for democracy to fully function in a society.

2.4 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND INTERMEDIATION; A DEPARTURE TOWARDS MEDIATION IN POLITICS

Public relations literature has witnessed a shift in the paradigm from one that is functional, mostly "management or organization-centric approach" which primarily depicts public relations as a servant to the organizational interests, to a critical paradigm which covers "cocreational, public centred, international, and mediated theories" (Taylor and Kent 2022: 103). In the critical accounts of public relations, scholars have attempted to place public relations at the heart of societies, examining its impact and interaction within the broader social, political, economic and cultural context in which it operates. That represents the socio-cultural turn in public relations studies advocated by Edwards and Hodges (2011). Here, public relations is understood as more than a simple communication tool. It becomes a key mechanism for mediating socio-political relationships and contributing to societal cohesion, social change, and community development, particularly in the context of less democratic societies like Oman, where public engagement is crucial for nation-building. Hence, the public relations role in societies, particularly in social change, community development and democracy has been tackled by many scholars using different theoretical frameworks. As mentioned in a previous section, the frameworks vary and encompass PR's role in nation-building (Taylor 2000b), governmental communication functions (Waymer 2013), PR's functions in the public sphere (Hiebert 2005), PR's contribution to civil society (Taylor 2000a), PR and social capital (Sommerfeld 2013), CSR in PR (Jin and Lee 2013), dialogic public relations (Taylor and Kent 2014), the role of PR in deliberative democracy (Edwards 2016) and PR as cultural intermediaries (Benecke et al. 2017). This study builds on the debate about the potential of public relations in nation-building and democracy, using a theoretical framework that consists of multiple concepts around PR, nation-building and democracy. Unlike the previous studies, I attempt to consider public relations' role in mediating between the government and citizens and in shaping perceptions and ideologies about political life in Oman. It also aims to evaluate the extent to which it can facilitate participatory, bottom-up communication. For the purpose of this study, Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediation and mediation is seen as a good theoretical ground, supported by the concepts that deal with public relations in relevance to nation-building, social change and democracy such as the imagined communities, social capital, public sphere and other concepts discussed earlier to better understand this mediation in the context of the political environment, particularly in the sense of government-citizens relationship. The sections below will discuss Bourdieu's concept of cultural intermediation and its relevance to this specific thesis.

2.4.1 Bourdieu on Cultural Intermediaries

Discussing cultural intermediaries classically starts from the work of Bourdieu, particularly from his mammoth book; *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), which is largely considered a prominent sociological contribution to understanding the economic-cultural production and consumption. Based on Bourdieu's description, cultural intermediaries are tastemakers who work to satisfy the economic production needs by creating favourable tastes and dispositions in the consumption arena and therefore directing cultural change (Kobayashi et al. 2018). His study in this book was concerned with "how social stratification is reproduced and legitimated through notions of taste, as they are expressed and enacted through consumption" (Maguire and Matthews 2014:16). His findings reveal that there is a connection between the cultural meanings and practices (e.g., people's preferences, thoughts and behaviours and the social capital (which is acquired through education, social class and others).

The most prominent finding that is of great relevance to this thesis and which provides a wider picture to understand the idea of taste and meaning is that tastes are socially constructed and are acquired through certain forms of capital; economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. However, they are lived as inherent while there are constructed meanings which make them negotiable. Therefore, powerful or dominant groups can have hands on shaping the tastes in the culture for the sake of defending their social meanings (Maguire and Matthews 2014).

Considering this argument, one can make sense of the position of cultural intermediaries in the production of tastes. As described by Bourdieu, they "perform the tasks of gentle manipulation" of tastes (1984: 365). They can create new tastes or defend existing ones. Based on Bourdieu's definition, cultural intermediaries are middle-class groups who work in cultural industries and belong to the new petite bourgeoisie. He described them as those involved in the:

> Presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services. These include the various jobs in medical and social assistance…and in cultural production and organization (…radio and TV producers and presenters, magazine journalists. (Bourdieu 1984: 359)

According to Bourdieu's 1984 and 1996 conception, cultural intermediaries are basically seen as mediators between producers and consumers, or as agents working towards qualifying goods, services, practices or ideas and therefore are also negotiating and mediating between economy and culture (e.g., Cronin 2004; Maguire and Matthews 2012; Moor 2012; Smith Maguire 2008). Occupations which involve "information and knowledge intensive forms of work" (Hodges 2006) are believed to be cultural intermediaries, for example, public relations, advertising, branding consultancy and others. These occupations are fundamental to the economy and culture (Nixon and du Gay 2002). The role of cultural intermediaries is described as "shapers of taste and the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions" (Nixon and Gay 2002: 497) and as shapers of habitus which contain "corporal dispositions and cognitive templates" (King 2000: 417). Inspired by the Bourdieuian description of habitus, Edwards (2011) defines habitus as:

> The set of durable dispositions developed and inculcated over time, through family and education, that determine the way we comprehend our social environment and our role within it. It is manifest in our values, beliefs and attitudes, evident in the language we use and embodied in our behaviours, often unconsciously (Edwards 2011: 67).

The habitus as durable dispositions are an open system. They produce society and are produced by society. Although it cannot be assumed that they are easily controlled by external forces, they are open to modification (Ihlen 2007). "It is durable but not eternal" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133). The habitus has a relation with what Bourdieu called "field" which can be defined as "a social space or network of relationships between positions occupied by actors. The different positions are structured and anchored in forms of unequally shared power or capital" (Ihlen 2007: 270). The amount of capital an actor has will determine his position in the field. Bourdieu classifies the capitals into four categories: economic (e.g., money), cultural (e.g., education and knowledge), social (e.g., networks), and symbolic power which means the value an actor gets as a result of the possession of all the capitals, for example, prestige. Public relations is relevant in the sense of helping the organizations or actors it worked for, through its activities, by attaching symbolic values that align with their interests and, therefore may potentially create cultural and social meanings.

2.4.2 Public Relations and Mediation in the Political Realm

Public relations is among other occupations that are described as cultural intermediaries or more specifically new cultural intermediaries. They are producers of symbolic meanings associated with goods and services. Bourdieu identifies producers of cultural programmes and journalists as the "most typical intermediaries" (Bourdieu 1984: 315). But later added other occupations including advertising, public relations, branding consultancies and others in the classification of cultural intermediaries. From the understanding of Bourdieu's work, public relations as other intermediaries, play a role in promoting a particular habitus over others, through the representation of the desired habitus as superior and more suitable. In this way, PR works as a mediator between producers and consumers, governments and citizens, charity and donors, celebrities and fans through the promotion of particular habitus to reach desired outcomes. While this dynamic has been majorly studied in relation to the economic-cultural production and consumption, cultural intermediaries can offer a good way to understand where public relations fits in the political-social field as well. First of all, it allows for understanding the role of public relations in the process of mediation between the government and citizens, and hence, politics and society. Second, it allows for examining public relations as "producers of symbolic value" (Maguire and Matthews 2012: 551), in which public relations practitioners, and other occupations like journalists, work for "transforming or disguising interests into disinterested meanings and legitimizing arbitrary power relations" (Edwards 2006: 230). Attaching values to tangible or intangible resources, normalising them and even giving them more value is the way producers of symbolic power work to legitimise organizations or people they work for. Thus, taking the ideas of mediation and production of symbolic meaning is believed to contribute to answering the questions of this thesis; how public relations mediate citizen engagement for nation-building, what potential role it can play in political and social changes and what are the implications on the government-citizens relationship.

As stated earlier, although the previous researches heavily concentrate on the work of intermediaries as value producers mostly in the commercial and industrial field, I aim to adapt this concept to study the realm of politics, considering the functions of public relations in producing symbolic values and in the process of presentation, representation and consumption. This approach will allow for considering questions of agency and power in the political system, considering the power of different actors, for example, the

political authority, the governmental institutions and citizens who are believed to be no more passive, if they ever were. For the purpose of this study, I'm considering the variables and concepts offered by Bourdieu and other researchers on cultural intermediaries, while adapting their ideas to governmental public relations and its potential in constructing social meanings, symbolic values and beliefs in the political arena. Rather than focusing merely on the relationship between culture and economy, I aim to shift the discussion to think and question public relations potential in mediating between politics and society, central to the nation-building and democracy approach of this thesis.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Bourdieu's intermediation concept in this study not only contributes to addressing the research question but also partially fills a gap in this concept by addressing the absence of the political element when analysing the functions of cultural intermediaries. Bourdieu described cultural intermediaries as producers of 'the belief in the value of the work' (1996: 229). According to Maguire and Matthews (2010: 408), they have a "pedagogic function" by which practitioners serve as producers, shapers and manipulators of consumers' beliefs, values and preferences and therefore affect their behaviours for the desired intended outcome. For Maguire and Matthews (2010: 408), they simply, "add value". This value can be attached to anything, not necessarily to commercial work, for example to goods, services or ideas. It can be equally attached to values of citizenship, values of a governmental practice (for example engagement activity), values of national identity, values of a presidential speech and so on. Therefore, intermediaries are impeded in political practice. Politics affect and are affected by the mediation of the intermediaries. This is why some researchers have recognized the importance of politics and considered the political factor to understand cultural intermediaries. For example, Cronin and Edwards (2022) called for an urgent need to consider the politics and the political in cultural intermediary research which they think is of no existence in the relevant studies. For them, a neutral distinction between politics, culture and economy should not be taken for granted and should be reconsidered as the distinction between these spheres is blurred. From here, came the significance of this study as a shift in the paradigm from the classical consideration of cultural intermediaries in the economic-cultural sphere to the consideration of their role in the political-social realm.

2.4.3 The Theoretical Framework

A. A multi-conceptual theoretical framework

According to Pieczka (2019), communication scholars are faced with the challenge of "theoretical disjuncture" in communication-related fields such as public communication, public relations and communication for social change. Pieczka (2019: 231) suggests that recently, scholars have moved to "embrace non-linear models of communication for social change, and appear to embrace hybridity to deal with the theoretical confusion in the field". Following this hybridity perspective, this study adopts a sociological, cultural-centred perspective, embracing a multidisciplinary approach within its theoretical framework. As noted from the concepts discussed earlier in this chapter, the theoretical foundation of this research draws upon a diverse range of concepts derived from the realms of development, political, communication and sociological studies, all of which are instrumental in investigating the roles of public relations in the complex dynamics of nation-building, democracy, and engagement. Within this sociological-cultural framework, the theory of cultural intermediation proposed by Bourdieu in 1984 is perceived as relevant in alignment with the other theoretical concepts set before. Bourdieu's perspective on cultural intermediation, power structures, and the dynamics of influence align closely with the central theme of this study, which revolves around how PR facilitates and mediates citizen engagement activities. Bourdieu's work can provide insights into these core correlations, facilitating a deeper understanding of PR's role in shaping public opinion, empowering citizens and fostering engagement. However, since the focus of this research is on the role of public relations in the communicative process of public engagement initiatives by the government as well as studying the mediation between government and citizens, Bourdieu's perspective on cultural intermediaries alone will lack understanding of the specificity of the political communication and engagement. Therefore, there is a need for a theoretical ground based on governmental and political communication theories. That's why the study integrates elements from other theoretical frameworks, including the public sphere, citizen engagement, and the functions of PR in nation-building and democracy as explained earlier. The public sphere theory, for example, with all its communicative and political aspects can help to conceptualise intermediation in the political field in many ways. First, the public sphere is described as located between the state and society (Habermas 1996) and it is the closest framework for studying democracy (Sommerfeldt 2013) which in this case is represented by citizen engagement activities for nation-building. Second, this framework can help situate public

relations in the mediation process between politics and society by studying PR's communicative practices and their contribution to the development of public opinion and the public sphere. By integrating these various dimensions, the study can gain a comprehensive theoretical foundation that aligns with the complex sociopolitical landscape it seeks to investigate. Having said that, it is still crucial to recognize that while these concepts may seem distinct and address varied topics, they fundamentally converge into the very heart of the overarching wider debate on the role of public relations in society.

B. A Cultural-Centred Approach

In this study, two approaches have informed the theoretical organization of this research. The first is Moor's (2008) three-fold approach to the examination of cultural intermediaries. Moor (2008), who was inspired by researchers such as Nixon and Du Gay (2002) built up her analysis on three foundations which are historizing the occupation, examining material practice (the everyday functions) and assessing the impact. Moor used this method to examine the branding consultants as cultural intermediaries based on a historical and empirical analysis of the branding industry in the UK. Each of these elements is built upon Bourdieu's (1984) early conception and is thought to be a good guide for future studies of cultural intermediaries (Maguire and Matthews 2010). Through the use of these three foundations; the history, the everyday practice and the impact, I aim to understand the occupation of public relations, from the lens of the cultural intermediaries' framework. The second approach is Hodges's (2006) model of the circuit of cultural intermediation (See Figure 3).

- Habitus
- Occupational identities
- Experiences
- Social Networks

Practitioner lifeworld

PRO CULTURE

- Knowledge
- Rules and Norms
- Socialisation

Occupational structure

Structure of society

- Socio-cultural structure
- Political and legal Structure
- Economic Structure
- Historical influences
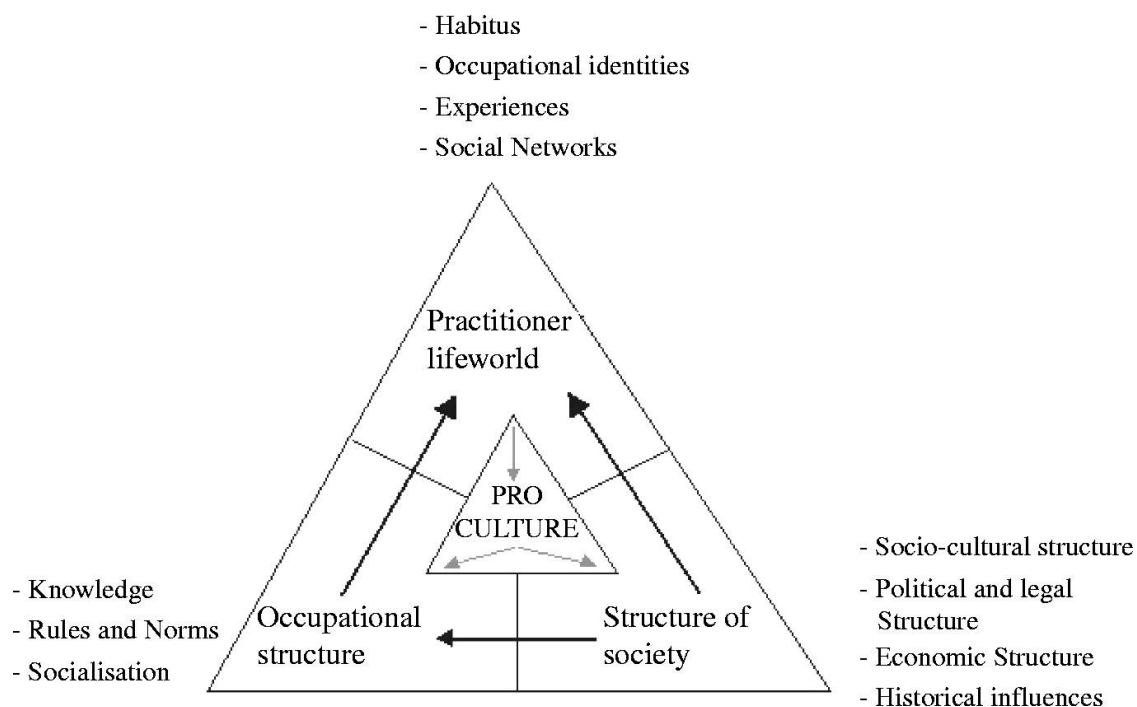
Figure 3 The circuit of cultural intermediaries by Hodges (2006)

Hodges defines three components to be studied to understand the public relations profession as a cultural intermediary. These are the society's structure (political, social, economic, cultural and historical), occupation structure (knowledge, rules and norms) and the practitioner's lifeworld which includes the practitioner's habitus, identity, perceptions and experiences. Previous researchers have found these two frameworks to be useful. For example, utilising the circuit of culture as a theoretical departure, Hodges and Edwards (2014) used Moor's three dimensions to describe the process through which public relations as a communication practice have a hand in producing, distributing, consuming, qualifying and representing meanings. Also, Maguire and Matthews (2010) used the same approach in their review of case studies of cultural intermediaries with the aim to provide a theoretical introduction to what constitutes cultural intermediaries with a focus on the practices and their impacts. More recently, Benecke et al. (2017) also used the circuit of culture to understand the role of young cultural intermediaries in creating meaning through a digital empowerment project in South Africa.

Both Moor's and Hodges's approaches intersect in their dimensions. Inspired by the two approaches (combined), with the addition of one more dimension I proposed, this study has been theoretically organised around the following components:

1- **The profession contextualization:** Moor's first dimension (historizing the profession) and Hodges's structure of society dimension have inspired me to

emphasize the importance of the contextual factors influencing the practice. Therefore, I considered at first historizing public relations in the context of nation-building and providing a deep examination of the political, economic, and sociocultural factors in which public relations operate (see Chapter 4).

2- **Practitioners' perceptions:** Hodge's practitioner's lifeworld as well as Moor's overall approach has informed me to consider the practitioner's perspective and articulation of the activity under examination (engagement in the case of this study). Understanding PR's role in creating social realities largely depends on our understanding of "PRP culture – their values, attitudes and behaviours, their perceptions of effective practice, their stories, experiences and visions for the future, and their perceptions of their relation to other fields" (Hodges and Edwards 2014: 95). This is one reason why I dedicated Chapter 5 to articulating engagement from the perspective of the practitioners.

3- **Material Practice**: Moor's everyday practice dimension and the occupational culture in Hodge's model suggest that considering public relations functions is important to understand their role in the intermediation dynamic. In chapter 6 I started by clarifying the status and functions of public relations in Oman.

4- **The impact:** Moor's last dimension; the impact of the practice constitutes a central theme of this study. However, Moor considered only the impact from the viewpoint of the practitioners (offered in Chapter 6). Both Moor's and Hodges's approaches are limited in terms of considering the consumption part which I proposed in the following dimension.

5- **Audience agency**: I believe in the necessity to look at the consumers (in this case citizens) as creators of meaning and influencers on the meaning constructed by PR or any other intermediary, introducing their perspectives on both the practice and impact of PR communication in this matter. In this way, I aim at stretching Moor's (2008) and Hodge's (2006) pillars to one more dimension which I call the audience agency (citizen agency). Considering audience agency is particularly vital when putting into mind that mediation is not a passive process, but rather is active one in which both producers and consumers could be part of constructing social meaning. Particularly, with the advancement of media and its features, including the web and social media, it becomes even more substantial to study the impact of audience on shaping habitus and their effect on the intended meaning by the cultural intermediaries. Maguire and Matthews (2012) noted that there is a

cultural turn which resulted in many significant works that consider the consumer agency. For Maguire and Matthews (2012), we all have a hand in forming values, which is the basic work of cultural intermediaries as described by Bourdieu. In my account, I don't agree with the idea that everyone can be a cultural intermediary as we all simply can create or help in creating values because cultural intermediaries are of professional expertise, are regulated by particular economic or political interests and are working, strategically and deliberately, towards a set of strategic desired aims and objectives. However, I argue that consumers are not passive and therefore can incorporate themselves, either consciously or unconsciously in the meaning shaping and the creation of values. Consumers are powerful, they can foster, create, maintain or reject a value created by intermediaries and hence, it's equally vital to consider their impact on the work of cultural intermediaries. Therefore, Chapter 7 of this thesis is dedicated to addressing the impact of the mediated engagement from the citizen's perspective.

Having explained that, this research is theoretically significant in its way to moving forward, beyond the classical discussion about intermediation, toward political public relations and its implication on the social-political relation and in the nation-building process. And because of the involvement of a democratic and public engagement discussion, I assume that a cultural approach alone will not be sufficient to understand the complexity of the intersection between the creation of social meaning and the implication of these meanings on democratization, empowerment and nation-building. This is why, as previously mentioned, the study utilises different concepts such as citizen engagement from political and communicative perspectives, the public sphere among others to form a robust theoretical ground for the study.

2.5 SUMMARY

This chapter aims to review the literature relevant to public relations intermediation in nation-building and democracy and also aims to set the theoretical foundation for this study. Public relations has been always a controversial occupation with lots of opponents who perceived it as a practice to maintain the existing status quo, reinforcing the existing power relations and using persuasive techniques that serve the elites, either governments or corporations. As cited by Weaver et al. (2006: 7), L' Etang stated that it becomes "a truism for public relations to do more public relations to increase public understanding of its role in society". There are increasing numbers of studies which depict public relations

as a practice that can hold beneficial traits for society as explained throughout this chapter. And that's mostly through its informational and relational functions, inherent to the PR profession. In this thesis, public relations is conceptualized as a strategic communication process that goes beyond elite-serving practices, fostering participatory relationships between governments and citizens, especially in nation-building contexts. This chapter, while acknowledging that PR may be used to serve its clients, focuses on the potential roles and relevance of public relations in nation-building. It focuses on citizen engagement as a democratic practice involved in nation-building efforts, especially, when knowing that concepts of civil society and the public sphere have offered a paradigm shift in development communication towards participatory communication (Dutta-Bergman 2005). In this context, public relations' role as a government communication practice links directly to fostering participatory relationships, contributing to sociopolitical change and community engagement which are key aspects of this study. In doing so, the chapter also reflects the shift in the paradigm from the functional focus which mostly considers PR as an organizational practice to the critical paradigm which studies the complex elements of public relations that place public relations at the heart of societies. That is done with a specific focus on governmental public relations, central to this study.

This chapter reveals some gaps in the literature. First, the nation-building approach in public relations is still developing and there are not as many studies in this vein. Most of the studies focus either on the government practices for nation-building (e.g., Chaka 2014.) or the NGOs practices for society's development (e.g., Dabbs 2013) with little attention to the public affected, for example, citizens. Also, most of the studies are based on Western, democratic, capitalist nations, with a noticeable absence to the other contexts, especially the South in which countries are still developing and their political, economic, social and cultural features can vary greatly. Despite the steady growth in international public relations academic work, it is "under-studied, under-theorized, and, perhaps, under-practiced" (Curtin and Gaither 2004: 34). In specific, there are few public relations studies dedicated to examining the Arab world and the Middle East (Al-Kandari and Gaither 2011). "Public relations is present to varying degrees in all countries and all sociopolitical systems" (Curtin and Gaither 2007: 8) and therefore these different contexts should be taken into account to understand international public relations. Studies in marginalized spaces in the world can offer different views and alternative ways to understand public relations and communication practices (Dutta-Bergman 2005;

Somerville et al. 2016). That is because assumptions about the practice in itself can vary among different contexts, making it function differently. Taylor and Kent (1999: 131) mentioned that "many of the assumptions that guide Western theories and practices are not applicable in other regions of the world".

Lastly, the chapter also aims to guide the study by establishing its theoretical foundation. Reviewing the literature, and given the multi-disciplinary nature of this research that encompasses theories, concepts and direction from different disciplines such as political studies, mass communication and media studies, governance, nation-building, administrative studies as well as sociological and cultural studies. This literature guides a multi-concepts approach, towards the theoretical ground of the study, encompassing mainly concepts derived from nation-building, democracy, political communication and sociological perspectives. Theories like imagined communities, typologies of engagement, PR in democracy, and Bourdieu's cultural intermediation are seen as a good foundation to inform this study. What's unique in this study is the seamless adaptation of the concepts and theories, for example, the use of Bourdieu's intermediation to understand PR mediation in politics, to form a solid conceptual foundation for this specific study.

CHAPTER 3

THE METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is dedicated to explaining the empirical work conducted for this research. It aims to provide a critical discussion about the research process and the methods used to collect and analyse data, discussed from both theoretical and reflective stances, covering the variables that affected the research, the limitations and the researcher's role in the process. In essence, this chapter aims to delve into not only the 'what' and 'how' but also crucially the 'why' in the empirical research. My methodology process will be explained utilizing the research onion model (see Figure 4), which offers a comprehensive way to reflect on and explain the various stages of the empirical research.
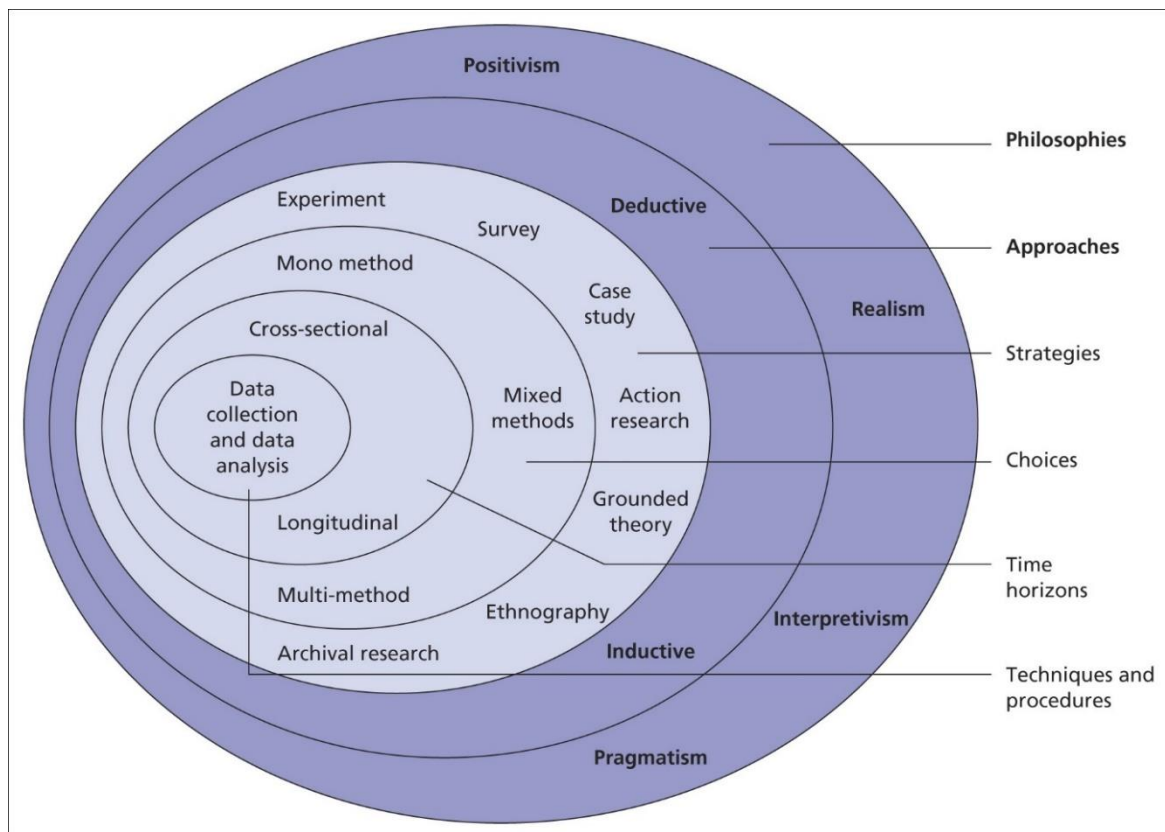
Figure 4 Research onion model by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2008

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Since the start of my PhD journey, I have been significantly influenced by the advocacy of many public relations scholars, including my PhD supervisor Professor Anne Cronin, who has called for a shift in public relations research towards a critical socio-cultural paradigm. Specifically, the work of Edwards and Hodges (2011), *Public Relations, Society & Culture: Theoretical and Empirical Explorations,* had a great impact on my research philosophy on the level of both theoretical and methodological perspectives. There is a shift that public relations studies are witnessing from the dominant normative functional research to a paradigm that locates public relations at the heart of society, culture and politics. While the functional approach, represented mainly by the 'Grunig school', is deemed crucial for understanding the profession, it primarily depicts public relations as an organizational tool directed mainly at serving the interests of its organization, overlooking the broader societal impacts of the practice. This tendency is evident in the perspective offered by Grunig, as cited by Edwards and Hodges (2011):

> Public relations contributes to organisational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organisation's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organisation. Public relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Public relations is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the senior public relations manager is a member of the dominant coalition where he or she is able to shape the organization's goals and to help determine which external publics are most strategic. Edwards and Hodges (2011: 2)

This perspective clearly symbolises public relations as a servant for the organization's interests, disregarding any interests of the audience, failing therefore to acknowledge the dual roles that may potentially emerge as a result of advancing and legitimising the interests of one position (Edwards and Hodges 2011).

From another perspective, with the development of the critical work of public relations in the socio-political-cultural contexts, the perspective of considering power which is vital in such studies remains problematic. That's because most of these studies, ontologically, perceived public relations as a distinct entity from both the structures that influence its actions and the agents responsible for performing these actions. Hence, most of these studies, according to Edwards and Hodges (2011) develop a view of either seeing public relations as a source of domination or as a force of change, without capturing the

complexity of public relations where both aspects could coincide. In this study, public relations is understood as a strategic communication process that is both shaped by and shapes the socio-political environment, particularly in the context of the Omani government. It is viewed not simply as a communication tool, but as intertwined with the broader dynamics of power and engagement. Ontologically, this thesis adopts a position that views public relations as neither entirely dominated by structural forces nor completely autonomous. Instead, it exists in a dynamic interplay between structure and agency. In the case of Oman, public relations is hypothesized to embody a dual nature. On one hand, it operates within the constraints of powerful structures (e.g., the government), which use communication to maintain societal order and legitimize authority. On the other hand, public relations can be a catalyst for change by promoting public engagement, dialogue, and nation-building. Thus, the ontological position of this study recognizes that public relations, especially in governmental contexts, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its relationship with the socio-political structures it serves and the agents (e.g., public relations officials) who enact it. That is why the interviews with governmental officials form an important part of the study's empirical data. However, including interviews with citizens is also essential for capturing the perspectives of those affected by public relations practices. This dual focus on both officials and citizens allows for a nuanced analysis of how public relations operates as both a tool of domination and a force for engagement in Oman. In this study, therefore, I have a hypothesis that suggests the dual nature of public relations in the context of the Omani government, which is influenced by the structure posed by powerful party, potentially, however, serving as both a tool of domination and a catalyst for change. The research particularly focuses on a non-democratic setting where media, public relations, and journalism are seen as tools for legitimizing existing power and maintaining the societal status quo. Through its constructive and interpretive approach, this study seeks to explore these nuanced relationships and offer alternative perspectives on public relations, trying to test the stated hypothesis.

In this socio-cultural turn, Edwards and Hodges (2011) also advocated that the context should be an integral part of the epistemology of the socio-cultural view of public relations as it is insufficient to analyse the profession in isolation from the context in which they are created and consumed. Given the primary focus of this study on the context (Oman) as a factor that may challenge our notions and understanding of public

relations practices in such contexts, I see the questions that Edwards and Hodges (2011) suggested in relevance to the context as a great contributor to developing the perspective of this study. The authors suggested that for a socio-cultural critical account to be developed, there are areas that should be covered, among which is the context in which public relations is produced. The questions they think are relevant here can be those like:

> What aspects of the social and cultural context produce and sustain different forms of public relations? How do changes in the context change the role and substance of public relations? How do the profession and its professionals manage the demands and fluidity of the context? How is public relations affected by different histories? (Edwards and Hodges 2011: 7)

For such questions to be answered, for my hypothesis to be tested and for my research questions outlined in Chapter 1 to be answered, I adopted a constructivist, interpretivist approach for this study which is explained below.

3.2.1 A Constructivist-Interpretivist Approach

Having explained the shift to the socio-cultural paradigm in public relations, the research methodology derived from the researcher's philosophy is of great impact if aiming to locate the study within this shift. According to Macnamara (2012), the functional, organisation-based theories of public relations like the models of public relations, the role theory, the excellence model and the system theory fall under the positivist nature, one that recognizes 'working with an observable social reality and that the end product of such research can be law-like generalisations similar to those produced by the physical and natural scientists' (Remenyi et al. 1988: 32). Macnamara (2012), acknowledged that scholars have different views of whether these public relations functional studies fall under the positivist or post-positivist approach, however, he suggested that:

> In contrast with positivist/post-positivist modernist notions of singular truth and certainty discovered through scientific research methods, and attendant behaviourist and functionalist approaches designed to achieve or 'engineer' consensus, postmodern thinking is grounded in interpretivism, constructivism and acceptance of diversity and dissensus. The former leads to command and control approaches in PR working on behalf of organizations and elites (i.e. organization-centric), while the latter informs critical thinking and societally orientated approaches. (Macnamara 2012: 371)

Considering the research's aim to situate itself in the critical socio-cultural studies of public relations, an interpretivist approach is being therefore adopted.

With a specific focus on how to view the context of the study, this approach has also informed my research ontological and epistemological position. Thus, my ontological stance is derived from the constructionist. This perspective suggests that reality is not objective and pre-existing but is rather socially constructed through the interpretations of individuals. Reality in constructivism is seen as subjective, depending on comprehending how social actors create their reality based on their social and cultural contexts (Cupchik 2001). One prominent figure in the constructivist approach is Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who in their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality (1966)* argued that reality is an ongoing human accomplishment that is constructed and maintained through social interactions. They highlighted the role of language, symbols, and shared meanings in shaping individual and collective perceptions of reality. According to the authors, reality and knowledge rely on specific social contexts and "these relationships will have to be included in an adequate sociological analysis of these contexts" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 15). Sociological analysis needs to be supported by critical investigations of "the software (culture, beliefs, values …) and hardware (social structures, status, institutions …) of society deeply rooted in the everyday consciousness of people, and that it provides a framework that can be used to characterize such consciousness" (Dhakal 2019: 3). Taking this into account, the sociological thinking can allow for pluralism of interpretations and it allows for competing ideas to coexist. Reflecting on his experience in sociology, Béteille (2009) suggests that there is no single, universally accepted viewpoint in the studies of societies. The author advocates accepting that multiple viewpoints can exist, even in the same society itself and that this acceptance is needed to progress sociological thinking.

> Even within the same society there generally is a plurality of standpoints, varying with religion, class, gender or moral and intellectual predilection, and, besides, different outsiders may view the same society from different standpoints (Béteille 2009: 210).

Affected by the ontological view explained above, which according to Gray (2004) informs the researcher's epistemology, I adopt an interpretivist epistemology for this research. Interpretivism is an epistemological stance that stresses the significance of

understanding social phenomena through the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to them (Melnikovas 2018). In contrast to positivism, which seeks to uncover universal laws governing objective reality, interpretivism emphasises that social reality is complex and best understood through the perspectives of the individuals involved (Hiller 2016; Saunders et al. 2003). This means that knowledge is embedded in an individual's beliefs, values, localities, and political and cultural positions and hence is "not universal" (Hiller 2016: 103). This approach is associated with qualitative data through which the weight is given to the perspectives and meanings the participants hold and that also requires the researcher to get involved with his/her recruits (Daymon and Holloway 2010). According to Saunders et al. (2003: 118), in this approach, research is bounded by value, and therefore "the researcher is part of what is being researched, cannot be separated and so will be subjective".

Having said that, I do acknowledge that the knowledge generated in this study might be subjective, and context-specific and is shaped by the perceptions and perspectives of the participants. Yet, it allows for capturing the experiences and meanings held by both government and citizens, allowing for a deep and rich explanation and understanding of the nuanced relationship between public relations and intermediation in politics in this specific context. It also allows for capturing the details of the complex interplay of economic, social, cultural and political features which are vital to put the perspectives of the participants into its context; something that can be hardly gained through quantitative data.

3.2.2 Limitations of the chosen approach

While the constructivist-interpretivist approach offers valuable insights into the subjective and socially constructed nature of reality, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this epistemological and ontological stance. The researcher here works as "a co-constructor of knowledge, of understanding, and interpretation of the meaning of lived experience" (Lincoln et al. 2011: 110). The researcher, while interpreting the meanings offered by the participants, can be inevitably influenced by his own beliefs, values and experiences. Knowledge, hence, becomes 'intersubjective' (Hiller 2016: 103), reflecting the interaction of the researcher and his recruits. That is even more true if the researcher herself belongs to the same context as the participants, such as in my case. However, in order to minimise the bias in data interpretation, I followed some

of the insights offered by Noble and Smith (2015) to try minimising the bias in the research process. First, early in the research process, I reflected on my personal views on the topics of the thesis. Also, during my data analysis, I was constantly writing about the similarities and differences and comparing the different accounts to make sure different perspectives were covered. Lastly, I tried my best to engage with other researchers, especially those who have researched in similar areas, in the same context. Some of them are interested in very relevant topics like social activism in Oman through social media, journalistic reporting of the political news in Oman, and public relations through presidential speeches in Oman.

Another challenge of this approach is generalizability which means "how applicable theories, which are generated in one setting, are to other settings" (Carcary 2009: 15).

> Interpretivist knowledge comprises the reconstruction of inter–subjective meanings, the interpretive understanding of the meanings humans construct in a given context and how these meanings interrelate to form a whole. Any given interpretive reconstruction is idiographic, time– and place–bound; multiple reconstructions are pluralistic, divergent, even conflictual. Greene (2010) as cited by Hiller (2016: 68)

Greene's description of knowledge as idiographic, time and place-bound, proves the problematic issue of generalisability of such research. However, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), knowledge can be transferred, yet it is the task of the practitioners and other future researchers to apply the knowledge to their specific settings while taking into consideration the context in which they operate. To allow for this transfer, the researcher needs to offer thick and well-expressed context information. I, therefore, attempted in this research to be as reflective and informative about the context as I could, writing a whole context chapter (see Chapter 4) that not only broadly defines Oman but addresses the specific issues of public relations, engagement and nation-building historically in this setting.

Reliability and consistency of the findings are other criticisms of this approach. Reliability is about the possibility of repeating the same research and cross-checking the findings. The challenge here, is that even if the study is repeated, it is difficult to obtain the same results, as participants can change their perspectives as well as other researchers might interpret it differently (Carcary 2009; Zembik 2016). However, in the interpretive

approach, the researcher should be able to show that she has not created or misrepresented the data. Scholars have suggested some strategies for maintaining confirmability including the suggestion to develop a research audit trail, originated first by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The audit should involve documenting and reflecting on every step of the research process, surely more important is data collection and analysis. While theoretically, that might seem perfect, practically, it is rarely conducted (Carcary 2009). In this research, I did not develop such an audit firmly, yet I tried to be reflective throughout the research by writing notes at different stages about decisions, my feelings, my perceptions and interpretations. Although it looks a little messy, it helps me make decisions about data collection methods, the study samples, the interpretation of the data, mostly the coding process and the development of the themes. Messy notes here and there are kept in a file for my revision whenever needed.

3.3 THE RESEARCH APPROACH: GROUNDED THEORY IN *'STYLE'*

Selecting the appropriate research approach is crucial to the successful handling of the research question. My research question as stated in Chapter 1 is: how public relations mediate citizen engagement for nation-building in Oman, while it says *how*, it unfolds the *what* and sometimes the *why*. Especially, when noting that not much is written about either citizen engagement, public relations or nation-building in the context of Oman. Putting all of these concepts in one question, therefore, was a challenging task, starting from the initial steps of reading about the topic and trying to understand the relevant literature. Therefore, I consider my research journey as a discovery one and I consider my research as both explorative and descriptive in nature. Having said that I see that the nature of my research fits, in part, into the grounded theory as a methodological approach. Grounded theory (GT) which was first developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the mid-1960s is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups, known as social processes (Noble and Mitchell 2016: 34). It involves "an open, reflexive form of research where data collection, analysis, the development of theoretical concepts and the literature review occur in a cyclical and interactive process" (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 130).

However, the full application of the original grounded theory in practice is not common, even though many studies claim they have done it (Daymon and Holloway 2011). That's

mainly because of the need for extensive constant comparison, systematic analytical measures, the need for theoretical sampling and more importantly fulfilling the main aim of this approach which is developing a theory (Daymon and Holloway 2011). Daymon and Holloway (2011) have recognised these challenges and suggested that the researcher can employ a simpler version of the approach, following some of its procedures, such as inductive reasoning which has led to the development of a conceptual framework derived from the data. In this way, they concluded the researcher can be classified as employing the '*style*' of the grounded theory, rather than following strictly '*the full-blown grounded theory approach*'. (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 144).

Given the complexity, time and resources-consuming nature of this approach (Allan 2003) and inspired by Hodges (2005) who studied public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in the city of Mexico, I followed the *style* of the grounded theory in the sense of two main things. First, I conducted my research cyclically and reflectively, starting at first with collecting information about the context, from secondary data. For example, that's why, the first chapter I wrote was the context chapter (Chapter 4). However, in collecting and sorting out the secondary data, I aimed to conclude an understanding of the public relations role in nation-building, in a way that has not been written in previous research. Performing a critical reading of the secondary data of Oman as a context, its journey in nation-building, and the practice of public relations historically, I concluded the role of public relations throughout the different stages of nation-building in Oman. I consider this chapter as crucial to understand later how public relations works in citizen engagement. Second, I see my role as a researcher as an 'interpreter', not only a describer of the data (Hodges 2005: 54). I think, taking secondary data and creating a whole complete novel meaning out of it is critical and of value to the research. In this process to develop such understanding, I needed to refer back and forth to the literature and the context information to create such understanding. Since then, I used the same way to analyse the data at hand. The process has then become more systematic and involves a repetitive cycle of data collection and analysis along with referring back to the conceptual frameworks in the literature and the contextual information. While I will say the inductive approach was prominent in analysing my data later on, I describe the process as a simultaneous inductive and deductive approach that enables me to use the primary data, secondary data of the context and the literature at the same time to be able to interpret the data and generate meanings out of them. Classically, the grounded theory is described as

mainly an inductive process but that is a very simplistic way to perceive it (Glaser and Strauss 1967). It is far more complex and should be thought of as a blend of both induction and deduction directed at 'theory building' (Saunders et al. 2003). This is a highly important aspect that allows the flexibility needed for such an explorative study where not much is known about its context. On another side, it allows for discovering the nuanced relationship between a set of interplays of factors that affect our understanding of the situation, including the political, cultural, economic and social; something that might be challenging using solely one approach of induction or deduction.

3.4 THE RESEARCH STRATEGY: CASE STUDY; OMAN VISION 2040

It is useful at this point to recap first the research questions stated in Chapter 1. The main research question is:

How does public relations mediate citizen engagement for nation-building in Oman?

The sub-questions are:

1. What does citizen engagement in Oman look like, and how does it influence the normative communication values associated with engagement?
2. What does public relations in the context of Oman and particularly for Oman Vision 2040 entail?
3. What is the role and impact of public relations in mediating citizen engagement for national development?
4. *What are the outcomes and impacts of the mediated citizen engagement for Oman's democratization and nation-building?*

These questions revolve around three basic concepts: public relations, citizen engagement, and nation-building which reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of this study covering areas of communication, democracy, and development studies, not to mention that those intersect with political and sociological disciplines at different points. The questions may seem general, except that they identify a specific context which is Oman. However, the study, indeed, relies on a specific national development project; Oman Vision 2040, as a base for answering these questions. This specific project serves as a case study to answer the research questions.

A case study as "a methodological approach or a research design" as identified by Daymon and Holloway (2011: 114) is defined as:

> Case study research involves intensive and holistic examination – using multiple sources of evidence (which may be qualitative and quantitative) – of a single phenomenon (such as an issue, a campaign, an event or even an organization) within its social context, which is bounded by time and place. Often a case study is associated with a location, a set of people such as a social or professional group, an organization or a community Daymon and Holloway (2011:115)

Putting this definition into application for this study, Oman Vision 2040 provides a unit of study to delve into the details so one can offer a comprehensive examination, using qualitative sources to gather information about this specific project. The study is bounded by a specific timeline (see section 3.5.3), although Oman Vision 2040 is an ongoing project until 2040. According to the official website of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit:

> Oman Vision 2040 is the national reference for economic and social planning for the period of 2021-2040, and the source of national sector strategies and five-year development plans. It was put in place under the wise guidance of His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, and carried forward by His Majesty Haitham Bin Tarik. After being developed with extensive participation by the community, Oman Vision 2040 was approved by His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik in 2020, then it was put into action as of early January 2021 and will remain in force till 2040.

The vision has been promoted as a project that involves community participation at every single stage from its preparation to its ongoing implementation. A quick look at the website of the vision makes anybody recognize the efforts put to promote participation in the Vision, not to mention that every official document and relevant social media account is putting community participation forward in the beginning of any communication product. For example, the following quote is taken from the Home page of the official website of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit.

> In order to enhance the role of the different sectors of the Omani society in building the future of our country, Oman Vision 2040 has developed a participatory approach at which individuals from different parts of Oman shared their views and inputs at different stages of the Vision development. It targeted the government and private sectors, civil society institutions, municipal councils,

academic institutions, and other sectors such as women, youth, media professionals, people with special needs, university and school students, in addition to a group of expatriates.

This sort of wide participation, which will be explained in Chapter 4, is unique to Oman and can be considered fairly as the first of its kind, given the institutionalised and organized community participation initiatives in this project. This observation has encouraged me to do some more research about this particular project, to eventually end up choosing this project as a case study for this research. Yin (2009) suggests that a case study research design can be used in the following situations: when you are addressing a how or why question, when you aim at examining the contextual factors that you think are central to understanding the phenomena, or when you cannot see the boundaries between the context and the social phenomena. The first two situations apply to this research, given that the research attempts to find out how public relations mediate citizen engagement in Oman and allows for delving into the complex contextual factors affecting the situation. To be clear, I perceive the significance of this particular case in terms of the following points:

1. The developmental visionary aspirations: The vision has introduced ambitious targets, involving economic development and diversification, social development and changes, governance and institutional performance and environmental sustainability (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow Up Unit 2020, Oman Vision 2040 official document). All of these may suggest a new stage of nation-building that depends on engaging citizens in such issues which were previously the task of the government alone.

2. The wide community participation: as explained above, that was the main driver to let me think about this project as a case study. In fact, as an Omani citizen, myself, I observed the overwhelming feeds of news about participation in the preparation of the Vision and that's significant to uncovering the potential roles of public relations in citizen engagement.

3. Communication strategies and initiatives: Such vision proves to use a wide range of communication initiatives as part of their community participation initiatives (as will be explained in Chapter 4), suitable for the specific focus of this study.

4. Cultural sensitivity and contextualisation: the choice of such a project in such a country allows to reveal the complex interplay of economic, political, cultural,

religious and social factors; vital for offering a deep examination of the issue and allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of public relations potential to serve in citizen engagement, given the specific contextual factors.

In this research, I adopted the stance offered by Robert Stake in his seminal book: *The Art of Case Study Research in 1995.* Stake's definition of a case study reflects a constructivist, interpretive, and inductive approach whereas his counterpart, Yin in his book *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, stood on a positivist, deductive stance. While Yin (2009), stresses the need for the development of theoretical understanding beyond the specific case study, Stake emphasises that the target of the case study research is not to conclude a generalization but to reach out to a particularization and to give attention to a particular local situation; which he considered as the power of such method, in response to the criticisms of the case study research design. In addition to understanding the epistemological stance of the researcher's choice of case study, it is also crucial for the researcher to understand the different types of case studies and determine which is suitable for her research objectives and situation. Stakes, for example, identified three types of case studies. The first is intrinsic: studying a single case that is deemed important in itself without necessarily being interested in studying other cases or similar events or even creating a theoretical understanding. The second is instrumental which is a single case used when we "have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding and feel that we may get insights into the question by studying a particular case" (Stake 1995: 3). The last type is the collective case which indicates the use of multiple cases through which a general understanding of a particular phenomenon can be provided (Stake 1995). In this study, Oman Vision 2040 is an instrumental case, designed to be used as a tool or instrument through which a general understanding of public relations in citizen engagement for nation-building in Oman can be generated. The vision represents a point of reference, rather than a single focus of the study. This reference is used to help primarily to facilitate the discussion with the participants to collect data. Speaking generally on such topics may invite going off the map of this research and confuse the participants. The vision, therefore, can help put the discussion into a context that serves the research questions.

3.5 THE RESEARCH CHOICES

3.5.1 Qualitative Research

Given the constructionist-interpretivist philosophy explained earlier, the research fits into what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as the *'human as instrument'* approach, in which examining people's experiences and their reflections on these experiences becomes the core of the study. To gain such understanding, qualitative research is more suitable because, unlike quantitative one where predetermined questions offer less room to understand human experiences and how they have been created, qualitative research allows for an open approach where thoughts, emotions, values and reflections can be revealed, allowing for a more deep understanding of the phenomenon in its natural context (Jackson et al. 2007). According to Hignett and McDermott (2015), qualitative researchers are interested in meanings. They are concerned with the way individuals construct their meanings, how they make sense of the world around them and how this affects their perceptions and experiences. For Hignett and McDermott (2015: 120), what makes qualitative research distinguishable is the following features: "(1) it's non-numerical, (2) it focuses on a few cases with many variables, (3) its sampling strategy often develops during the study, (4) it has iterative data collection and analysis, subject to flexible research design, (5) it aims at understanding the phenomena in its context (natural setting), (6) the researcher's value can have an impact and objectivity is not valued". Having explained that, qualitative research, therefore, is seen as appropriate as meanings that are constructed in the participants' specific context are of great value to this study. I aim to understand how people, (both from government and citizens) perceive citizen engagement, how they relate that to nation-building and how public relations work as a mediator in such a context. I assume it will be hard work trying to address these questions through quantitative methods, especially when not very much is known about the topics under the scope of the research. In this sense, the open approach of the qualitative method allows for uncovering issues and themes that the researcher might not be aware of which cannot be guaranteed through the closed-ended questions and statistical approach of the quantitative data.

3.5.2 Site of the Research

Oman, a country located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula has been selected for this study. The choice of this particular site has stemmed from a number of both theoretical and practical considerations. Theoretically, first, as indicated in Chapter 1, the literature lacks a deep examination and understanding of public relations at the cross-cultural level. Oman with its distinctive political, economic, social and cultural

features that will be explained further in Chapter 4 can contribute to international public relations understanding. That is especially true, considering that this study, hence, departs away from examining public relations in Western, democratic nations, mostly covered in the literature. Second, Oman, although non-democracy, is characterised by a stable political environment, stimulating questions like how political stability is promoted in such a non-democracy, what government communication looks like, why citizen engagement is promoted and practised, how that affects the practice of public relations, what roles public relations can play in this dynamic, and what might be the impact. These questions are set at the heart of studying public relations intermediation in the political environment; a core to this study.

From another side and beyond the academic considerations, there are some practical and personal reasons behind the choice of this site. First, as an Omani native, doing research in the context where I was born and raised can give an advantage to the depth of the study in several ways. First, considering the language variable, having a deep understanding of the Arabic language is needed to conduct a study in a country where much of the public relations work is performed in Arabic with some level of English only when necessary. Second, being aware of cultural sensitivity is crucial when doing research, especially in conservative contexts. Being a member of Omani society, I'm fully aware of social and religious sensitivity, not to mention political sensitivity as well. That allows me to ask questions in an acceptable way, during the interview, being able to deal with the situations where participants do not feel comfortable discussing certain issues and more importantly, interpreting the hidden meanings, for example through non-verbal cues; something that might be challenging for outsider researchers. Third, having grown up in Oman, I have an in-depth understanding of the historical development of this nation, its socio-political contexts and the development of the governance system. This knowledge was instrumental in pursuing this research. Lastly, the access to information and connections I have allows me to collect secondary information needed but also allows for access needed to start the interviewing. These variables, however, can be of criticism regarding the researcher's bias in the study which will be discussed later in this Chapter.

3.5.3 Time Horizon

According to Saunders et al. (2003), identifying the time horizon is crucial for the research design, yet independent of the choice of the research strategy and methodology.

According to the authors, there are two types of time horizons; longitudinal and cross-sectional. The first is conducting the research over an extended time frame, while the latter is researching the phenomena during a specific short timeline. I acknowledge that the longitudinal timeframe for this specific research can be efficient and most appropriate. First, the selected case, Oman Vision 2040 is a long-term plan, extended to two decades. A comprehensive understanding of the position of public relations and citizen engagement in relevance to the vision requires long-term research. Second, since nation-building is a dynamic process, usually, changes cannot be easily traced over a short period, an extended timeline can allow for exploring such dynamics and tracing the political and social changes. This is why, initially, I tried to conduct a content analysis of official documents to trace the historical development of nation-building, public relations and citizen engagement as will be explained shortly in the next section. Third, many policies and many changes have been introduced since the start of the implementation stage of Oman Vision 2040 in January 2021, during the data collection stage. And that has shaped people's perceptions to some extent and therefore might have affected the sort of data collected at the different stages. Although I realized this methodological need, due to time, resource and financial constraints, but also some practical issues, including the restrictions due to COVID-19 and other limitations such as the lack of access to the needed resources, prevented me from carrying on with this type of time scale. A cross-sectional time horizon, hence, has been utilised.

3.5.4 Piloting Methods

> Researchers often find themselves in the predicament of studying issues of which they have minimal tacit, intuitive, or experiential understanding. This leads the researcher to make educated guesses based on theories or hunches, with some level of hesitation about the validity of the design (Kezar 2000: 385).

That is especially true in the case of novice researchers, who may not only have little knowledge of the subject under study but also little knowledge about the various research designs and methodological aspects. For me, that means that I need to be open and reflexive in the process of selecting the right instrument for my research. And that can help to discover the wide range of methodological aspects, including, the techniques and procedures in every step of the research design (Max Van Manen, 1990). According to Bassey (1999), methods that are pre-tested and well-designed in studies that aim to

investigate the details of a phenomenon, rather than to explore a broad outlook, are essential to build the reliability of the study. Testing the methods is also necessary to adapt to the local context of the study. Gudmundsdottir and Brock-Utne (2010) who explored the methodological choices based on two studies in two different contexts; America and Africa, found that the local context has a profound impact on the methodological fieldwork, including the process and findings of the research.

According to Malmqvist et al. (2019: 2), there are two types of piloting study in social sciences: "(1) smaller versions of studies, called feasibility studies, or (2) the pre-testing or 'trying out' of a particular research instrument". Due to the resources and time limitations, I cannot conduct the feasibility piloting but I tried out different methods to help make an informed decision on the appropriate instrument for my research. I will outline here the methods that I ended up not using in this study, for some practical consideration and will explain the methods used in a subsequent section.

A. Official Documents Analysis

At the outset of my research, the analysis of official documents seems a promising area for rich information about citizen engagement, nation-building and government communication. After getting my ethical clearance in November 2020, I started the fieldwork. At that time, I was in the UK. Due to the travel restrictions posed because of the pandemic as well as the 'working from home' scheme applied in most of the countries including Oman, I could not do either personal or online interviews. I could not travel from one side and there were very poor online connections from Oman with minimal and delayed responses that took up to a few months from another side; both have contributed to the delay of interviewing until the end of February 2021. Thus, I started by collecting documents for analysis. I wanted to employ this method to get an answer about the government perspectives which I was planning to combine with the data I will obtain from interviews with governmental officials. Theoretically speaking, it seemed perfect to me. I started to collect documents online but some from the relevant government organizations. That's included many documents concerned about nation-building, citizen engagement, and government communication. I collected 29 documents which range from national development plans over the years, visionary documents, communication initiatives of Oman Vision 2040, presidential speeches, Oman Vision 2040 documents and some others from the Government Communication Centre (See Appendix A for a list

of the documents). In the beginning, I started scanning these documents with the aims of either: (1) making a historical interpretation of how public relations, as a communication practice, has evolved to respond to the nation-building needs, how it develops and what features of communication can be recognized in the different stages, or (2) to find out what does citizen engagement in the context of nation-building means and how it is performed, what are its feature and how it developed. However, I could not trace any of these. Although scattered information here and there is available, the documents did not delve into the details of any. For example, the National Development Plans (NDPs) were deeply concerned about tangible nation-building resources such as the building of the infrastructure, the financial statements and plans, the economic situation and so on. Nothing until recently has been published about communication as a practice for a healthy government-citizens relationship. And this may be justified in such a nation that was just developing as will be explained in Chapter 4. The other documents that deal directly with citizen engagement and communication such as those taken from the Government Communication Centre and Oman Vision 2040 Office, posed other challenges. For example, the Government Communication Centre has developed several documents and made them available online to serve as guidelines to the public relations and communication officers in government entities. I recognise that these documents are sort of a theoretical guideline that is free from any practical consideration and can serve nothing to my study except to recognise the role of the Government Communication Centre as a regulative entity for government communication activities across the country. The documents taken from the Oman Vision 2040 Office have more relevance to this study as they discussed communication initiatives and citizen engagement. However, it lacks contextual information as well as in-depth information needed for the analysis. For example, much of the work regarding citizen engagement in Oman Vision 2040 is offered either in statistics forms or infographic forms; both are not helping the explorative-descriptive nature of this research as I aim to discover what citizen engagement looks like and the deep work of public relations and its impact. In-depth information about the procedures of citizen engagement, the different forms of it, the communication practices at different levels and evaluation were not present. Not to mention that, I tried out reaching documents that have specific details but it seems that due to the ongoing narratives of Oman Vision 2040, the response came as 'Yes, we do have some, but they are not allowed yet for researchers', quoting one of the responses I got from the Oman Vision 2040 Office. To summarise the process, I decided to discard this method, basically,

because of issues relevant to the quality and depth of information. However, I need to acknowledge that the knowledge I gained from these documents and my observations has helped me to form a broad picture of communication positions at different stages which was useful in classifying the stages of nation-building of Oman and the development of public relations and tracing out the changes in the communication style, covering the participatory approach of citizen engagement as will be seen in Chapter 4. That is why it's clear that I employed both information from these documents along with the literature to form a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of public relations in the nation-building of Oman since 1970 in Chapter 4.

B. Thematic Analysis of Tweets from X

Besides understanding the government's perspective, I wanted also to discover citizens' views. Initially, I aimed to analyse a popular hashtag on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter. The hashtag is an ongoing one, entitled in Arabic; رؤية-عمان- 2040, (Oman-Vision-2040). I chose this method for several reasons: (1) based on my observation, but also on academic resources which are reported in Chapter 7, social media has offered the Omani public an arena for public discussion that is of fewer constraints and censorship and that means a range of different views can be reported, (2) the hashtag is very popular in the country which, though cannot be precisely measured, is reachable and known by many of the Omani citizens, (3) the hashtag can give real-time insights from its users, helping to capture people's sentiments towards the Vision and communication practices. Starting the actual work, I had more than 25 thousand tweets collected in the period February 2020- September 2021. With the initial thematic analysis, the themes in Appendix B were reported. The themes were rich and can be used to analyse the potential of social media as a platform for public discourse about Oman Vision 2040. However, it does not respond to the objective of this study, regarding the citizen's segment, which is to understand citizens' perspectives on the impacts and outcomes of the mediated citizen engagement. This objective became clear to me after I finished collecting and analysing the interviews with governmental officials, which I reported in Chapters 5 and 6. At that time, I looked back to the themes that emerged from the initial analysis of the hashtag and I tried to evaluate the effectiveness of these themes to answer my question. I needed to cross-check the findings reported in Chapters 5 and 6 and I wanted to make a comparison between government data and those from citizens and I realized that the themes do not help. I needed a set of tailored questions that would address

people's perspectives on citizen engagement and government communication practices, especially their impacts, concerning Oman Vision 2040 as a point of reference (as an instrumental case).

3.6. THE EMPIRICAL WORK

3.6.1 Data collection and analysis

Based on my learning experience about the methods described earlier, I decided to collect data using interviews with the two segments targeted for this research, government and citizens. In qualitative studies in marketing communications and public relations fields, interviews are commonly used (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Interviews, for qualitative research, can help "to contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees" (DiCicco-Bloom et al. 2006: 314). That stresses the assumption held for this study that knowledge is socially constructed and is affected by the experiences of people. Moreover, I believe that for this specific research, interviews can help surpass the weaknesses found in the methods I tried before, including tailoring questions that can be of direct relation to the research questions, yet at the same time allow for the discovery of other issues that can emerge through the discussion. That's why I adopted a semi-structured interview style where pre-determined questions form the base of the interview but other questions can emerge as a result of the discussion. Unlike the unstructured and fully structured interviews, "semi-structured interviews are often the sole data source for a qualitative research project" (DiCicco-Bloom et al. 2006: 315), as in the case of this study. However, to make sure of the appropriateness of this method and to avoid being overwhelmed with data that I ended up not using like in the two methods described earlier, I decided to collect data in three stages: (1) doing a few interviews serves as piloting interviews to decide the appropriateness of the questions and the quality of data I'm getting, (2) taking notes on these few interviews, outlining the strengths and weaknesses, (3) continue doing the rest of the interviews, with adaptation made based on my observations. That was an overall strategy I conducted for interviews with both categories. However, details about each specific category are described in the following sections.

3.6.2 In-depth, semi-structured interviews with governmental officials

In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 government officials, who have worked or are working in the communication and public relations field, in organisations that have

relevance to the preparation or the implementation of Oman Vision 2040. As mentioned above, I was ready to start the fieldwork, particularly the interviews, in November 2020 when my ethical application was approved. However, the actual interviews started in February 2021. Practically, I started communicating with the organizations targeted, as soon as I got my ethical approval. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process was delayed. The communication, which was online through emails was poor, resulting from working remotely from home and working by shifts, which was applied in Oman at that time. Since I was in the UK, I could not manage to do anything except waiting for responses. Thankfully, I started the first online interview in February 2021 which was then followed by other 4 interviews. However, after that, I got stuck again and no more interviews were done. I was not getting any responses from one side and I could not travel because of the difficulty travelling due to the restrictions at that time. I transcribed the 5 interviews that I got and I managed to travel only in December 2021 to Oman. I stayed there for a month during which I conducted 5 in-person interviews in January 2022 and arranged to do 2 more interviews online as I returned to the UK the following month. It took me almost a year to complete the twelve interviews. I recognised the time gap between interviews. Although I was frustrated at that time, the time gap has allowed me to transcribe the interviews, take notes and observations, and do some initial analysis which was highly significant and beneficial for doing some adaptation and focusing on some aspects that needed more explanation, resulting in a more rich and informed discussions in the subsequent interviews.

A. Sample

I perceive interviews, as instruments to reveal the shared understanding that a group of people (interviewees) hold, upon which a researcher can rely to interpret data and accordingly offer a conceptual understanding of a particular phenomenon. For that reason, selecting the interviewees is highly crucial and "interviewees should be fairly homogenous and share critical similarities related to the research question" (DiCicco-Bloom et al. 2006: 317). To explain, the features of the selected sample, I will employ the three dimensions considered important in public relations and marketing communication research suggested by Daymon and Holloway (2011: 210). These are "(1) the setting, (2) time, events, activities or processes, and (3) which is the most important, people or materials and artefacts".

The dimension	The sampling decision for this study
1- The setting (The location in which data can be collected, for example, a certain organization, culture or country.)	Three organizations that are directly related to the research questions and the case study (Oman Vision 2040) were selected. The organizations are: - Oman Vision 2040 Office, which was established in 2017 and serves in the first stage of the Vision (the preparation stage). The Office was responsible for all the communication initiatives and public engagement activities. - Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit which was established in August 2020 in replacement to the Vision Office which has been permanently deactivated. It is the body responsible now for everything related to the vision and its implementation, including the communication activities relevant to the vision. - The Government Communication Centre which serves as a regulative and consultative body for all communication activities in all governmental organizations across the country and is a communication and media sponsor for the Vision in all stages and all communication activities, including the public engagement practices.
2- The time (Time, in this context, encompasses stages, sequences, rhythms, or specific times of day.)	In the context of the case study of this research, the Vision can be seen as defined in stages: preparation and implementation so far. Therefore, I targeted to interview people who have witnessed both stages, although the interviewing happened between 2021 and 2022, the interview questions revolved around the preparation stage (2013-2020) and the implementation stage (2021-the present)

3- The people	For this research, the background and experience of the people are paramount to the aim of the research which seeks an in-depth understanding of public relations in the context of citizen engagement for nation-building. Therefore, the study targeted people who have worked or are working in public communication, citizen engagement, media relations, public relations and government communication. However, people with such expertise in the targeted organizations but who have not worked specifically for Oman Vision 2040 were excluded. That's because this research is specific to communication activities in public engagement and therefore the participants' direct involvement in such activities was required.
(The extent of people's experiences in relevance to the question under study.)	

Table 2 The sampling dimensions inspired by Daymon and Holloway (2011)

In recruiting participants, I started initially by contacting the organizations targeted to work as gatekeepers to recruit respondents. It's important to note that the research culture in Oman is still emerging and conducting qualitative research in particular is a challenging task (Hammad and Al-Ani 2021). Officials were, in many times, reluctant to take part; a major challenge I faced in my research. Therefore, I had no option except to follow a convenience sampling style which is based on the availability and willingness of the participants. The early interviews, however, have led to others, reflecting a snowball sampling, where other participants from the network of the initial interviewees have expressed their willingness to take part in the study. However, I attempt to at least cover these criteria in recruiting the participants which are: (1) having both male and female, (2) having both seniors and juniors in the practice, and (3) employing an equal number of participants from each organization which I was successful in. The full description of the participants is attached in Appendix C.

It is apparent, as previously noted, that the public relations practitioners being interviewed included a mix of both senior and junior practitioners. At this point, I want to make it clear that interviewing public relations professionals with different levels of experience helps in providing valuable insights, but their different levels of seniority as I noticed have influenced how they respond to questions about public relations and engagement. The first thing and most obvious is that most of the time seniors will speak about long-

term strategies, policies, and how public relations fits into the broader goals of the government. They are more focused on the strategic, macro-level aspects of PR and engagement, such as managing crises and maintaining the government's reputation. On the other hand, the less experienced practitioners are more focused on daily routine, technical parts of public relations and engagement such as the methods they use, media relations, preparing materials and so on. They are also more focused on challenges which I noticed is barely mentioned by the senior practitioners. For example, as will be noted later in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, most PR functions are explained by junior officials while the models of communication, the overall political aspect such as the change in the social contract and the engagement conceptualization are explained by senior officials. For example, the idea of the change in the social contract has been explained more clearly with details by the senior practitioners, especially, GO4, GO6 and GO7. Another thing I noticed is that seniors' perspectives are deeper in terms of understanding the overall objectives and policy of the government but they tend to be more cautious and diplomatic in their answers. They appear more defensive as well and they are comfortable using examples and cases from other countries and governments in order to defend the position of the government. In contrast, less experienced officials appear to have fresh perspectives, especially about the practical aspects and challenges they face when trying to engage the public, such as bureaucratic barriers or internal miscommunication. These differences in the answers and perspectives, however, have greatly contributed to having rich information about both strategic and technical aspects of engagement and public relations.

B. The interview process

Before I started interviewing, I developed a guide which contained a set of questions. Based on the request of some interviewees, the interview questions were sent to them in advance. This can help the participants to feel more comfortable and assure them that the research does not try to play what Johnson (1947: 90) calls "gotcha". I initially thought that these questions would be fixed, but as I started conducting the interviews, I noticed that the discussion was leading to other questions and that I referred only to the guide to make sure that we were not off the topic. It was interesting to note that each interview was unique in the sense that it was different from those before and after, resulting from my increasing knowledge but also from the various experiences and interests of the participants which makes the latter interviews more active, serving therefore as "a project

for producing meanings" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 14) and "a productive source of knowledge" (Holstein and Gubrium 2003: 74).

The interview guide (see Appendix D) was set around three major areas which are:

1. General questions about government public relations and strategic communication
2. Communication, citizen engagement and national development in relevance to Oman Vision 2040
3. Evaluation questions

Moreover, I took the habit of introducing myself and the purpose and scope of my study and then allowing time for the interviewee to introduce him/herself which I think has contributed largely to making "a comfortable and encouraging atmosphere in which interviewee feels respected and safe" (Brounéus 2011: 136). At the end of the discussion, I concluded by giving a chance to the interviewee if they had anything they wanted to add by asking questions like: *is there anything you would like to tell?* The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours. Seven interviews were conducted online and 5 were in-person. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

C. Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I used thematic analysis (TA) in the way suggested by Braun and Clarke in their phenomenal 2006 paper; one of the most cited papers. The approach consists of six stages that will be explained shortly. However, it is essential here to clarify that the six stages are not static but are rather dynamic processes; something that Braun and Clarke themselves acknowledged in later papers they published to reflect on the approach that becomes vastly employed in different fields. The authors have clarified in later publications (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2013; Braun and Clarke 2019; Braun and Clarke 2022) that the thematic analysis they meant reflects the essence of qualitative research in which subjectivity, the researcher's engagement in the data, the interpretation nature rather than discovery, and the themes generating rather than themes findings are central (Braun and Clarke 2019). This way is compatible with this research philosophy that stands on the constructionists-interpretive approach. In their reflection on the approach, the authors stated:

> We intended our approach to TA to reflect our view of qualitative research as creative, reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a

resource rather than a potential threat to knowledge production, as it arguably is conceptualised in Boyatzis' and some other approaches to TA. For us, qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there' and findable from, or buried deep within, the data. For us, the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative. (Braun and Clarke 2019: 591)

Revisiting their approach resulted in the authors' agreement to give it the name: reflexive thematic analysis in order to clarify the value of flexibility (Braun and Clarke 2022) but also at the same time "reflexivity, theoretical knowingness and transparency" (Braun and Clarke 2019: 592), while providing systematic steps to perform the analysis in the qualitative research. In the following section, I will provide explanations of each stage, reflecting on how it is performed, and taking into account the reflexive nature of the approach.

1. **Familiarizing oneself with data**: According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher must be familiar with the depth and breadth of the data by immersing herself in the data. "Immersion usually involves 'repeated reading' of the data, and reading the data in an active way- searching for meanings, patterns and so on" (P.87). For my interview data, I transcribed the interviews by myself. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic, I transcribed them in the same language to capture language complexity which is important sometimes to understand the context of the talk. Later on, only the statements to be used in the reports were translated into English. Although the transcription was lengthy and hard work, it helped me develop a sense of the range of topics and breadth of the content. I was writing my comments and notes as I was transcribing, for example, notes on interesting statements, unexpected statements and so on. Also, before starting the coding, I read the entire data available at that time. That's because there was a time gap between interviews as mentioned earlier. For example, after conducting the first five interviews, I read all of them and started the next step. In this way, the process was dynamic, reflexive and evolving as new data was collected. The same step was repeated after all the interviews were transcribed.

2. **Generating initial codes**: codes in their simple meaning refer to short labels or tags that represent specific ideas in the data set. "Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst, and refer to 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 88). Below is an example of the codes given to the first quote used in Chapter 5.

Data extract	Coded for
The society that the government addresses today is the same society that used to receive most of the services free of charge because this was the nature of the social contract between the authority and society at that time. The authority has all the options and all the power, and in return, the people have salaries, services, education, health and so on, without taxes. Once the state starts taxing, the social contract must be changed immediately. Citizens then should have their say. GO6	Citizen's benefit Government power in the past Introduction of taxes Citizen's rights

Table 3 Example of the coding scheme

This way has been followed to code the data. However, I should admit that I did not follow a coding book or a very strict code system. I revisited the codes as new data were present and as I developed a better sense of the complete set of data. When I was not sure, two or sometimes three codes were given to one sentence, especially when it involved multiple issues that I perceived relevant. Then, codes are being reviewed every time and another. That was done manually using the traditional way of coloured highlights.

3. **Searching for themes:** "This phase, which re-focuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 89). Themes are different to codes in the sense that they are broader but more important is that they are the result of the researcher's interpretation in relations to the research questions and the topic under study (Braun and Clarke 2006). I would describe this stage as the most difficult one, messy and at first, it looks impossible and very unorganized, looking at the long list of codes. Even now as I write it, I find difficulty explaining it. However, with repeated review of the codes and thoughtful consideration, I started to sort out the codes into broader themes. Gradually, I developed the initial themes and then I started to play with the codes again, moving them where they seemed more relevant. Reflecting on the process, it was a cyclical, rather than a linear one of simply sorting codes to discover themes. It also involves my interpretation, because codes in themselves did not make meanings that can be used to answer the research questions or to understand the phenomenon. I perceive them as units which when put together creatively can help make meanings represented in themes. Initially, ten themes were generated from the data set generated from the government segment as follows:

The initial themes
1. Engagement is a necessary change to modern governance; Oman Vision 2040 as a starting point
2. Engagement as public communication practice
3. Engagement as an open space for dialogue
4. Listening is a pillar of engagement
5. Local engagement in Oman
6. Features of real engagement
7. Public relations functions
8. The roles of government communicators (public relations)
9. The impact of the participatory approach of government communication (PR)
10. Challenges to government communication and engagement

Table 4 The initial themes extracted from the interviews with governmental officials

4. **Reviewing themes:** in this stage, a refinement of the themes is conducted. In this stage, decisions about discarding, merging and revising themes happened. In my case, some themes were merged and all the themes were renamed. The last theme about challenges was discarded because not enough data was there. However, reports of the challenges were covered throughout the analysis where appropriate.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** in this stage, Braun and Clarke (2006: 92) advised the researchers to define and refine which means **"**identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what
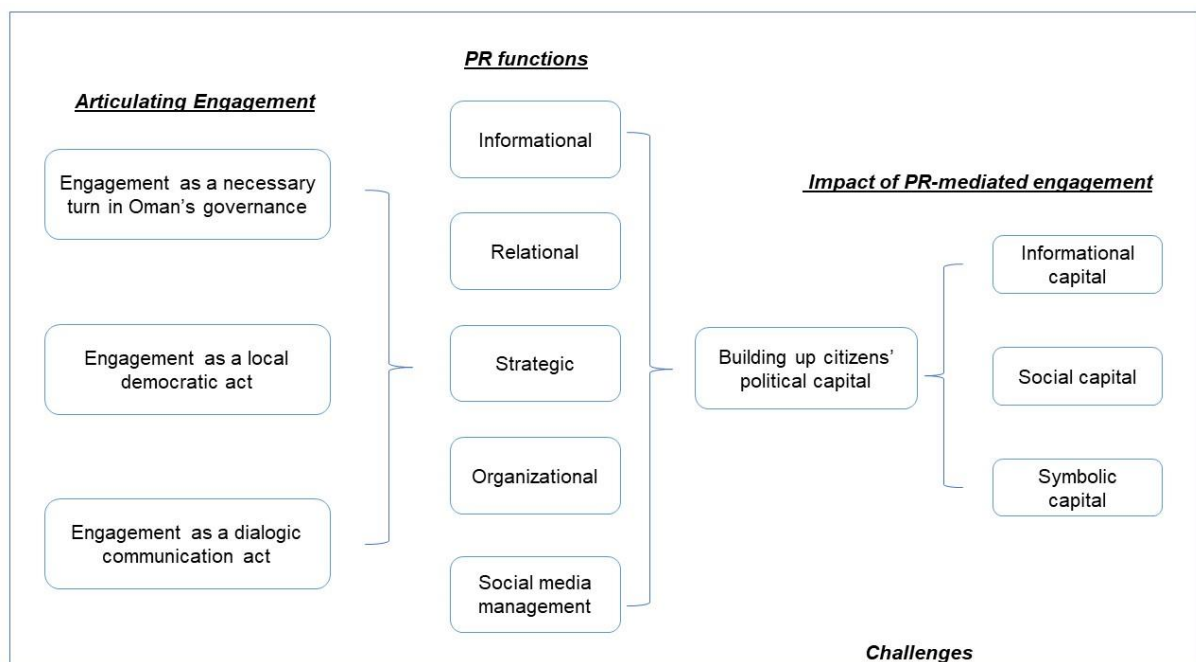
Figure 5 Results generated from the interviews with governmental officials

aspect of the data each theme captures. It is important not to try and get a theme to do too much, or to be too diverse and complex". According to the authors, it is also about trying to capture how themes with their data can produce a narrative suitable to the study. Names should be concise and comprehensive for the data they will cover. I refer back to the research questions to help me refine and name the themes in a way that will produce a narrative directed at answering the research questions. The final version of the themes generated from the interviews is shown in Figure 5.

6. **Producing the report**: the final step was to write the report. The report should provide "a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell within and across themes" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 93). It should also present adequate evidence from the data and should be presented in an analytical way that exceeds only describing the data. In producing the report, I first have decided on which themes will answer which research question. Chapters 5 and 6 report the analysis in which the first one addresses the question regarding articulating citizen engagement while the latter addresses the question related to public relations function and impact. In writing the report, I aimed to be analytical and interpretive. For that, a mixture of interview data, conceptual and theoretical backgrounds and my own interpretations and reflections are used to produce the final version of the reports.

D. Limitations

As I mentioned earlier, recruiting participants was not an easy task. Many people, even those who expressed their willingness at an initial stage, were not responding later. The size of the sample might be questionable and may seem not representative. Although a bigger sample may have given a deeper understanding, in this study, the quality, rather than the quantity is valued. The 12 interviews have produced a range of topics vital for addressing the research questions, reported in Chapters 5 and 6. A small sample size is common in qualitative research and can still provide an in-depth understanding of the area of study but, it should not be too small that it does not reach data saturation which means that no novel ideas are emerging (Daymon and Holloway 2011); something I noticed in the last two interviews. Another challenge I faced was the language issue. Directly from the first interview, I noticed that I needed to educate myself about the terms of public relations and communication in Arabic. Although I'm a native Arabic speaker, my educational background in communication and public relations is all in English. That's why sometimes, I was not able to find out the correct terms used in Arabic which resulted in some misunderstanding in the first interview. The terms are not difficult or not common, it is just me who is not familiar with them. That's why, after I noticed this gap in the first interview, I consulted a bilingual colleague and I developed a vocabulary note where I wrote down, the terms I think I will need and their equivalence in Arabic.

3.6.3 In-depth semi-structured interviews with citizens

This research is mostly concerned with the potential roles of public relations in mediating citizen engagement, which means trying to address the impact of the practice. Therefore, the citizens' perspective cannot be ignored. Although incorporating citizens' perspectives was a target I set from the beginning of the research, as I completed the analysis based on data generated from interviews with governmental officials, I became more curious about citizens' views. Quantitative research methods such as surveys are common when the population of the study is large (Brady 2000) such as in the case of targeting citizens of a whole country. This is one reason why surveys are popular in political sciences to address such issues (Brady 2000). However, in this study, I'm concerned with understanding how citizens perceive citizen engagement as a communication practice and how they perceive their impact. That aligns with the idea that qualitative methods are interested in making sense of social phenomena from the participants' perspectives (McMillan and Schumacher 2010). It is particularly true when we know almost nothing about the questions at hand. To my knowledge, there are very few studies that investigated citizens' perceptions in Oman regarding political, governance, public communication, or citizen participation issues, and therefore qualitative methods can serve the explorative target suitable for the nature of this study. For example, a study conducted by Al-Aufi, et al. (2017) investigated citizens' perceptions of the participatory approach by the government through social media. The study used a quantitative approach based on a self-administered questionnaire. Pre-determined factors were set in advance and were tested through the questionnaire. While this way can be beneficial, it does not serve the target of this study to uncover and explore people's perspectives without limiting them to a set of pre-determined factors. That's why, I decided to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with a small sample, prioritising the richness of data and depth of understanding over the large-scale quantitative methods. I was also aiming to use text-based material, extracted from the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) as another source to generate a better understanding. However, as explained earlier, this method did not work for this specific research and therefore was discarded.

A. Sample

Initially, I used a purposive sampling technique, a popular method in qualitative research (Distel 2018), which relies on a strategic choice of what or who will go in the study with an aim to enrich the study with an in-depth understanding (Campbel et al. 2020). In this way, I was specifically targeting only people who have participated in any of the

engagement activities of Oman Vision 2040. I have contacted the Oman Vision 2040 office and a senior officer has worked as a gatekeeper, representing the Office, to reach the participants. I provided them with the participant information sheet (see Appendix E) [1] and in their ways, they disseminated it to the targeted segment. After a long wait and repeated communication with the Office, luckily, I received the first two expressions of interest from two persons and I directly conducted the first two interviews. Although I chose not to include these interviews and the other two subsequent interviews that follow them in the analysis, for a reason I will identify later in this section, the four interviews were beneficial. First, they worked as piloting interviews that informed the whole interviewing process later as will be explained shortly. Second, I noticed from the discussion, that including people who have not participated is of benefit. Especially that the interviewees suggested some potential participants who might be willing to take part but also who have an interest in the subject and therefore a snowball or chain referral sampling; in which one participant can lead to finding another (Daymon and Holloway 2010) was then used. It is also important to mention that a convenience sampling technique was employed. In a country where research is still limited and people are not familiar with such sorts of research participation (Karadsheh and Denman 2019), it is of research benefit to use this way. Also, it was part of my ethical obligation not to put anyone under any sort of pressure to take part. So, I accepted whoever was willing to take part.

The participants vary in their demographic and interest features. Ten women and ten men were interviewed from different regions of Oman. However, I was not able to obtain participation from every single region of Oman. The youngest participant was 19 years old and the oldest was 64. Eight of them have participated in one of the engagement activities for Oman Vision and the rest have not. The participant varies in their educational level, ranging from primary education to postgraduate education. They also have different occupational states, including job seekers, employees in the private sector, governmental employees and entrepreneurs. Some participants have some interests or are active in a field that may be of some relevance to the subject of this research which has been noted down in the participants' description sheet. For more details about the participants, see Appendix F. It's important to mention that the information provided has been written in

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[1] The highlighted text in the PIS (yellow for the text added, red for the text omitted) signifies the changes that were conducted to suit the individually focused interview adopted later.

consultation with each participant, ensuring their full consent of how they have been described.

As with the interviews conducted with governmental officials, data saturation was used as a measure to identify the sample size. As I was analysing the interviews after finishing the first six interviews, the themes developed gradually, and in the last 4 interviews, I noticed no changes to the coding or analysis scheme. This criterion can have limitations as the researcher cannot anticipate if other interviews will generate a different understanding (Distel 2018). However, as mentioned earlier, the aim of this study is explorative and does value the quality of data over the generalisability but that still suggests the possible need for a representative study in the future.

B. Piloting interviews

I stated before that the first four interviews were excluded from the analysis and I considered them as piloting interviews. Before the interviews, the question guide was developed in advance around the area of this research. A participant information sheet was sent to the participants who expressed their willingness to take part which includes the information they need, including that the interviews will be recorded and how I will use the recording and their information. However, when I started the interviews, interestingly, all four participants asked if it was possible not to record the discussion. Three of them said it jokingly and one expressed that she was not feeling comfortable with the recording. I explained to them the importance of the recording for me to later transcribe it and be able to work on the analysis of data. I also explained that if they are not feeling comfortable, they can withdraw at any time. Three of them said it was okay but the one who expressed not being feeling comfortable with the recording needed some time to make up her mind but eventually, she said it was okay too. Once granting their permission, the interviews were conducted and were audio-recorded. However, they did not go as I expected. My main observation was that the participants had views that were extremely supportive of the government. I was thinking about what had been said after listening to the interviews over and over again. In my research journal, I wrote: "This is not an ordinary citizen; it is the official Oman TV. The terms used, the expressions, and even the way the participants spoke about challenges, it was like: "We are still developing, it's ok", "the government is doing their best", and "We have better living conditions than many other countries". The interviews echo the mainstream media with an absolute

absence of any other counter-view; something that struck my attention right away. Of course, I was expecting a sort of cautiousness but it exceeded my expectations. I was truly disappointed, in the first four interviews, only after the first 20 minutes, I had no other questions because life is good, and everyone is happy. I felt that it was pointless to do interviews because I realised, I would not collect data in this way, no themes emerged and it was difficult to write any sort of specific impact or any specific views regarding government communication or citizen engagement. I would describe these interviews as silent interviews, in which "meaning can be found in silences, rather than what is openly expressed" (Koch 2013a: 393). This experience has opened my eyes to an important methodological challenge regarding doing research in contexts that differ greatly from those in which most of the methodological frameworks and tools have been developed. To be more specific, most of the literature around methodologies is based on Western liberal contexts that do not emphasize the practical methodological limitations facing research in what Koch (2013a) called the closed context. According to the author, closed context "might be referred to as 'illiberal', 'authoritarian', 'nondemocratic', 'coercive' or even (non) 'exceptions' within the prevailing 'liberal' system" (Koch 2013a: 390). Reflecting on that, Oman is a monarch, rentier state in which media is state-controlled and therefore can be perceived as a closed context. From another side, however, based on my experience on the initial analysis of the Tweets as explained earlier in section 3.5.4, I gained an impression that people are critical and they have counter opinions and they express quite freely on social media platforms such as on X. My own experience being an Omani person, I could see the criticisms, expressed both implicitly and explicitly in the social media networks about different subjects including, political and governance topics. So, I do acknowledge that the topic of discussion is sensitive in such a context where political openness is not a norm, however, I cannot ignore that people are using different platforms like social media to express themselves. The question then was why this happened in the interviews, why I'm getting an interview with the ideal citizen who is happy with everything?

According to Koch (2013b), closed context can be featured by *"a culture of fear",* in which people are cautious about discussing politics and are aware of the outcomes of their words and actions and this fear is not necessarily something they live on a daily base but is present deep in their perception and could rise whenever they see a source of fear. From this perspective, I see that the audio recordings in the case of this situation may be a

source of fear, especially, given the nature of the research which involves politics and assessing a governmental conduct. That's a similar concept to the notion of "self-censorship", that features journalists in such a context as described in Chapter 4. Now, this has raised a big methodological question about the accessibility, validity and transparency of data collected in context with such characteristics, which is beyond the scope of this research. However, I would suggest, based on my experience that flexible methods should be allowed and some adaptations can be made to serve the endeavours of the research and to protect both the researchers and the participants.

Audio recording is traditionally considered a necessity and a taken-for-granted requirement in qualitative research. Walliman (2021: 139) suggests that the recording is an essential tool used to "retain a full, uninterpreted record of what was said" that "does not rely on memory and you can repeatedly check what was said". In this way, the recording and transcription are employed to preserve the richness and depth of the responses in the exact words of the participants (Daymon and Holloway 2010). That is seen as essential for the accuracy of the research to capture the narratives of the participants and therefore provide a more accurate representation of the data. The recording is also employed to maintain the trustworthiness, validity and credibility of the research ((Rutakumwa et al. 2020). Besides, the recording allows the researcher to capture the tones, pauses and emotional expressions throughout the interview (Rutakumwa et al. 2020); something that can be hardly achieved depending only on the memory of the researcher.

With that being said, however, I made a deliberate decision not to record the interviews based on my experience explained earlier. In doing so, I followed the advice of Bassey (1999:81) which is: "work out your own methods- from a clear ethical standpoint, and based on your research questions". My decision is rooted in prioritizing the quality of information over documenting and reporting the exact words of the participants from one side and protecting the participants from any likely negative impact. Such a decision can show the sensitivity of the researcher who has become aware that the recording is making the interviewee "nervous" (Rutakumwa et al. 2020: 568), affecting the quality of the data collected. According to Rutakumwa et al. (2020: 577), it is a sign of "the researcher's sensitivity to the integrity of the research project ", not "a weakening of research conduct" when she decides not to record interviews when a possible negative effect can be present. In my case, I wanted to put the participants at ease; something that did not happen when

a recorder was present. My aim was also to gain a deep insight into the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees. In answering the question, what is a good interview? de la Croix et al. (2018: 452) stated:

> The obvious response is: a good interview gives you data to help answer your research question. It generates data that allow for thorough analysis or description, and are aligned with the research goal and theoretical framework. The less obvious, but more salient, answer is that a good interview unlocks insights into people's experiences, viewpoints, opinions, thoughts and feelings. (de la Croix et al. 2018: 452)

If my interviews, hindered by the recording, are not unlocking people's insights and views, then what is the point of doing them? Creating an environment that makes the participants feel comfortable expressing themselves is paramount. Caronia (2015: 157) explained that recording devices should be considered "epistemic agents: they make a difference in the making of the data and contribute to defining the recorded behavior as a document of the object of inquiry". If the recording can shape the behaviour of the people, then in specific contexts, this should be prioritised especially when people do not feel comfortable speaking about certain issues. Assuming that utilizing recording during an interview inherently results in more accurate data overlooks the significant impact of specific contextual factors on the articulation of experiences and the trustworthiness of conveyed information. Additionally, it fails to consider the influence of the recording device itself on the content and actions during the interview process (Rutakumwa et al. 2020). However, not recording meant that I needed to make fundamental changes in the interview structure and guide and I needed another way to document my data. That will be explained in the coming section.

C. The Individually Focused Interview

With all that being said, I decided to discard the four recorded interviews and I conducted the 20 non-recorded interviews used in this study, following the individually focused interview style suggested by Clausen (2012). I see this style as an appropriate method that can help in obtaining quality data without the need for audio transcription. According to the author, "the Individually Focused Interview is "an alternative way to find the immediate discourses that are attached to the main issue. It seeks to predict trends and explain the social dynamics, and is a way to ensure breadth of range of statements"

(Clausen 2012: 1). With the use of an example from his data collection and analysis of the research he published in Clausen et al. (2008), the author suggests that in certain conditions, it is possible to get quality, valid and reliable data without necessarily using audio-recording and transcription in the traditional way we know. He also suggests that audio-recording is not necessarily needed to fulfil the scientific standards and that validity and reliability remain problematic in qualitative research with or without audio-recording and that audio-recording does not make it any better. However, to ensure that the interview will still provide a scientific approach, the author, inspired by Kvale's seven methodological stages suggested six stages of the interview that need to be thoroughly explained. In this way, "the qualitative research interview can be conducted in a manner that makes it possible to improve reliability, validity, and transparency" (Clausen 2012: 2). Compared to Kvale's seven stages in qualitative research interviews, the individually focused interview approach differs in two main aspects: (a) active involvement of the interviewee in the process, including thorough introductions and their contribution to note-taking, and (b) excluding the transcription of recordings Clausen (2012). I conducted the individually focused interview, using the same six stages proposed by Clausen (2012) as explained below:

1. **Thematization, design, and planning**: as explained earlier one target of this study is explorative, aiming to examine citizens' perspective about government communication, particularly its participatory approach and their perspective about the impacts of this approach. That became more determined once an analysis of the interviews from the government categories was done. In the findings of these interviews, I reported the results regarding articulating citizen engagement at first and then public relations functions in intermediating citizen engagement and the impact of this intermediation (see Chapters 5 and 6). Therefore, the interviews with citizens aim to test the results derived from the governmt. Moreover, the themes around which I want to formulate my questions became also clear. Therefore, my interview guide is well-focused on three main themes which can be put in the following three questions: (1) what does citizen engagement mean? (2) how do you perceive government communication in the country? And (3) what is the impact of the citizen engagement? Having clear topics in mind can make taking notes much easier. Sure, there are some follow-up questions and room to add some more questions to serve the explorative purpose of the interviews.

However, all the questions revolve around the three main areas. The sample which is explained above is heterogeneous and that can contribute to collecting adequate data and widening the breadth of statements. Focus group interviews can contribute to enriching data. However, in this study where privacy should be prioritised and, in a case, where recording did not work, there is a risk that people will not feel comfortable speaking in front of the group.

2. **Thorough introduction to the interview method:** The modified participant information sheet was sent to those who expressed their willingness to participate. In the sheet, the purpose of the study is made clear. Information about privacy and confidentiality was provided. Information about the role of the interviewee was also provided (See Appendix E)[2]. As the participants agreed to take part and when I had contact with them to arrange a time and a place, I explained in detail the following: (1) the purpose of the research, (2) the nature of the interview that it would not be recorded but instead notes taking during the interview will be done with the participation of the respondent, (3) a script will be written after the interview with one-two days and will be sent for the participant to double-check the script of the interview and write his/her comments or anything they want to modify or add. (4) the participants need to send it back within one week. The interview guide (presented in the next step) was then sent to the participants who confirmed their participation to make the discussion more focused.

3. **The interview, and writing of notes on statements together with the participant:** During the interview, I started by introducing myself, my research objectives and my interest in the research. Then I asked the participants to introduce themselves and to define their position in terms of community or civic participation, particularly if they have participated in any of the governmental engagement programs, especially those related to Oman Vision 2040. I remind the participants of the privacy and confidentiality issues and their rights to withdraw at any time. The interviews were conducted in person in a public office space that I booked ahead of time. The interview questions were divided into three main areas with the main questions outlined below:

A. Citizen engagement:

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[2] The highlighted text in the PIS (yellow for the text added, red for the text omitted) signifies the changes that were conducted to suit the individually focused interview.

1. How do you define citizen engagement?

2. How does it relate to democracy? Propaganda?

3. Are you happy about citizen engagement in Oman, for example in Oman Vision 2040? Explain.

B. Government public relations (government communication)

1. In your opinion, what are the changes in the government communication in Oman?

2. What can be done for better communication and relations with the citizens?

C. The impact:

1. In your opinion, what is the impact of citizen engagement in Oman Vision 2040?

2. What is the impact of the changing government communication style?

3. What can be the possible impacts in the future?

Follow-up questions or explanation questions were used when needed. All the interviews were conducted in 40-60 minutes. My role was to ask questions and take notes at the same time which was not an easy task. I realised how difficult this can be, and that's why I practised doing such interviews before with some family members and friends. It was still not easy. However, with the participants aware of the roles I was doing, it went smoothly for most of the interviews. Constant checking with the participants was done to check their statements.

4. **Writing of the draft and further joint production:** immediately after the interview, a script was written, based on the notes taken. The script (3-6 pages) which can be described as a condensed documentation of the interview now involves meaningful sentences that can be used for analysis. It was then sent to the participants to confirm that this was what they meant and that they were happy with the words being used. All the participants were given a week to complete that. Interestingly, a few comments came from only 5 participants with the rest of them being happy about the script.

5. **Analysis:** A reflexive thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data, following the same six stages that I explained in the data analysis of interviews with governmental officials earlier in this Chapter.

6. **Results:** the results are reported in Chapter 7 of this thesis. Figure 6 shows the summary of the results generated from the interviews with citizens.
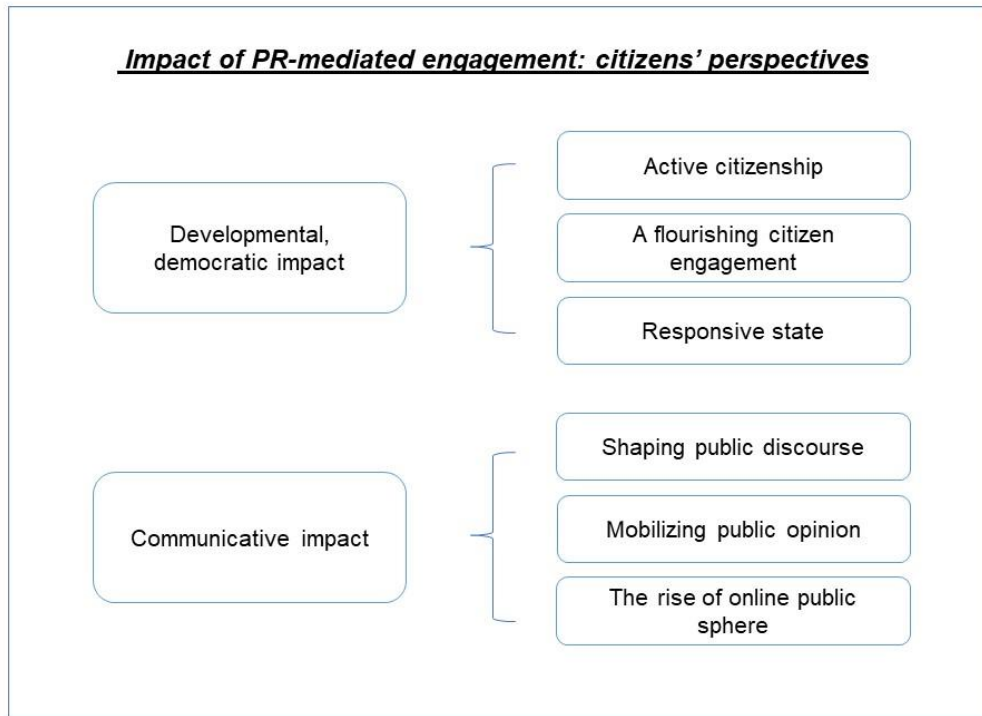
Figure 6 Results obtained from interviews with citizens

D. Limitations

The first and foremost limitation of this method is the absence of the audio recording, which I perceive as both a challenge but at the same as an opportunity to unlock citizens' perspectives without the possibility of potential self-censorship described earlier. As I explained, I have chosen to rather take notes as a result of my appreciation of the quality of data over the audio recording of data. This itself was a response done as an attempt to address a broader challenge regarding doing research, especially involving political views, in closed contexts. Moreover, making notes at the time of the interviews is deemed a challenging one, especially with the fact that you need to interact with the interviewee and at the same time take notes of their responses. However, with the joint production of the interview script with the participants themselves, I tried to address the issues of inaccuracy that may have happened because of the multi-tasks I was doing at the time of the interview. Another limitation, as has been mentioned before, in Oman, the research culture is just emerging, making it difficult to recruit participants. With the ethical consideration of voluntary participation and informed consent, it becomes harder to

recruit participants. That can also lead to bias resulting from the voluntary nature of the participation. To be more specific, the participants who voluntarily choose to take part may be more motivated or engaged in such topics or are more enthusiastic which may result in their view reported that may differ to less motivated or less engaged citizens. I tried to involve people with various interests; some of them have certain interests in the areas of this research, and some of them have not which was reported in the participant description sheet.

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

In considering ethical issues, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006: 319) proposed four main issues related to the interview process which are: (1) reducing the risk of unanticipated harm; (2) protecting the interviewee's information; (3) effectively informing interviewees about the nature of the study, and (4) reducing the risk of exploitation. I aimed to address these issues. The ethical clearance from Lancaster University was granted in which I stated the ethical issues that I need to consider when collecting data. The initial concern addressed by the ethics committee focused on the extent to which I, as a researcher, could conduct an independent, unbiased and critical study, ensuring freedom from any sort of censorship. This concern is understandable, taking into account the context of the study and the fact that I'm a sponsored student by the government in Oman. However, as will be mentioned throughout the next chapters, this country is not considered a liberal democracy, however, there is room for freedom of expression. Some critical studies have been done, including some of which were sponsored by the government, for example (Al-Farsi 2010; Al-Rawahi 2019). For that reason and to ensure the ethical committee that no harm is expected to the researcher and the participants, I asked for a letter from the Embassy of Oman in London, The Office of Cultural Attache, which is responsible for the academic supervision of Omani students in the UK. They wrote a letter indicating their support to me in doing the research critically and independently, stating their understanding that all data will be anonymous and that participants' information and responses will be dealt with as strictly confidential. In the letter, it was stated that the support from the organizations in Oman to work as gatekeepers would be highly appreciated. This letter has served the research in two ways: (1) it helps dealing with the concern of the research ethics committee, and (2) it helps to contact the organizations in Oman who might be otherwise reluctant to take the role of gatekeepers. However, the letter was not given to any participant to avoid any possible pressure to

participate. Second, all the participants from both segments (governmental officials and members of the general public) were reached out through the assigned organizations which worked as gatekeepers to avoid access to their information without their prior consent. The participation was completely voluntary. Once the participant expressed his/her willingness to take part in the study, the participants' information sheets (PIS) were sent and then informed consent was taken either verbally or in writing according to the wish of the participant (see Appendix G and H). In the PIS, all information about confidentiality, anonymity and how data will be saved and used is fully explained. The participants have the right to withdraw from the study based on the timeline defined in the PIS. The issue that I find problematic was the interviews with citizens regarding the audio recording as explained earlier which I think caused distress to the participants and also a disappointment to me as a researcher. However, I dealt with that by choosing not to record interviews with this segment. The PIS then was rewritten to suit the new form of the interview in which the roles of the participants were made clear along with the other ethical issues.

3.8 REFLECTIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE METHODOLOGICAL FINDINGS

At this point, I want to acknowledge that, as a PhD candidate, the empirical research was both hard work and full of learning experiences, not only about how to conduct research but also deeply acknowledging that different contexts will view researchers in different ways ranging from appreciation to a deep underestimation. It is also a great chance to learn how to be flexible in every single step, starting from deciding the initial method, to keep changing the interview questions and guide to sometimes even changing the whole perspective and changing the whole method or inventing some changes to suit the context or the conditions in which you collect data. With the presence of COVID-19 at its premium stage during my data collection period and due to the global restrictions on travel and working times around the world, being adaptable and responsive to these challenges proved remarkably challenging. However, I do appreciate it as it helps me form perspectives and views about methods and data, participation and undertaking research in general; insights that might not have developed under normal circumstances. There are three methodological considerations I learned in my research journey.

The first consideration unfolds as an imperative acknowledgement of the profound impact of the societal, cultural, and political factors within the context under investigation. Recognizing the dynamic interplay of these forces is fundamental to unravelling the nuanced layers that contribute to but also affect the research. The second point is that I stress the need for crafting an effective methodological approach; one distinguished by its inherent flexibility. This flexibility is needed to respond to the many conditions that inevitably emerge due to the complex nature of social, cultural, and political factors at play. It is a deliberate recognition that the research landscape is not static, and therefore an adaptable approach becomes a key player in navigating the complexity of influences that shape empirical inquiry. The last consideration is the importance of the researcher's direct engagement in the entire process, from data collection to analysis, including the small steps like transcribing and translation. I observe that this involvement is rooted in the acknowledgement of subjectivity as an inevitable tool for comprehending complex situations, especially in social sciences studies. By immersing oneself in the research process, the researcher becomes part of the nuances and deeply involved in the socio-cultural dimensions that can significantly influence the empirical work. I perceive subjectivity, in this context, as no interruption but a lens through which the researcher gains an understanding of complicated social phenomena.

The last thing I want to reflect on is that knowledge should not be limited to certain contexts. However, certain contexts may face challenges in doing research and therefore in obtaining knowledge. In the Arab world, the research is often characterised by its simplicity in terms of using simple affordable methods (mostly quantitative research) with a tendency to employ simple theoretical frameworks that are in many times unable to capture the complexity of the issues, especially in social sciences (Hammad and Al-Ani 2021). Therefore, it is my wish that this study will, to an extent, depart from this simplistic way employed in most of the Arab research by (1) using qualitative research, (2) being brave enough to state the difficulty in doing research in such a context and taking a step that may challenge the traditional way of conducting and recording interviews, (3) adopt multi-disciplinary approach with a multi-conceptual framework that allows for a production of a critical study rather than a functional one.

CHAPTER 4

OMAN AND THE HISTORY OF OMANI PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Since public relations doesn't exist in a vacuum, I discuss, in this chapter, the historical rise of public relations in Oman, its potential for national development and the influence of the political, economic, cultural and social factors, addressing, therefore, the first pillar of the cultural-centred approach explained in chapter 2 (section 2.4.3.B); the profession contextualization. Considering the history of public relations as an intermediary work and a nation-building resource (Taylor 2000; Taylor and Kent 2006) is vital to address the theoretical bias in public relations in which most of PR's concepts, models, and theories have been developed as practised in capitalist, Western, democratic countries (Hodges 2006). The bias towards the US approach (e.g. Cutlip 1994; Olasky 1987; Tedlow 1977) in understanding public relations history is clear in the literature and this is why "for many it is assumed that the US is actually the birthplace of PR and its early practitioners 'the fathers'" of PR (L'Etang 2008: 362). In addition to the dominant Western context that has shaped our understanding of public relations, there is also a dominant paradigm that associates PR birth and development with the rise of industrialization and the increasing power of big corporations in the Western capitalist nations (e.g. Tedlow 1977; Raucher 1990). Therefore, the importance to understand the history of public relations in other countries, for example in Oman, which is a non-capitalist, non-democratic, oil-rentier state, socially conservative, and has its own unique economic, political, social and cultural structure, is clear. This chapter, therefore, aims to provide a critical examination of the rise and development of public relations in Oman and its role in nation-building since 1970. In doing so, it also aims to set the context for the following chapters where I will specifically examine citizen engagement as a communication and democratic practice and explore the role of public relations in mediating engagement and its impact on nation-building.

Doing so, however, requires first understanding the political and socio-economic conditions in which public relations is created and practised and the power relations constructed in its specific context. This is reflected by L'Etang's (2008) questions that she considers vital when crafting and writing the history of public relations. The questions

proposed are: "how did public relations emerge in context X and why? What role did public relations play in a particular historical event and how? What has been the relationship between public relations and power? Why did organization X set up a public relations function? How and why did this PR practitioner achieve public notoriety or iconic status and why? When did employee magazines and communications emerge, where and why?" (L'Etang 2008: 323). These questions will be used as a guide for writing this chapter. To emphasize her account, L'Etang (2008) cited Cutlip, a PR historian, who wrote a reflection on the process of writing PR history in his significant book (*The Unseen Power*) in 1994:

> Initially… I set out to trace the evolution of public relations practice from the Colonial period to the mid-20th century. The first 10 chapters brought me to only the turn of the 20th century. A historian friend suggested that I was trying to write a history of the United States. In writing about the history of public relations it is a difficult task to keep the focus on the practice and not get mired in substantive content of the problem or project with which the practitioner is trying to deal (Cutlip, 1994: x).

L'Etang used this citation not only to clarify the relevance of economic, political and social changes to the rise of public relations but also to stress the idea that public relations neither necessarily evolves as a result of commercialization, nor is limited to the business environment.

From the perspectives outlined above, I dedicate this chapter to providing a critical reading and analysis of the political and socio-economic reforms that have occurred in Oman since 1970 and examining the various public relations and communication activities that have been used to provide an understanding of the rise of public relations in Oman through the lens of nation-building approach. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first offers general information about Oman, the second provides general background on nation-building in the context of Oman and the third examines the history of public relations in nation-building since 1970.

4.2 OMAN'S GEOPOLITICS, ECONOMY AND SOCIO-CULTURE

4.2.1 Geography

With its strategic position in the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is situated at the convergence point of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The sea borders it on two fronts, with the Sea of Oman lying to the northeast, and the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the southeast. Oman shares land borders with Saudi Arabia to the west, Yemen to the south, and the United Arab Emirates to the north. Additionally, it has maritime borders with Iran. Oman has a long coastline (3,165 km) that extends towards the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Sea of Oman, and the gateway to the Arabian Gulf (World Bank 2015). The coastline encompasses fertile habitable areas, in contrast to the largely uninhabited interior that is part of the vast desert of Rub' al Khali (The Empty Quarter) which was traditionally perceived as dry land, yet more recently, findings indicate the presence of water beneath the sands (Foreign Ministry of Oman 2022). Oman's historical and economic significance stems from its strategic location as a transit hub for crude oil (Morris 1991). This position allowed the country to historically construct a powerful empire with its cocolonization that extended to the coast of India and Eastern Africa Until the middle of the 20th century (El-Ashban 1979). Today Oman covers an area of 309,500 sq km (120,000 sq miles) (Foreign Ministry of Oman, 2022). It is administratively divided into 11 governorates, namely: Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Muscat, A'Dhahirah, A'Dakhiliya, A'Sharqiyah North, A'Sharqiyah South, Al Wusta and Dhofar. Each Governorate includes several provinces (Wilayats). Every governorate is directed by a governor, while each wilayat is led by a Wali. These officials serve as representatives of the government and are responsible for administrative duties within their respective regions.

4.2.2 Politics

Oman's political landscape which has been shaped by traditional and historical development is characterised by hereditary monarchy. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who ruled from 1970 for almost five decades until his passing in 2020, is widely credited with modernizing the country and introducing political reforms that laid the foundation for Oman's current system. Qaboos bin Said started modernizing the country as soon as he took over the ruling, calling it *'the Omani Renaissance'*, undertaking vast reforms in all political, economic, social and welfare fields which remains evidence of the transformation of the country until today.

Before 1970, Oman was a poor isolated country. When Sultan Qaboos took over, he had to deal not only with the poor conditions of the country and its people but also with a local war in the southern part of Dhofar by a communist-equipped army. However, Sultan Qaboos with the support of Britain and Iran succeeded in ending "the communist-inspired Dhofar rebellion that erupted during the 1960s in the southwest corner of Oman" (Lefebvre 2010: 99). With the political situation being under control by the end of 1970, the young Sultan started a journey of rapid changes towards modernizing the country, starting from the basic living needs like health and education to the political needs like the establishment of the government. The Sultan declared in his early speeches his approach that depended on democracy which stems from Islamic teachings.

> Our plan is to build our country and provide all its people with a decent life. This is a goal that can only be achieved through the participation of the people in bearing the burden of responsibility and the task of construction. We have opened our doors to our citizens in order to reach this goal and we will work seriously to establish democratic fair governance in our country within the framework of our Omani-Arab reality and according to the traditions and customs of our society, keeping in mind the teachings of Islam, which always illuminates the path for us. (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, July 1971, P.22)[3]

By a royal decree number 101/96, the Sultan promulgated the Basic Statute of the State which contains 81 articles; a step that gained international recognition. The parliament experience of Oman started in 1981 with the establishment of the Consultative Council of the State which involves members representing the public sector, the private sector and the different regions of Oman. However, members were appointed. In November 1991, a royal decree to establish Majlis A'Shura (Consultative Council) to replace the Consultative Council of the State was declared. Majlis A'Shura has developed in terms of its financial, administrative and legal authority. Today, members of Majlis A'Shura are elected by Omani citizens and they constitute representatives from all the Wilayats (provinces) of the country. Majlis A'Shura also constitutes one pillar of the Oman Council along with Majlis al-Dawla (State Council) which has members who are assigned by royal

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[3] All the extracts from Sultan Qaboos' speeches mentioned in this thesis are taken from a book produced by the Ministry of Information which involves scripts of all the speeches from 1970 to 2015. The book can be found at: omaninfo.om/images/library/file/Book402340.pdf.

decree. Oman Council with its two pillars (Majlis A'Shura and Majlis al-Dawla) aims at enriching the development and the building of Oman (Majlis A'Shura, n,d).

With that being said, however, Oman's absolute monarchy means the Sultan holds ultimate authority over state affairs. The Sultan's powers encompass legislative, executive, and judicial functions. In article 41 of the 1996's Basic Statute of the State, the head of the state is defined as:

> His Majesty the Sultan is the Head of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, his person is inviolable, respect of him is a duty, and his command is obeyed. He is the symbol of national unity and the guardian of the preservation and the protection thereof. (The Basic Statute of the State 1996)

That means that the power is centralised in the hands of Sultan Qaboos (Khalaf and Luciani 2006). According to the Basic Statute of the State, among his duties are the presidency of the Council of Ministers or appointing someone to chair it, and the presidency of the specialized councils or appointing someone to chair them. His duties also include appointing deputy prime ministers, ministers and their equivalents and relieving them from their positions. Also, he is responsible for appointing senior judges and relieving them from their positions, declaring a state of emergency and general mobilization, issuing and ratifying laws, signing international treaties and agreements and issuing ratification decrees, among others. The Sultan presides over influential bodies including, the Council of Oman, the Defence Council, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Secretariat of the Cabinet, and the Supreme Judicial Council, among others (The Basic Statute of the State 1996). However, Sultan Qaboos initiated a series of reforms aimed at modernizing Oman's governance structure and fostering greater participation of citizens, especially after the protests of 2011. The reforms included some direct responses to the protester's demands but also an increased political openness, for example by granting more authority to Majlis A'Shura and increasing the participatory approach of the government as will be explained later in this chapter.

In terms of its foreign policy, Oman started its policy in 1970 when Sultan Qaboos decided to end the international isolation imposed by his father, building a country that is an active part of the region. While Oman is seen as one of the very few places that are silent and mysterious (Allen 2016), the country has played a strategic position in the political intermediation between different countries. Oman's foreign policy depends on

three rules as identified by Lefebvre (2010: 99): "Rule number one: acquire a great power patron (protector), rule number two: avoid alienating your patron, rule number three: avoid making enemies". By applying these rules, its policy features "independence, pragmatism and modernization" (Lefebvre 2010: 99). In doing so, Oman makes itself committed to neutrality, diplomacy and maintaining good relations with regional and international society. In this way, it builds its strategic position as a peacemaker and a neutral intermediary to facilitate dialogue for the benefit of the regional conflict, for example in the case of Iran-US relations, the Iran nuclear issue, the Yemen crisis, Saudi-Qatari conflict and others. (see for example, Al Zubair 2017; Baabood and Baabood 2020; Valeri 2014; Schanzer and Salter 2019). Today, Oman has gained a reputation as the 'Switzerland of Arabia' with its foreign policy which is frequently described as being uniquely peaceful, with Omanis depicted as 'friends to all and enemies to none (Worrall 2021: 135).

4.2.3 Economy

Before the discovery of oil and the start of the commercial production and export of oil in 1967, the country's main resources of revenues were coming from agriculture, fisheries and trade (Foreign Ministry of Oman 2022), with the country's budget being dependent greatly on "religious taxes (zakat), customs duties, and British loans and subsidies" (Pikulski 2006: 187). Oman's wealth generated from oil revenues has helped boost the economy dramatically since 1970. With the use of oil revenue, Sultan Qaboos was able to transform Oman from a poor isolated country to a modern one starting in 1970. The progress made was basically in the form of establishing physical and social infrastructure including, schools, hospitals, roads, an international airport, etc. However, Oman's persistent dependence on the hydrocarbon sector exposes the country to significant economic vulnerability (Calabrese 2018). That is why there have been historical efforts to diversify the economy away from oil. Despite these efforts, however, the country's budget still largely relies on the oil and gas sector. In 2014, oil export revenues constituted 84.3% of total government revenue, a figure that decreased to 68.2% by 2016 (Al-Sarihi 2020). Today Oman faces challenges to its economy resulting from the reliance on oil and gas revenue, the weakness of the private sector, and the over-dependency on foreign labour which has all contributed to a major challenge of unemployment. According to the most recent official data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the unemployment rate in Oman stood at 3.2 per cent as of July 2021, most of which are

young population (World Bank 2021). Oman's recent five-year development plans and visionary plans like Oman Vision 2040 are all focused on economic diversification with a target to reduce the country's dependence on a single source that is subject to global price fluctuations (Al Yahyai 2023). They are also targeting "Omanization" which means the replacement of expatriate labour, especially in the private sector, with Omani national labour (Pikulski 2006).

4.2.4 Society and Culture

Oman's population is around 5 million, with about 43% non-Omani expatriates. Around half the population is aged under 30 (Oman Foreign Ministry 2022). The society of Oman is linked to its rich history, which spans thousands of years, from the civilisations that flourished along the shores of the Arabian Sea to the empire of Oman which extends to Eastern Africa and India. The strategic locations of Oman along the trade route have also influenced the diversity of the Omani society. Today, Oman's society is mainly perceived as homogeneous consisting of Arab Muslim population who are mainly Ibadi [4] (45%, most of which occupy the interior parts of Oman) or Sunni (50% who are scattered across the country). While this is accepted even by most of the Omanis themselves, minority groups do exist including the Asian minority (mostly Indians, Pakistani and Bengali) but also other religious groups like Shi'i and Hindu (5%) (Peterson 2006). Oman is known for its religious pluralism and tolerance. The country protects the rights to religious freedom by "guaranteeing the freedom of belief, worship and religious education based on the values of tolerance, mutual understanding and coexistence" (Oman Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

With the majority of the population being Muslims, the teachings of Islam constitute a central role in shaping the society's norms, traditions and culture. The Bedouin[5] traditions are also influential in the shaping of the society (Chatty 1983). For example, at the heart of Omani society lies a strong sense of community and relationship. Families form the cornerstone of social life, with extended family networks providing support and solidarity. Hospitality is valued with guests often welcomed with warmth and generosity. Respect for the elderly and women is a sign of one's honour and dignity, and gender roles are defined by cultural norms, assuming the traditional roles of men and women. While

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[4] Ibadhi and Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence
[5] a nomadic Arab of the desert

the country has witnessed social transformation along with economic development and due to globalization, the Omani people are still committed to their traditions and identity; something that anyone can notice right away when visiting Oman. Social status is also influenced by factors such as tribal affiliations, as most of the population belongs historically to tribes (Allen 2016). Omani society is characterized by a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, with communities coming together to celebrate religious festivals, weddings, and other social occasions. Mosques serve as not only places of worship but also as centres for community gatherings and social interaction.

Many scholars and those interested in the politics of Oman believe that the Omani culture and society have influenced the sort of political authority and centralization manner but also the tolerant manner of being a regional mediator followed until today in the country. From one side, for example, the Omanis adhere to the concept of the family as the basic nucleus of society, which is derived from Islamic law, making the Omanis realize the importance of controlling the behaviours in society. Thus, even if the society is open to social and international changes, it is committed to achieving a degree of balance between centralization and decentralization necessary to control the behaviours and protect its traditions and values (Al'Asimi 2015). On the other hand, citing different authors such as Jones and Ridout 2012; Leonard 2017; Tahmizian Meuse 2018; Wilkinson 1987, Worrall (2021) explained how Omani culture has influenced its foreign policy:

> The culture of mediation, derived in part from the Ibadi branch of Islam can be seen to permeate Omani society, with traditions such as shura (consultation), ijma'a (consensus), the sablah (council), as well as the everyday practice of politeness and avoidance of interpersonal conflict all of which clearly influence practices within Omani approaches to foreign policy (Worrall 2021: 142).

4.3 NATION-BUILDING IN THE CONTEXT OF OMAN

As described earlier in Chapter 2, nation-building is understood differently and subjectively by scholars and practitioners. However, central themes have dominated the debate about what makes and contributes to nation-building. Among these themes are: state formation, national identity and unity, modernization and democratization. To understand where Oman fits into the theoretical understanding of nation-building, I will briefly discuss the features of nation-building in reference to Omani political, economic,

and social conditions, before I go to the details of where public relations fit in nation-building efforts since 1970 in the following section.

As explained in Chapter 2, the first element of nation-building is the state formation in which governments, institutions, and the basic infrastructure need to be established. Before 1970, the Omani government was weak and failed to create the basic institutions needed to satisfy the primary demands of its citizens. Oman – ruled by Said bin Taimur for four decades (1932-1970) – was politically unstable, economically poor, socially suffering and internationally isolated. This period was described as the dark age of Oman (Allen and Rigsbee 2014). Funsch (2015: 49) described the country as "little more than a medieval potentate, a quintessential Arab "hermit kingdom", impoverished, xenophobic, and affiliated by a stubborn Marxist inspired insurrection in the south and chronic civil unrest in the north". In terms of infrastructure, the country lacked basic infrastructure. There were only six miles of paved roads, three boys' primary schools, no mass media, no water system, only one electrical power plant, one small hospital operated by the Dutch Reformed Church, and one small maternity hospital in the capital city, Muscat. The life expectancy was 47 years (Funsch 2015), a figure which alone illustrates what sort of life Omanis had to endure. Economically, people mostly depended on agriculture and fishing for their everyday living. Oil, which is today's major source of revenue, was not discovered until 1967. In terms of the administrative system, there were few governmental units that dealt with the basic matters of the country. Only two primary ministries existed, one for internal and one for external affairs, with 10 other units responsible for basic needs like financial affairs, customs, police and printing (Sheban 2016). This situation lasted until Sultan Qaboos took over power in 1970 and started the nation-building of Oman, beginning by creating governmental institutions that worked primarily to supply the basic demands of the people.

With the need to build the state, national identity and unity are other important elements. It can be achieved by the efforts of connecting the disconnected parties, by developing a sense of nationalism and collective national goals. That is especially needed in contexts where people are disconnected, and diverse. Before 1970, Omanis were disconnected parties fragmented by many causes. The first was the civil war in Dhofar (1963-1975): an insurgency movement against the reactionary Sultan, Said bin Taimur. The rebellion started in 1963 as opposition to the restrictions and reactionary life Omanis had endured during his ruling, seeking Dhofar independence. The rebellion was supported by the

Marxist-Leninist regime that appeared in Adan (Yemen) and was assisted by the Soviet Union and China in terms of funding and training, especially when the insurgency expanded their goals to achieve Arab unity and independence, including ending the British existence in the Gulf area (McKeown 1981). The second cause of social division was the inherent tribal system in the culture of Oman which makes the tribal members ethnocentric to their tribes and prioritize tribes over any other cause. This tribal ethnocentrism was left by the previous government for anxiety and conflict among the different tribes. Another cause of Omani society fragmentation was religious affiliations, with Ibadi in the interior of the country (Aldakhil), Sunni in the coastal area (Alsahil) and the historical conflict between Imamah ruling by Ibadi and the Al Busaidi family (the current royal family) (Alsalmi 2020). Lastly, it was also the differences in people's aspirations and divided goals that made them to be separated. For example, due to the Dhofar rebellion, people in the south aspired to freedom and Marxist values. In contrast, people in the north (for example in Batinah and Muscat) were inspired by money, the creation of wealth and development as they were affected by the start of wealth creation due to the oil boom in neighbouring countries, where oil exploration and production began years ahead of Oman, for example in UAE and Saudi Arabia (Skeet 1992). Accordingly, it is here that national identity and national unity form an important part of the story, where resolving the differences in the social system and bringing people's attention towards common national goals and future become vital. That was another task for Sultan Qaboos as he took over the power in 1970.

Lastly, in terms of politics, before 1970, citizens' political rights did not exist at all. Said bin Taimur, father of Qaboos, used a strict and conservative ruling system, imposing rash and rough restrictions in the country that pushed many Omanis to emigrate in their search for a better life. For example, the capital Muscat was dark all night and people were forced to stay home as the city was surrounded by gates that closed at 10 pm. Nobody could walk out except those who held oil lanterns as a sign that they had the government's permission to do so (Al Shueili 2015). This caused many of the few educated Omanis and the few who opposed the government to escape the country, and most were then stripped of their nationality by the government. Although Oman is nondemocratic, today the country has seen some political openness and political rights. For example, Majlis A'Shura (Consultative Council) and Al Majlis Al Baladi (Municipal Council); both are consultative elected councils, the law of freedom of expression (albeit limited), and public

engagement in certain national projects are all signs of the slow, conservative but ongoing steps towards political participation. It may not fit linearly into the Western model of democracy yet it provides proof of a change in Omani society toward political openness.

4.4 PUBLIC RELATIONS COMMUNICATION FOR NATION-BUILDING IN OMAN

4.4.1 Before 1970

Given the situation in Oman before 1970 as described above, it should come as no surprise that basic communication between government and citizens was hardly maintained. However, few public relations activities were practised to serve the governmental agenda. For example, the Wali's Majlis (the council of governor of a province), called "Al Barzah", was used by the Walis to meet with nobles and tribal leaders to discuss issues of concern and mediate between them and the government. It was used to transmit the government's voice, explain its policies, and improve its image among the locals. There was also another Majlis at a smaller level called "Al Sablah" which was used by Shikhs (the tribal leaders) who worked under the governance of the Wali in which they met with members of their tribes and transmitted the information they received from the Wali (Al-Hinai 2012). Publicity activities can be traced to the first published newsletter (our company news) that was issued by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) only two years before the Renaissance in 1970 (Zahra and Al Balushi 2017). PR and communication practices were extremely limited but they witnessed a dramatic development after 1970.

Based on a critical reading of secondary resources obtained from the academic literature and resources from official documents and websites, I divided the rise of public relations for the nation-building of Oman into three milestones since 1970. With this categorisation, I focus on the main communication practices in each milestone, considering their functions and impact on Oman's nation-building.

4.4.2 The First Milestone (1970-1990): The Reform Phase; A Rise of Public Communication and State-Society Relations

This phase represents the start of the nation-building process in Oman. Sultan Qaboos, who took over power in 1970 and started reforms in various fields, was challenged in many ways. As explained earlier, the obstacles included the civil war in Dhofar, social fragmentation (caused by religious affiliations, tribal structure, ununified citizen's

aspirations and attitudes) and the absence of all basic infrastructure. Adding to that, Qaboos himself was totally unknown to the Omani population and neighbouring countries as he did not leave his palace in Salalah to visit any other city in Oman. He had only travelled to the UK, Europe and other countries when he was 18 years old for education and military training and returned to Salalah in 1964 to receive religious and cultural education in the palace (AlBusaidi 2020). Considering all these factors, the new regime needed a relationship that relied on trust, publicity efforts against the propaganda from the insurgency's supporters in Dhofar, awareness raising about the development and reform plans by the new government and the creation of a national identity around which people would be unified towards collective national goals. Public relations, represented by governmental communication efforts, was a good fit for these functions. The basic communication activities in this period and their effects on nation-building are explained below.

A. The use of controlled public communication (mass media)

Public communication through the newly established, state-controlled media was an integral facilitator to the new government in building a contemporary state. Its emergence can be associated with the desire of the new regime, ruled by Sultan Qaboos in 1970, to make use of mass media in development projects. Therefore, since its establishment, it has been employed to document the achievements of the new government in different fields, explaining them and associating them directly with the Renaissance man (Sultan Qaboos), as he was represented in the media (Al-Kindi 2021).

The government realised early the importance of having a media system that could serve as a resource, among others, for nation-building efforts. Thus, the first radio station was inaugurated only two weeks after Sultan Qaboos took over power in the country. The temporary station, which broadcast for just two hours a day, was used to spread Qaboos' speeches and transmit governmental messages. However, the signal (which covered only one kilowatt) was received by a few areas in Muscat (the capital) (Al-Mashiaki 2015). That's why simultaneously, a four-page brochure was published across the country, in which a transcription of Qaboos's speech was written on papers of stencil (Al-Hinai 2012). Within one year, a radio station was established in Salalah (a major city in the south) which indicated the government's intention to use radio in the area of the civil war. In his first speech on the occasion of radio Inauguration, Sultan Qaboos said:

It is a pleasure for me to speak to you this evening, on our Omani radio, and we meant that you know closely the government's plans for the future and the steps we are taking to achieve reassurance and progress for our people and increase the security of our country. And on this basis, you can trust that our talk tonight defines the direction of the future, and similar talks will follow, either from me personally or from senior government officials (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, August 1970, p.15).

The key words here are: to know and to trust – diffusion of information and relation building based on mutual trust. These are fundamental for nation-building at this stage and here is where public relations fit as a facilitator for nation-building (Taylor and Kent 2006).

The radio station was then followed by developments in different media outlets. Omani journalism started in 1971 with the establishment of a private publication, Al Watan Newspaper. The first governmental newspaper (Oman Newspaper) was published on 18th November 1972, the National Day of Oman. The inauguration of TV was also linked to the national day in 1974 and was first used to broadcast the Sultan's speech on both occasions (Valeri 2009). Oman News Agency (ONA) was launched in 1986 as an official source of news and information, from the Omani government (Al-Kindi 2021).

As the country began to flourish, the media system expanded. Today, there are five radio channels broadcasted from Oman radio stations, including Oman General, the English Channel, the Youth Channel, The Holy Quran Channel, and The Classic Music Channel. There are also a few private radio stations including Hala FM (launched in 2007), Al Wesal (2008), Muscat FM (2017) and Al Shabibah FM (2018). More private newspapers – all Arabic – were also established, for example, Al Shabiba in 1993 and Al Roya newspaper in 2009. There are now also four English newspapers, of which only one is governmental (Oman Observer, launched in 1982) and three private newspapers: Times of Oman (1975), Oman Turbine (2004) and Muscat Daily (2009). TV has also improved with four governmental channels: Oman General, Oman Live, Culture Channel, and Sports Channel (Ministry of Information 2021).

Reviewing the media environment in Oman, it seems that it follows the model of media for development (communication for development) where media is used to support

governmental development plans. This can be viewed as a positive facilitator to nation-building in the first stages of the process, particularly when considering Oman's situation in 1970. Scholars who have examined communication as linked to modernization such as Schramm (1964) have focused on the necessity of one-way, persuasive communication from the state to the population during the first stages of nation-building (Beiner 1999). This is particularly apt when considering cases of developing countries which lack the basic living requirements (Van Leuven 1996). For example, Marsden (1990) attributed the need for a persuasive one-way communication style to the lack of citizens' awareness, knowledge and skills needed to effectively join in two-way communication. In the Omani context, it seems that this approach has been used, although for much longer than the theory suggests, i.e. until reaching maturity in economy and other aspects of development. For instance, Oman TV was the only channel Omanis had access to until 1994 when satellite dishes were allowed. For 24 years after the new government, Omanis were allowed only to watch the Sultan's speeches, religious leaders who spoke about Islamic rules, and cultural and entertainment programmes decided by the government. The TV, the gathering point for families, was used to create a national identity through the emphasis on using the Omani Arabic language, showing Islamic rules and representing governmental achievements (Valeri 2011). Compared to many Arab media, Oman TV imported very few Western programmes and tended to focus on its own shows, which mostly cover themes around Oman's history, heritage, religion, and social life.

Thus, TV was used to shape people's minds and direct them to national development efforts by Qaboos's government and the preferred values and norms that contribute to the making of national identity and unity. This was applied to all other media outlets. Radio was especially important until 1976 to respond to anti-Omani propaganda broadcasted by the Marxists in the South. Al Shahri (2017), who conducted a content analysis on radio and TV programming in 1970-1979, found that the majority of programmes broadcast discussed the political situation, the government's performance and religious education. Half of the programming used the Arabic language while the other half used the Al Shahri language (the language of Dhofar) in a clear indication of the use of broadcast media to influence people against the Marxists. The press was also used as a tool to counter Marxist propaganda that was supported by the Yemeni radio, citizen's voice radio, which was popular in Dhofar. For example, Oman newspaper, since its establishment, used the Islamic religion, the history of Oman and development achievements in social life as

references to promote the legitimacy of the Omani government and the necessity to combat the Marxist movement in Dhofar which was represented as a source of disruption for the religious, historical and social values of Oman and its people (Al Nomani 2016).

Radio, TV and the press were and still are used in a way that reinforces the power and agency of the regime. For example, all news bulletin starts with announcements of newly issued royal decrees, the visits made, and the messages received or sent by the ruler. Previously when broadcasting was shut at night, the national anthem was broadcast at the end of the session (Valeri 2020).

To sum up, at the start of the nation-building process, Omani media served as a development tool which was used to fight the Marxist propaganda and to transmit nationalist ideologies to serve the unity of Omanis and help the government in the fight against the rebels in Dhofar. It also served as a tool for transmitting governmental messages that aimed at creating knowledge among citizens to start the national reforms from one side and to promote the new government on the other side; hence, building legitimacy for Sultan Qaboos and gaining people's trust and support. Communication efforts at this stage can be described as one-way, top-bottom communication, yet I argue it was effective for starting the nation-building process, considering the situation in the country at that time. Media campaigns, through state-controlled media, were used for awareness raising, building regime-society relations and the construction of the social meaning of the Omani nation as being linked to its history, religion, language and hope for a better future. Such campaigns were used as a persuasive tool to inform, influence attitudes and change behaviours (Slater 1999). They also brought diverse people together in the nation to think and act collectively for the purpose of nation-building (Taylor and Kent 2006). In a more stable phase of nation-building, such campaigns can "improve citizen's lives and promote democracy in the developing world" (Taylor and Kent 2006: 345).

B. Presidential speeches

From the day he acceded to the throne, Qaboos used his speeches as a way to inform the public and maintain good relations with them based on trust and credibility. The speeches served as a public relations tool to declare the steps taken by the government towards development in various fields. The fact that Qaboos was the only leader in the Arab world to create a regular annual speech makes them valuable to Omanis who wait, on the

national day each year, to hear from their leader about accomplishments and future steps towards development. "His presentations were widely discussed and always acknowledged for adding value to the Omani body politics" (Kéchichian 2008: 113). Until 2003, Qaboos' speeches were delivered annually on the national day as a way of reviewing the national achievements of the last year. Examining the speeches in the first two decades, I identified the following main themes: response to Marxist movements in Dhofar (until 1976), addressing issues of social division and national unity and legitimatising the new regime by focusing on its national achievements. The speeches were both informative and relational; particularly during the first years, they were optimistic and promoted a sense of hope for a better future. In his first speech on 23rd July 1970 upon taking power, he said:

> I will work as fast as I can to make you live happily in a better future…
> My new government and I aim to achieve our basic goal – Omani
> people, my brothers – Yesterday was dark and with the guide of Allah,
> a new dawn will rise over Oman and its people (Extract from sultan
> Qaboos speech, July 1970, p.7).

The language of hope he used was good enough for an oppressed population to trust the new leader. Qaboos also declared the change of the country's name from Sultanate of Oman and Muscat to Sultanate of Oman with a clear intention to create a national identity.

> One of the vital aspects I want to declare today is our decision to change
> our country's name which will be known from now onward as Sultanate
> of Oman. We believe that this change is a start to an enlightened new
> era and a symbol of our determination to unify our people. No
> difference after today between AlSahil and aldakhil [the coastal and
> interior areas] and between them and the Southern Province of Dhofar.
> We are all one nation, sharing future and destiny (Extract from Sultan
> Qaboos speech, August 1970, p.15).

Until 1976, the speeches were also an important communication tool against anti-Omani propaganda used by the rebels in Dhofar. On the first national day in 1971, Qaboos said:

> Today, we want to speak about a matter that is a source of pain and
> irritation for every loyal Omani, it's about the Southern Province of

Dhofar. As we celebrate today the national day, our brothers and sons in Dhofar are subjected to types of oppression, terror, and destruction as a result of the domination of foreign, extraneous elements, including opportunists, gangsters and atheists (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, July 1971, p.22).

In all his speeches, Qaboos employed Muslim values and Arab values of unity as references for why Omanis should fight communists, and he always used citations from the Quran (the Holy Book for Muslims) as a way to respond to communist ideologies.

The struggle that we are waging against atheism is a sacred duty imposed on us by our religion, our patriotism, and affirmed by our Arabism (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, November 1973, p.50).

He also used powerful language to describe communists and the possible consequences of their domination.

What are you expecting from the communists? Do you expect peace from them, and they are the ones who filled the world with corpses and drowned it with blood? Is fulfilment expected from them when they secretly and openly breastfed the milk of betrayal? Is sincerity expected from them when they deny their homelands and sell their consciences to other countries? Communism, if dominates, will take two paths, which are only two paths; either genocide or forcing conversion to atheism. And this is a statement of God's saying in the holy Quran: "For if they should come upon you, they would stone you or force you to return to their cult, and in that case you would never attain prosperity" (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, November 1972, p.42).

However, to encourage supporters of the insurgency, he gave a sense of security that if they stepped back, they would be welcome as loyal Omanis.

Our position on the so-called Front of Oman and Arab Gulf Liberation is the same position with which we started our new era. We said at the time, let bygones be bygones. Do return to your homeland and resume the life of building and reconstruction, because yesterday's darkness

will turn into light, and we all have a historical responsibility towards this country. (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, November 1972, p.50).

Qaboos kept speaking about the civil war and transmitted messages against the communists in all his speeches until the declaration that the war had been won on 11th December 1975. In this speech, he linked the victory to the great history of Oman and the unity of its people.

> The victory is the fruit of the sacrifice of our sons, the soldiers and the national teams, and all the friends who contributed and helped. It is a sacred sacrifice to save their homelands, to protect their Islam, and to save peace from the futility of communism, the reason behind terror and corruption in the region (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, December 1975, p.93).

On the other hand, in his response to the need to unify people beyond their tribal affiliations, Qaboos targeted the tribal leaders. He did not destroy the tribal system that is inherent to Omani culture. Rather, he involved them in a way that ensured they did not feel their power was left out or threatened by the new Sultan. He described them as an essential part of the development journey.

> We highly appreciate the responsibilities of the Sheikhs [tribal leaders] in protecting their groups and their security and promoting good behaviours among them. We intend to get them paid for performing these tasks. We have directed for an urgent consideration for this matter (Extract from Sultan Qaboos speech, August 1970, p.17).

It's clear how much the speeches addressed the issues of unity and national identity. The speeches were also a good tool for recording national achievements, in areas such as education, health, transportation, media and communication, trade, industry and foreign relations. Qaboos used the speeches to emphasise national achievements, which served as a good record for Oman's development, particularly in the first period (Kéchichian 2008). After the monarch reached a level of self-assurance and after the development of many governmental institutions that dealt with national development projects, the speeches began to get shorter and provided only general reports of progress compared to the detailed speeches in the first two decades of the Renaissance era.

C. The Royal Tours

Inspired by the Muslim princes of the past, Qaboos reinvented the practice of visiting local regions; a practice that had not been carried by Omani leaders before him. The annual tours (1971-2013) can be described as open parliament and as the first public engagement practice by the new government. They served the nation-building efforts in many ways. These annual meetings served as a legitimacy tool for the Sultan and his government (AlKamisi 2015) and were part of the "greet and meet" campaign (Funsch 2015) by which Sultan Qaboos aimed to define himself to the citizens of Oman since they did not know anything about him before he came to power. They were also used as a tool to encourage the tribal leaders (Sheikhs) to take part in development matters and develop a sense of belonging rather than ignoring them which may hinder the legitimacy of Qaboos and his efforts towards unifying the country. Valeri (2020: 149) described this as an effective "containment strategy", and as a positive addition to Qaboos' relations with tribal leaders and their members (Funsch 2015). For example, the tour usually contained discussion sessions organized in a semicircle where Qaboos faced the sheikhs, speaking and listening to them. The tours also functioned as a way to help the Sultan to evaluate the level of loyalty of different tribes and reconsider their administrative roles in their locality, which was regularly monitored (Valeri 2020). This face-to-face interpersonal interaction is defined by Verderber and Verderber (2004) as cited by Rhee (2007: 103) as "the process through which people create and manage their relationship, exercising mutual responsibility in creating meaning". It results in the creation of positive relations with the target audience. It involves personal influence in which face-to-face communication is used for building personal relationships with the key public, for example, media, activists, politicians (Grunig et al. 1995), and with citizens. However, developing interpersonal relationships needs skills including "listening, empathy, being able to contextualize issues within local, national and international frameworks and being able to identify common ground between parties" (Kent and Taylor 2002: 32). Qaboos had good listening and empathetic communication skills needed to convince and acquire people's support (AlKamisi 2015; Funsch 2015).

Sultan Qaboos indicated in an interview with the French News agency that he was conducting both announced and unannounced trips to keep him informed.

I'm even informed by the people in the street, I go in rounds, I meet individuals, I meet groups, and I sit with them, in various parts of the country, I do both some announced and other unannounced trips, unofficial trips which I always do, almost every week in different places. And then, there are also official tours which I do once or twice a year and each time I go to a different place, we sit with people, people who represent people, you can't sit with everybody but I certainly go around the villages and towns, I stop and talk to the people, sometimes they do (Extract from an interview with Sultan Qaboos by the French news agency in 1986).

From another perspective, the annual meetings provide a sort of direct democracy which can take different forms, from town meetings to referendums (Matsusaka 2005). They provide a venue for people to have direct communication with either Qaboos himself or the ministers who accompany him for weeks during the tours. People were allowed to question the ministers and criticize their work, particularly about the implementation of national projects in their local areas. In addition, usually, during the tours, announcements about long-awaited projects were declared (Valeri 2020) which indicates a strategic aim to link good news to the Sultan's presence in the local area. For example, the state's constitution was announced on one of the annual tours of 1996 (Alsalmi 2020).

4.4.3 The Second Milestone (1991-2011): Socio-Economic Growth Phase; Stagnation in Communication Efforts

There has been a quantum leap in the development of various areas within the first two decades of building Oman as a contemporary state; including the government administrative system, basic infrastructure, economic growth and the political situation. Oil revenue was a major source of the country's wealth on which the state depended for delivering the basic needs of its people. By 1990, there were 759 schools, institutes and colleges with more than 327,000 students. The first university, Sultan Qaboos University, was established in 1986 with six faculties. Also, 47 hospitals and 86 health centres were established around the country. Most Omanis were granted work opportunities, mostly in the public sector. Women's associations, youth sports centres, youth clubs and disabled care centres were established, and social insurance was granted to families in need (Oman Annual Book 1990). In terms of political life, the major development was the introduction

of the state constitution in 1996 which defined the state's principles, public rights and duties, the head of state, Majlis Oman and the judiciary (Oman's Constitution 1996). The constitution was amended in 2011 as a response to the demands of the protests during the 2011 Arab Spring. In terms of political participation, Majlis A'Shura (an elected consultative council) was established in 1991 but had limited power until 2011 when it was given more legislative and financial authority as a response to the protester's demands of increasing political participation. In terms of the economy, notions like economic diversification, development of the private sector and balancing governmental spending became major issues. The fourth five-year national development plan (NDP) (1991-1995) was the first to discuss such issues, and they continue to be major concerns in NDPs until today.

With all the remarkable achievements in various fields, public communication practices did not seem to change or develop much, maintaining, mainly, a one-way, top-down approach which does not fit with the developing nature of the country and its emerging needs. While some researchers were in favour of using one-way mass media at the start of nation-building in developing countries as described earlier, others like Hiebert (1992) indicated the importance for these countries to change their communication towards a more two-way and dialogic communication. In Oman, however, the government did not change much of its communication practices. For example, the media system remained controlled by the state. This is what Hiebert (1992: 123) described as the authoritarian theory in which the public-owned media work to "serve the central authority, the state, the president, the king, the dictator, the government, the church-but not the individual" and if privately owned "the media were subject to close scrutiny, to licensing and countless other legal controls, to ensure that they would serve the needs of the powers that be". To a great extent, this applies to Oman. Although I agree that controlling public communication worked as a facilitator for nation-building in the first phases, the media system remained under strict control when its role in nation-building should have changed as a venue for transparent reporting of national and social matters. Several governmental organizations, like the Public Authority for Radio and Television and the Ministry of Information, are responsible for this control. For example, based on the Law of Press and Publication issued in 1984, all public and private publications must be licensed by the Ministry of Information. Alhasani (2008) and Saleem et al. (2017) described the Law of Press and Publication as too general and therefore not protecting journalists, instead

limiting their reporting opportunities. Alhasani (2008) also found that the Omani press is overloaded with news from official sources in governmental institutions. Also, despite the existence of a law of the freedom of the press, presented in the state's basic statute in Article 31, the law leaves gaps for uncertainty and constrains journalistic work. It contradicts the meaning of a free press when it defines, in a stretching way, the issues that the press cannot cover, including issues "leading to discord, harming the State's security or abusing human dignity or rights" (Article 31). The governmental control over the media through the Ministry of Information is also a major factor in setting the agenda of public opinion regarding local issues. Al Sawai (2008) focused on "self-censorship", which prevents journalists from the transparent reporting of local issues. Alrawas (2012) described the media in Oman as working to reinforce the concept of paternal or rentier states that provide all necessary services to their citizens. He suggested that Omani media failed in its social responsibility as they are not able to present the real picture of social life. He attributed this failure to the directions that media receive from governmental institutions not to cover particular issues under the pretext that the time is not right to discuss them. A good example to demonstrate this policy is the silence strategy used as a response to the 2011 protests. Al-Rawahi (2019) studied media coverage of the 2011 protests and attributed the absence of media reporting about this issue to the controlled media system that is directed towards serving the governmental agenda. For example, her findings showed that there was no coverage at all of the protests in the Omani press. However, after the end of the protests, newspapers (both governmental and private-owned) started to publish stories about the government's responses to the protesters' demands. Also, she noted that they used unattributed sources who spoke out against the protesters, presenting them as disloyal and focusing on ideas of nationalism which is represented as obedience to the government.

In terms of organizational communication, there has been a considerable increase in public relations units in governmental institutions. According to a study by Al-Hinai (2012), 93.3% of all governmental institutions had public relations units by the 2000s, but their roles remained limited. For example, Al-kindi (2019) identified three functions of public relations units in the public sector. The first is media relations, for instance, writing press releases and arranging media interviews with officials. The second is service functions, which cover activities of reception of guests, organizing events and issuing visas. The third function is 'other' and that includes internal communication, participation

in PR conferences and other events. Al-Hinai (2012) also indicated that the top practised activities by governmental PR units are related to visas and immigration, event management and reception of delegations which is also confirmed by Al-Qamshoi (2015). Similarly, Al-Zadjali (2012) indicated that despite the increasing use of websites by public sector organizations, they adopt one-way communication, and they rely on the presentation of information about the organization, legislation and service rather than strategic messages. It can therefore be observed that although public relations have become institutionalized, they have been used mainly to reinforce the power of the government by publishing daily press releases and sticking to other technical functions which do not facilitate the creation of good state-society relations.

Despite the country's need for two-way, transparent communication, the top-down mostly one-way communication the government pursues was not in favour of the state-society relations at this stage of national maturity. The need for development in communication style comes from the different challenges that face the government after the first two decades of its creation. The source of initial legitimacy by Sultan Qaboos through gaining the support of tribal leaders was soon altered by the wealth created by oil revenue, which was used to achieve social welfare. Oman as an oil-rentier state has for long acquired its legitimacy from the wealth created by oil (Alabdulkarim 1997). The upheavals achieved in various fields in the first two decades, as described above, worked as a reinforcer for the relationship between the regime and the population. However, this started to change in the 1990s when oil prices started to fluctuate, and they have not stabilized since. Thus, the fourth NDP (1991-1995) was the first to address issues of economic diversification, the need for a flourishing private sector, and balancing public spending. This later resulted in reducing governmental spending and even austerity policies (Abouzzohour 2021). The economic challenges resulted in socio-economic problems in the society which accumulated and resulted in protests in 2011 which coincided with the Arab Spring rising in different Arab countries. The 2011 protest was a peaceful movement in different parts of Oman, in which youth and educated populations demanded higher wages, solutions to unemployment, solutions to corruption and more political openness and political participation (Valeri 2011). Although the government responded to some demands, many remained unsatisfied, creating another challenge to the government today. With a government favouring the stability of the political system and introducing only a few reforms towards the empowerment of citizens and democratization, the gap in the

relationship between the government and citizens has been widening. Added to all the previous conditions, Sultan Qaboos – seen as the father of modern Oman, a saviour and a reformer – passed away in 2020 and left the government with even less legitimacy. Finally, there is the potential of social and new media to empower the unempowered population (e.g. Hong 2013), forming another threat to the government. While the government was successful in containing the tribal leaders at the start of nation-building, the same strategy cannot work with the unemployed youth, educated people, and middle-class workers who have become the main source of threat to the government (Abouzzohour 2021). Therefore, strategic communication and enhanced relations with these groups are vital for the Omani government's survival and effective nation-building, which at this stage needs collective work from both the state and citizens.

4.4.4 The Third Milestone (post-2011): Revitalizing the reform; Embracing Professional Strategic Communication and Participation

The challenges facing the socio-economic and political environment in Oman can be seen as one of the main drivers behind the changes in government communication since 2011. The new communication activities are used to reshape state-society relations and build a new source of legitimacy that no longer depends on rentierism and paternalism. These changes can be seen as a shift towards the two-way symmetrical communication model developed by Grunig and Hunt in 1984 (Grunig and Grunig 1992) and dialogic communication, both of which are needed for nation-building in mature nations. Below are the main communication trends seen in this period.

A. The Government Communication Centre

A few months after the 2011 protests, specifically in March 2012, Sultan Qaboos instructed the establishment of a government communication centre under the administration of the General Secretariat for the Cabinet (Sheban 2016), although it was not established until October 2017 (Al-Kindi 2019). The centre can be seen as an important evolution in governmental public relations that primarily aims to integrate the communication efforts of various governmental entities for the purpose of reshaping state-society relations and improving the image of the government. This is particularly true when considering how the unsatisfied demands of citizens since 2011 have affected the government's image. Also, the economic hardship which resulted in austerity policies to limit public spending since 2014 and the inability to secure jobs for the younger

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educated population are all factors which make it necessary for the government to break its silence and communicate with the public. The centre, which was recently moved under the supervision of the Ministry of Information, expresses its mission as:

> The achievement of direct and effective communication between the government and society through various means of communication and media channels, by providing accurate information at the most appropriate time (Ministry of Information 2021).

The basic elements of this mission are direct and effective communication, and accurate, timely information, reflecting mishaps in previous governmental communication activities. For example, according to Al-Kindi (2019), the Omani public sector suffers from a main problem of simply ignoring the issues of public concerns that dominate public opinion, using a silence strategy and publishing news without strategic planning. The Government Communication Centre's main objectives, listed below, can be seen as directly linked to a basic goal of improving the image of the government through the integrative efforts of all media and public relations units in the public sector. Its objectives are:

1- Interacting with society's comments on governmental performance;
2- Managing media relations for national and strategic projects;
3- Building public trust in governmental decisions and projects;
4- Finding effective partnerships with various media outlets; and
5- Enhancing the capabilities of partners from the communication and media units in various governmental institutions to enable them to deal effectively with both mainstream and social media (Ministry of Information 2021).

The Centre functions as a directive and mentoring body for all PR and media units in the governmental sector, which can be seen as an evolutionary step in managing public relations practices and directing them towards strategic integrative efforts. This can be seen through two main activities. The first is the training and support given to PR officials. For example, the centre organized the first government symposium, which aimed at "creating an effective and influential relationship with Omani society to support the development endeavours" (Oman News Agency 2017). 500 governmental PR officials attended, and they listened to and participated in discussions about the consolidation of governmental communication efforts, public communication, public engagement, media

relations in times of crisis, influencing the public sphere and the strategic planning for national projects. The second governmental communication forum did not go far and similarly provided discussions about the communication and media needed for nation-building. Some of the themes included the experiences of other countries, for example, governmental image management presented by the Singapore head of the governmental communication centre and the role of the media in maintaining national security presented by the head of the communication centre in the UK. Other sessions focused on media and communication as soft power for states, digital and social media, government communication in light of socio-economic changes, the regulatory frameworks for the new media, strategic communication and public satisfaction and public opinion monitoring (Salim 2019). The topics of discussion not only reflect the international trends in communication and public relations but more importantly reflect the understanding of the Omani government of the necessity of PR tools to rebuild and reshape its relations with society, which has been disrupted by both internal and external factors as explained earlier. It also reflects the shortcomings in governmental communication that occurred in the previous periods, and which may seriously harm the nation-building efforts. As a serious step for unifying governmental communication efforts, the centre produced a governmental communication plan in 2019 which provides several guides that work as references for public relations work in governmental entities. It includes 11 guides to a variety of communication practices, such as public engagement, media relations, integrative communication for managing mutual projects, media crisis management, dealing with rumours and false news, preparation for governmental decisions and mentoring and analysis of emerging issues. The guides are all published online on the Ministry of Information website. Terms found in the guides – like transparency, engagement, credibility, and trustworthiness – are all new to the communication practice in Oman. They also indicate a step towards the professionalization of public relations and a progressive model of PR.

B. Public engagement in national development plans

Oman has created a system of development that depends on five-year development plans, beginning in 1976. The national development plans (NDPs) were initially prepared by the Development Council, chaired by Sultan Qaboos himself, and then shifted under the administration of the Supreme Council of Planning until the recent update in the state's administrative apparatus issued by royal decree 75/2020 in which the Supreme Council

of Planning has been merged within the Ministry of Economy. The preparation of the NDPs recently witnessed a huge transformation in terms of communication and public engagement. Although words like public engagement and dialogue were introduced in some of the previous NDPs (e.g., the 5th NDP), they were used to indicate the participation of governmental officials, experts and economic personnel. Starting only from the 9th NDP (2016-2020), public engagement started to crystallize, taking two forms:

1- Publicity for the Ninth NDP: for the first time, the government published a summary booklet of the plan, making it available for public access.

> To realize the principle of dialogue that accompanied the formulation of the Plan, the Secretariat-General of the Supreme Council for Planning is issuing this booklet that reviews the main aspects of the plan, in order to ensure the participation of the different categories of society in the follow-up of the plan implementation and to ensure interaction with the ideas herein. The subject of this booklet has special importance due to the 9th Plan goal of laying the foundations for sustainable development in changing circumstances. (Ministry of Economy, Ninth NDP booklet, p.9-10).

2- Engaging the youth: it is unclear to what extent the youth were engaged and their contribution to the development of this plan. The booklet mentions public engagement as taking the form of:

> Organizing a number of workshops with Omani youth to understand their aspirations and agreement with the Plan's objectives for confronting the main challenges in this important sector (Ministry of Economy, Ninth NDP booklet, p.14).

Although some indications of changes towards public engagement have taken place in the preparation of the 9th NDP, the big shift can be attributed to the preparation of Oman Vision 2040. The Vision is described as "the Sultanate's gateway to overcome challenges, keep pace with regional and global changes, generate and seize opportunities to foster economic competitiveness and social well-being, stimulate growth, and build confidence in all economic, social and developmental relations nationwide" (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow Up Unit 2020, Oman Vision 2040 official document: 8). The

vision is organised around four main pillars: People and society, Economy and development, Governance and institutional performance and Sustainable development (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow Up Unit 2021, Oman Vision 2040 annual book 2021: 3). The 2040 Vision works as a guideline for all the NDPs that will occur during this period, heading to 2040. A strategic communication that depends on public engagement was widely used by the government, indicating the government's intention to use communication for nation-building, but this time taking a participatory communication approach that suits the social and economic maturation of the country. This time, every step was taken to "engage different segments of society across all governorates, using every possible means of interaction, to ultimately achieve the objectives of broad and effective societal participation. As a result, you have in your hands a vision for the future of Oman designed by you and for you" (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow Up Unit 2020, Oman Vision 2040 official document: 9). This participatory approach was conducted through various communicative initiatives. Some of the communication initiatives during the preparation stage as described in the website of the Ministry of Information (2020) are:

1- The Oman Vision 2040 team: during the preparation of the Vision, a team was formed to be part of all the following steps in the preparation stage. The team that represents various segments of Omani society "aims to reinforce the communication value of credibility in passing information, impressions and feedback about the 2040 Vision. It also aims to inspire, enable and embrace diversity in Oman's society and culture" (Ministry of Information 2020)

2- All of Oman campaign: a campaign that, for two months, moved across the country to involve citizens and allow for their input to be part of the Vision. Its aim was "to reinforce communication values in each Governorate by embracing diversity and enhancing local privacy, and most importantly, involve the public in formulating Oman 2040" (All of Oman report: 12). Dialogue sessions, workshops, and an electronic opinion polling system were used and around 3,040 participants from all the gouvernantes of Oman were involved.

3- Face of the Future: the initiative aims to establish communication values of inspiring and enabling younger generations (children), and raising awareness between them about Oman 2040 and their vital role in contributing to their country.

4- Media of the Future: This initiative was directed at the media and aims to reinforce the communication value of credibility and accurately spread information about the Vision and the development matters in general within a set timeline, to encourage local communities to adopt Oman Vision 2040. It also aims to encourage the locals to effectively participate in the decision-making processes and develop work plans to help achieve welfare for their communities. 250 participants were involved, including chairmen of boards of directors at press institutions and television/radio stations (public and private), editors-in-chief, authors, editors, programme presenters and producers, media teachers and students.

5- Business Dialogue: directed at the private sector with the aim of "reinforcing communication values to generate full trust in the private sector and its significant contribution to make decisions, develop work plans that match their aspirations and needs" (Ministry of Information 2020).

6- Creative Youth Incubatory: the initiative aims to reinforce communication values of inspiration and enable the youth to achieve their life objectives and fully contribute to formulating Oman 2040.

The communication initiatives were organized around a number of communicative values: credibility, trustworthiness, empowerment, neutrality, diversity, and privacy (Ministry of Information, 2020). All the communication and engagement activities at the preparation stage were conducted by the Oman Vision 2040 Office which then was replaced by the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit which continued following the same participatory approach. For example, the Unit publishes an annual report which reviews the achievements of each of the Vision pillars. Also, the Unit has launched a media campaign: Moving Forward with Confidence, which includes various communication and engagement activities directed at the community with the aim "to highlight the efforts of the national programs of Oman Vision 2040, their initiatives and projects" (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit, 2023).

Although it is beyond this chapter's scope to explain all the communication initiatives and the extent to which they have helped in reshaping or affecting government-society relations, it can be seen as an effort by the government to use PR communication activities as a tool for managing the government's image, improving its relations with citizens and unifying them around national goals in a time of threat and hardship – all of which is

necessary for nation-building at this stage. Nation-building requirements are now different, requiring interactive, prompt communication, transparency and empowerment of all parties.

4.5 SUMMARY

Despite the numerous accounts that are driven by neoliberal, democratic, western societies which link the birth and rise of public relations to the rise in industrialization and increasing power for corporations (e.g. Tedlow 1977; Raucher 1990), I argued that public relations in Oman have developed as a response to governmental needs for starting the nation-building of Oman while at the same time obtaining and maintaining the agency of the regime. With an examination of the historical context in this chapter, I argued that during the first two decades of building Oman, the governmental communication practices (represented mainly by one-way, top-bottom processes) served as effective tools for the nation-building process. However, as the nation develops, so should the communication style of its government. Sticking to the passive communication style for longer than necessary can negatively affect the nation-building efforts in subsequent phases. Responding to the threats and challenges facing the socioeconomic environment in Oman, however, has partly resulted in the development of a more professional government communication and a participatory approach of communication, especially in development matters.

CHAPTER 5

ARTICULATING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN OMAN

5.1 INTRODUCTION

As explained in the last chapter, introducing a participatory approach in Oman's government communication has come as a response to the challenges facing its political, economic and social landscape. However, this may have also come as a response to "the "global trend towards citizen participation" Pieczka and Escobar (2013: 114), and the increasing international pressure regarding democratization and participatory governance which resulted in big shifts in the governance styles around the world from the traditional conservative modes to new participatory practices. These practices include different forms that endorse citizens' empowerment such as "freedom of information legislation, the use of public performance measures, various forms of e-government and the increased use of government surveys and advertising among others" (Howlett 2009: 23). In today's world, therefore, engagement, as described by Nalbandian (2008) is mandatory and is an integral part of strategic communication, particularly for modern governance. However, as stated earlier in Chapter 2, engagement lacks clarity in terms of its definitions, mechanisms and impact. While some view it as merely another catchphrase, particularly within the realm of governmental and political communication, it is still important that engagement should not be understood as an international or global practice that can fit modern governments in the same way. Rather, it should be understood as how Heath (2018: 83) described it as "contextual and topical". In saying so, I argue in this chapter that engagement should be studied as locally practised to better understand its dynamics. In this chapter, therefore, I try to offer a depiction of engagement in the context of Oman, from the perspective of the governmental communication officials. In doing so, I address the second pillar of the approach followed in this research (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.3.B); the practitioner's perspective. Examining the practitioners' perceptions and understanding of the activity they are conducting (engagement in this case) is essential to lay the foundation to later study the roles and impact of public relations in mediating engagement for nation-building.

Interestingly, the participants offered a variety of explanations and interpretations about their perception of engagement in the context of communication for nation-building, some of which can be classified as developmental interpretation, some are political, and

some are more focused towards engagement as a communication practice. This stresses the findings by many scholars (e.g., Dhanesh 2017; De Bussy 2010; Morehouse and Saffer 2019; Taylor and Kent 2014) that notably clarity is absent in this concept. Figure 7 shows the main themes extracted from the interviews regarding articulating citizen engagement.
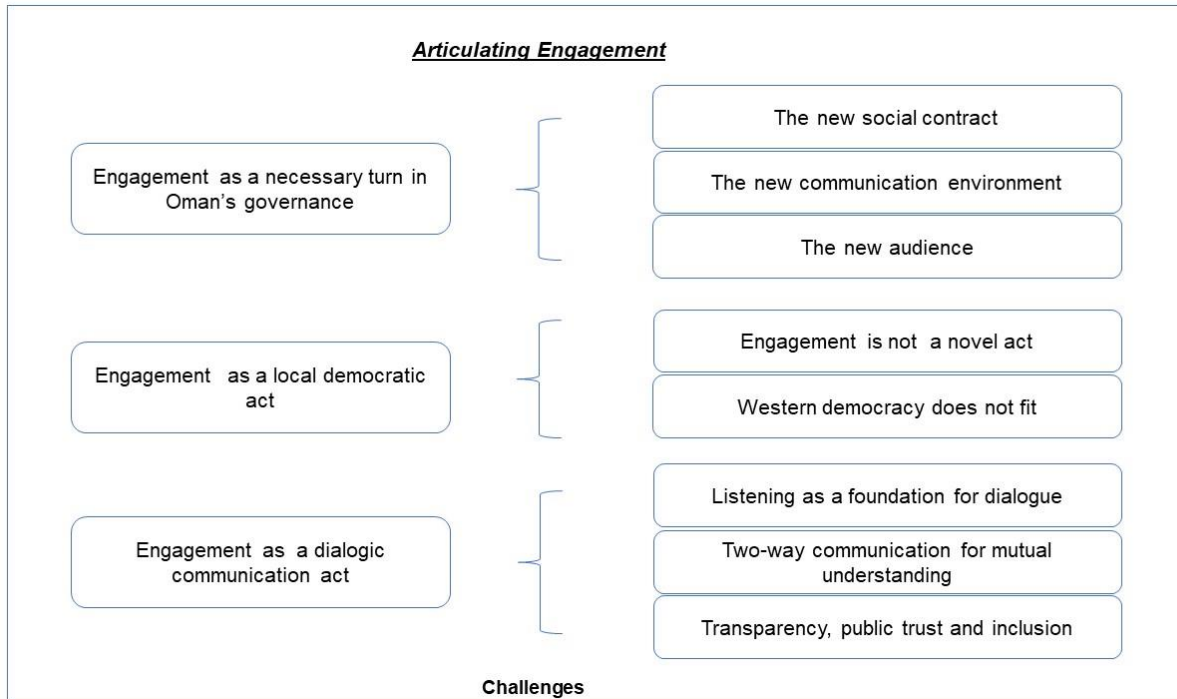
Figure 7 Articulating Citizen Engagement in Oman

5.2 ENGAGEMENT AS A NECESSARY TURN IN OMAN'S GOVERNANCE

As public policies and national planning received -both nationally and internationally- a lot of critiques (Reddel and Woolcock 2004), it seems that governments around the world have responded to these critiques, particularly to the international governance transformation towards citizen engagement. Therefore, it was of little wonder that all the interviewees perceived engagement as vital to the development of Oman. While they have different reasons, they all agree that Oman needs to engage its citizens in national planning for better policies and also for a better relationship with citizens. Primarily, the participants identified two main reasons why citizen engagement has become a necessity in Oman as explained below.

5.2.1 The change in the social contract

The primary reason behind the requirement of engaging citizens in Oman, as identified by some participants is the change in the social contract. Senior governmental officials emphasised the importance of more political participation as a response to the new economic and political era of Oman which should result in changing the social contract between the authority and citizens in the country.

> *The society that the government addresses today is the same society that used to receive most of the services free of charge because this was the nature of the social contract between the authority and society at that time. The authority has all the options and all the power, and in return, the people have salaries, services, education, health and so on, without taxes. Once the state starts taxing, the social contract must be changed immediately. Citizens then should have their say.* GO6

The social contract in the rentier states such as in many of the Arab countries, including Oman, has been tackled by many scholars in an attempt to understand the political transformation and democratisation in such countries (e.g., Hertog 2019; Schwarz 2007; Schwarz 2008). Al-Farsi (2010) wrote about rentierisim and democracy in Oman, in particular, in his thesis: *State, Religion and Democracy in the Sultanate of Oman*. The concept of an informal implicit social contract in the rentier states is led by the high level of wealth and welfare (Schwarz 2007) and requires the state to use the wealthy resources to "provide the people some subsidies, decent jobs in the public sector, and do so with little or no direct taxation, although it is at the expense of democratic forms of political participation" (Al-Farsi 2010: 1).

However, the challenge is that this kind of social contract can survive only as long as the wealthy resources are sufficient to satisfy both the states and the society's needs. The shortage of resources will impose a big political challenge on the states that fail to provide wealth and welfare to the society. The discussion of risks imposed on the legitimacy of the rentier governments has been discussed by many scholars, for example, in Saudi Arabia, Oman and other Arab countries. The findings driven from the interviews support this discussion and further display the efforts taken by the Omani government in an era of financial and economic hardship which puts the country on the spot of not satisfying the old social contract. The communication officials are aware of the need for the change of the social contract and therefore attribute the introduction of engagement in national planning as partly a result of an attempt to change the pre-existed social contract.

The initiation of the taxation policy in Oman is seen as a major reason behind the need to change the social contract. GO7 expressed this need, using the famous political slogan used in the American Revolution in 1765: *"It is as simple as this, no taxation without representation"*. However, for a more democratic evolution, according to OECD (2009: 202), a modern version of this principle should be "no commitment to actions without participation. At a minimum level, citizens should be given a voice in the matters where they are expected to play an active role as agents of public policies".

It is also worth mentioning here that Oman has followed a strict austerity policy since 2014 when the oil prices dropped significantly, resulting in some procedures that affected people directly, including suspending the promotion of all civil servants and limiting employment in the public sector which is the main employment market in Oman. That resulted in increasing unemployment which until today is seen as one of the biggest threats to the government. With more fluctuation of oil prices since 2014, which puts limits on governmental expenditure, the government has no option other than to develop more strict financial procedures. Therefore, the government approved a medium-term fiscal balance plan on October 22, 2020, and extended it until 2024.

> *In light of these fiscal challenges, and given the uncertainty in the future of oil prices, a Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP) for the years 2020-2024 was developed with overarching objective of achieving fiscal balance in the medium term.* (Ministry of Finance, Medium-Term Fiscal Plan, P.5)

The plan which aims to reduce the budget deficit from 15.8% of GDP in 2020 to 1.7% in 2024 has resulted in the introduction of new measures that the people of Oman are not used to, even not aware of them. For example, introducing the value-added tax VAD, income tax on high earners, the introduction of a new social safety net in which the government subsidy on public services like electricity, water, petrol and basic goods are to be redirected to the vulnerable families rather than a right to everyone as how it used to be (Ministry of Finance, Medium-Term Fiscal Plan, P. 25-26).

The introduction of new tough financial procedures which added to the ones imposed in 2014 makes the situation to be "*sensitive*" as described by GO8 to both the government and citizens.

I have wondered to what extent the government has the willingness to change the social contract, and to what extent the society can undertake the difficult austere financial policies without changing the social contract. GO8

The financial policies seem to be an important catalyst for introducing more participation initiatives and are thought to be a reason behind citizens' requirements for their political rights.

If we assume that this interview took place with all its variables except for the unstable financial situation of the Sultanate which resulted in the financial balance policies that affected the lives of people, do you think that the citizens will complain?! Or that they will enter into the issue of participation and changes! GO3

Here is an indication that participation comes as an obligation by the government and as a right to citizens which is described by GO7 as "*healthy and democratic change that happened in most countries*". Preserving the legitimacy that was previously gained- as any other rentier state- by using oil revenue to afford the services and employment opportunities in the public sector has changed and now requires a more vivid root of engagement, possibly through opening more political participation, particularly in the matters that affect people. Oman Vision 2040 is seen as one way through which citizen participation has been offered as a result of the change in the social contract.

There is pressure on the government and pressure on society. However, look at the effect of engaging the citizens in preparing Oman Vision 2040. Although in the same period, oil prices have dropped significantly starting from 2014 which has affected the country's economy enormously, resulting in austerity policies, such as stopping promotions for all public sector employees. However, when the window for participation in the preparation of Oman Vision 2040 was opened, people did not say no, we will not participate. Indeed, they attended and participated. We opened the discussion for them without embarrassment. In fact, in every event, more participants than we aimed for came to take part. That's evidence that no matter how difficult the situation is, you can still earn the support of the citizens as long as you involve them. GO4

The last sentence of this quote brings a question on the ground, regarding earning the support of citizens as long as they are involved. This indicates that there might be an

underestimation of citizens' power and willingness to challenge the existing political authority. And this is also observed in another interview when GO7 said:

> *No matter what the situation of the country, we are sure of the mentality of the Omani person, who proved along history that he is loyal to his country and his Sultan (the president)*

If we assume this might not be necessarily an underestimation of citizens' desire for political participation, it still puts engagement and democratization practices under question. Granting a loyal citizen and expecting him/her to be always loyal, no matter what can put the engagement efforts under questions of honesty and integrity. This requires detailed research into citizens' views, attitudes and capacities to test their opinions and potential for political openness and participation. I will encounter this discussion, though partly, in Chapter 7.

From another perspective, another participant described informing people, which is regarded as a basic form of engagement, as an important task while dealing with the hardships of the country.

> *It is understandable that it is really difficult for people to bear all these difficult financial limits that started in 2014 which may also be getting worse from the view of citizens, but we know we have to deal with this financial hardship at first, it's a national priority, while at the same time informing people about our situation.* GO9

Regarding informing, GO3 noted, "*If citizens know, they will understand, if they understand, they will collaborate, it's a mutual issue, it affects both the government and citizens, so there is a need to consider the relation between these two parties.*".

From the point of view of GO6, engaging people can help in going through the difficult situation in the country.

> *Although the financial procedures seem to be the contrast to what Oman Vision 2040 aims for, we are telling people that this plan is an enabler of the Vision, and people need to take part until we all safely go through this difficulty. GO6*

Although not said directly, I can understand from this quote that GO6, like the other participants, assumes that engaging people can help in the creation of mutual understanding needed to go through difficult times. With a focus on changing the social

contract which makes it unavoidable to open the participation door for citizens, surprisingly, nobody has spoken about the legitimacy of the authority and the government. This is interesting because it has been discussed a lot in the literature, focusing on the need for the Omani authority particularly the royal family which is the main authority in the country, to open up more political participation for its legitimacy and survival (e.g., Al-Farsi 2013; Abouzzohour 2021; Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service 2018). Nothing about legitimacy is found in the interview data, even when participants are asked about it. This might indicate that the participants are either not aware of it, which I disregard since they are aware of matters related to the social contract, or not willing to tackle issues in direct relation to the implications or challenges to the ruling system in the country. However, some respondents have spoken about issues of citizen trust and transparency which will be discussed later in this chapter.

5.2.2 The changing features of the communication environment and the target audience

The interview data revealed that digital and social media have an impact on changing the nature of governmental communication in Oman. The interviewees agreed that ICT and digital media have made it necessary for government communication to take another path, especially in terms of interaction with citizens. For example, the interactive feature and ease of access to the new media are seen as a reason behind the need for engagement as noted by GO4.

> *I think there has been a fundamental change in government communication, and everyone has become a strong believer that the idea of communication is no longer limited to keeping pace with events and publishing in newspapers. Communication has become very interactive. Thanks to the new social media. So, as a government, there is no option other than responding and interacting with the target audience. We've come to know that society is no longer depending on traditional media. There are now more channels that are accessible to everyone, so we know we have to be present in an appropriate way, using appropriate strategies. GO4*

It is true, indeed, that the effects of social media are inevitable and undeniable. The growing popularity of social media has led to a significant change in the conduct of public relations and communication in general, resulting in communication strategies that

integrate social and digital media (Avery and Graham 2013). It comes as no surprise, therefore that all the participants consider using social media as a strategic government communication tool as a major trend in Oman's government communication. Reflecting on this, GO3 said: "*You know the effect of social media; you know that an increasing number of people are using it, and you know the greatest majority of our target audience can be reached there, simply, we have to be there, there is no other option*".

It's important to note here that for a strategic usage of social media, practitioners should be aware that it is not only about being available on social media while still using the traditional, one-way mode of communication which does not serve a participatory approach. It, rather, should foster "*interactive, two-way communication*" as described by GO1. Interactive communication is defined by this participant as:

> *It is when we open a space for discussion, when we listen and respond, when we have a dialogue with the other party.* GO1

These elements can make an interactive communication but for better relations between the government and citizens and for a dialogue to be effective, a mutual understanding should be achieved. Mutual understanding which leads to clarity and integrity should be viewed as a prerequisite to building public trust and therefore should be considered when engaging with citizens as will explained shortly in section 5.4.2.

From another position, the new media does not only facilitate interaction, but it changes the features of the audience, the audience who used to passively receive news from TV, newspapers, and radio is now an active audience, not only in the sense of commenting and responding but also in term of creating content and reporting the news themselves. In this sense, GO2 said:

> *The audience today is powerful, they create content, and they involve themselves, it is even effective involvement. They have the information; the history of the information and they don't mind creating their own news and stories.*

This is true because "unlike the traditional corporate-controlled media, user-centered social media platforms allow individual users to become media gatekeepers and content-creators who collaboratively and proactively engage with companies" (Men and Tsai 2014: 417). Authors like Dan Gillmor (2004) described the audience as the media in themselves due to their ability to create and consume content at the same time which

explains the media convergence and reciprocal roles of producers and consumers of media content. It is also a reason behind the emergence of citizen journalism as a notion to describe the change in media production and consumption roles. According to Gillmor (2004: 63), "The rise of the citizen-journalist will help us listen. The ability of anyone to make the news will give a new voice to people who've felt voiceless—and whose words we need to hear. They are showing all of us—citizens, journalists, newsmakers—new ways of talking, of learning". Therefore, it is wise for all kinds of organizations which seek to achieve their interests, either political or economic, to respond to this trend and be aware that citizens are like what GO11 described as *"the source and destination":*

> *The audience, if we can still call them an audience, is the source and destination. The source of news and the destination to which news goes. Even when receiving our news, from us, the audience processes it and can produce commentaries and opinion pieces. You don't deal with passive people anymore. You deal with a knowledgeable active audience.*

It seems that this understanding of the effect of new and social media makes the government consider it a strategic tool to promote governmental activities and initiatives and create a space for engagement. This is what GO5 explained about how they use social media:

> *We use social media as a promotional and communication tool. So, we publish news constantly, we listen, we interact with our public, and sometimes we open a space for dialogue like when we opened the comments for public opinion on the drafted document of Oman Vision 2040. We received incredible amounts of comments. GO5*

Considering citizens as a target audience, all the interviewees described the audience as powerful and active and can have a say, at least on social media which provides a platform for people to discuss matters of interest to them and can criticise the government's conduct with less censorship. For example, GO10 said:

> *Social media offers a space for people to speak up, and discuss with other citizens, especially, because it allows them a space to vent their anger. This is particularly true as we witness the more tough financial procedures. I think that it is absolutely natural and healthy for the society. Maybe you remember the many hashtags*

initiated by citizens on many occasions like when lifting the oil subsidy and the lots of unemployment hashtags and so on.

The participants' understanding of the people as no longer passive reflects the critical shift in thinking about the public and the audience. For example, Rosen (2006) stressed this idea in his article: *the people are formerly known as audience,* in a try to prove that people cannot be seen as passive receivers and should not be dealt with as a mass. This was approved by all interviewees except one participant who contradicted the others when describing the Omani citizen implicitly as a kind of passive.

> *The Omani person loves his country, is loyal to his Sultan and is always confident that everything is happening is in the interest of Oman and the people of Oman, and even if the information is not available at some stage, he is confident and will understand sooner or later that all that is done is in the interest of the country.* GO7

In his view, "*the Omani personality is very unique and should not be compared to others*" GO7. However, this was contradicted by all the other interviewees. For example, GO3 noted, "*Omani Citizens today, require a more interactive and dynamic interaction, and that's a global trend*". Go.2 also said, "*Many citizens are really experts*". GO2 added another dimension in regard to the level of education that Omanis have today:

> *You can't compare the Omani citizens who are young, open-minded, and highly educated to the citizens in 1970. They have higher aspirations, they have knowledge and they can be critical. So, you can't deal with this generation in the same way you dealt with the 1970s generation.*

It is significant here to reflect on the seniority of public relations practitioners and how it significantly influences how they interpret and present public engagement. The senior official, GO7, reflects a focus on stability and long-term strategy, portraying citizens as passive and confident in government actions while at the same time focusing on engagement as necessary as seen in different quotes obtained from this participant. In contrast, junior practitioners like GO2 and GO3 highlight the evolving, active nature of modern Omani citizens, emphasizing their education, critical thinking, and need for more interactive communication. This disagreement reveals a gap between strategic ideals and operational realities, with juniors offering a more grounded understanding of the public's expectations. When interpreting and presenting data, it's essential to balance both

perspectives. Seniors like GO7 offer valuable insights into the historical context and long-term strategies, such as GO7's emphasis on the traditional loyalty of Omani citizens. At the same time, junior practitioners provide on-the-ground realities that reflect the evolving nature of public engagement. Both views are crucial: the senior perspective offers historical and political context, while the junior perspectives highlight the daily realities and current expectations of Omani citizens, providing a fuller understanding of the engagement dynamic.

GO7 also believes that citizens today are more ready to be engaged, unlike people in the past, for example in 1970 when the nation-building effort just started.

> *How could you involve people, most of whom can not read and write, the basic at that time was education and we all remember the famous saying by Sultan Qaboos at the very start of his ruling in 1970: We will teach our children even under the shade of a tree.*GO7

Another official described the audience who took part in the All of Oman initiative, the biggest public engagement activity for the development of Oman Vision 2040, "*they are very knowledgeable, they gave inputs that technical experts missed, we were impressed*", and he added "*I'm even speaking about young youth, like 15, 14 years old, and that's why indeed we call them the face of the future*" GO4.

To sum up, the change in the audience features, in terms of their education and growing political experience and aspiration along with the changing communication environment which offers better opportunities for both citizens and governments for interactivity, seems to be an important factor behind the rise of audience expectation. They require a more two-way, participatory communication in which they can take part and affect the communication and decision-making process. Hence, communication becomes an essential tool for enhancing participation and therefore democracy. With the rise of the Internet and social media which have impacted all realms including economic, social, media and political communication, politicians and governments today need to adapt their communication style and respond to the ongoing "meta-process- of media transition (Frame and Brachotte 2016: 1). Social media, for instance, has challenged the traditional one-way communication passed to passive receivers and requires the organisations to adopt a more open, inclusive and transparent approach for participation among different segments of the public in decisions relevant to them, shifting, therefore, the power from

corporate communication professionals to stakeholders. This is why we can see a shift in the public relations field to a public engagement paradigm as indicated by Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman Public Relations, who thinks that communication needs to be "democratic and decentralized" (Kang 2011: 2). Therefore, "success of organizations in this new public and media environment can be largely dependent on organizations' abilities to find ways to effectively and positively engage their stakeholders for meaningful partnerships" (Kang 2011: 2). The massive growth of the ICT and new media has impacted, consequently, the politics of countries around the world affecting "governance, relationships between citizens, political figures and the media, and political communication more generally" (Frame and Brachotte 2016: 1). Oman is no exception as discussed above.

5.3 ENGAGEMENT AS A LOCAL DEMOCRATIC ACT

The participants unsurprisingly have linked engagement to democracy which reflects the discussion presented in Chapter 2 about the position of engagement as a cause and a result of democracy and nation-building. However, it was very apparent that they wanted to make a local definition of democracy and avoid being understood as if they meant Western Democracy, represented mainly by the American Model. For example, while forms of democracy like the representative or the deliberative democracy are seen in many countries, especially in the West, as efficient, Oman practices its own kind of democracy as per the interview data. Most of the respondents acknowledge that a sort of democracy does exist in Oman, though it is locally specific and suits the context of Oman and its people. For example, GO4 said

> *Engaging people is, of course, a sort of democracy, a democracy that is led by our local values, it is about participation within our community in a way that suits it. This country has its history, religion, norms, values, moral system and so its political system is unique and does not need to follow other models. We can take what is suitable to our culture and leave out the things that do not fit.*

Another participant talked about the negative effects of following political systems without considering the local culture.

> *When we were planning the engagement activities, we were taking into consideration the local culture of Oman, we did not want to copy, for example, the Western democracy without thinking of our own culture because this can be a*

problem. It may make us forget who we are, make us lose our traditions and can make our society split apart. We want to engage but we do not want to misuse the engagement. A level of control should be there. GO2

It is interesting to talk about misusing engagement in this context; something that Mafukidze and Hoosen (2009: 379) found in their paper which shows that "community participation has far-reaching negative effects if not undertaken in the correct manner" and that possible negative impacts can include "social tension, disillusionment, conflict and societal fragmentation" and that "adequate socio-cultural and historical knowledge of a community" should be acquired to avoid the unintentional negative results of the engagement. From this perspective, therefore, it is fair enough not to assume that engagement and democracy are universal. This aligns with the interview data where most participants believe that engagement is done for democracy but affirm that it is done for achieving a local democracy that does not necessarily line up with how democracy is defined in other contexts nor necessarily provide a model for other contexts. Most of the participants' views are compatible to a great extent with the work of the American political philosopher Jason Brennan, 2017 in his book: *Against Democracy*, where he challenges the existing notions of representative democracy and voting. In the book, Brennan suggests that political participation and voting can lead "to make people worse— more irrational, biased, and mean" (Brennan 2017). It is important to note here that the interviewees did not see democracy as bad but as a practice that should be understood and evaluated from the viewpoint of the local context. Engagement also should be designed to suit the local context, which, in their view, contradicts many of the Western understandings of democracy yet still works well in Oman. The local democracy of Oman as described by GO7 is:

Oman's local democracy offers a unique balance between tradition and modernization, where participatory governance is developing within the framework of the country's unique cultural and political landscape.

The following sections provide a detailed discussion of how engagement works and is defined in the local context of Oman from both communication and political perspectives, from the viewpoints of the interviewees.

5.3.1 Engagement is not a novel practice

It is mentioned earlier in Chapter 4 that engagement as an institutionalised task on a big scale of national planning can be classified as a first of its kind in Oman Vision 2040. However, all the participants suggest that participation in itself is not new to Oman and that lots of citizen engagement activities are already there and are as old as the establishment of modern Oman in 1970. The participants have signalled to three forms of local engagement as follows: direct citizens' engagement with the ruler, represented basically by the royal tours, engagement using A'Shura (Consultation) and engagement in the decision made through local municipalities.

The respondents acknowledge the importance of public engagement in Oman Vision 2040 and how unique it is. However, most of them refuse to call it the first public engagement and propose that citizens have been always involved in one way or another and that engagement is going well with the stages of the nation-building of Oman. One prominent example given by most participants is the annual royal tours performed by Sultan Qaboos himself. GO8 said about this:

> *No one can neglect how Sultan Qaboos laid the foundations for citizen participation in this country. He used to go by himself to a particular Willayte* (province) *each time, accompanied by a number of ministers who are responsible for the development aspects so that they all listen to people's opinions and demands and follow up on the development achievements that have been done in that area. These are realistic visits, the impact of which is noticeable and tangible.* GO8

GO8's description as realistic interfered completely with how Katz (2004: 4) described those annual meetings as a "tightly stage-managed event designed to project an image of a sultan in close contact with his people while actually protecting him from any such contact that has not been authorized and choreographed in advance". Indeed, this might be true, especially if taking into account the argument about Sultan Qaboos's attempts to concentrate power in his hand, his unwellness to share power even with the other members of the royal family and being the "the only man" of Oman (e.g., Common 2011). However, there might be another argument, considering the historical development of Oman's nation-building since 1970, as explained in Chapter 4, the annual tours can be seen as suitable for the development stage, considering the level of education of the Omanis and their beliefs in the new Sultan while still a strategic practice aiming at

enhancing the new sultan's legitimacy. GO4 described the annual meetings as a way of communication in themselves without a need for a medium.

> *We do not need the media much, and the state does not need the media much, because the sultan himself performs this task. There is no country in the world where the president meets with the people directly, just as we have, so we have other means of democratic communication and this is part of Omani specificity.*
> *GO4*

GO4 continued describing the annual tours by proposing an exclamatory question and describing the annual tours as interpersonal, unmediated democratic communication.

> *Is there any strategic communication better than this?! It is strategic communication and it is a democracy. But the only thing is that some theories, especially the Western theories, tell you that this patriarchal system or the rentier system depends on a particular personality, I mean one personality for example a ruler and turns around him and therefore there becomes a centralization on this personality, and they ignore that this is a direct mean of communication and democracy and that it might be suitable if you consider who is your public*

Regarding the type of public being addressed at that stage of Oman's nation-building (started in 1970) and the type of engagement used, GO1 supported the previous quote by explaining that considering the situation of the Omanis at that time, the royal tours were appropriate, especially in making a sense of community.

> *The Omani citizens in 1970 were illiterate, isolated from the rest of the world and living a hard life. At that time, it was undoubtedly not suitable to introduce sophisticated forms of engagement. It was the sense of community, the sense of shared responsibility, and the sense of proximity to the new sultan and his government that was needed.*

In public relations studies, a sense of community is necessary for public participation and therefore is crucial in community-building (Kim and Cho 2019). The sense of community as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986: 9), is "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' need will be met through their commitment to be together". This makes the last quote more understandable and convincing that the society at the time

needed this sense of community and as previously explained needed national unity and national identity, which are all contributors to the sense of community, for the sake of nation-building.

Another participant gave a reason as to why this centralization around the personality of Sultan Qaboos can be fine in this context. He also agrees that it is a strategic clever practice.

> *The Omani society is still conservative Muslims, compared to all other Gulf monarchies and Arab countries. In Islam in general and Ibadism* (an Islamic sect widely popular in Oman)*, in particular, the concept of the ruler himself taking care of the citizens through direct contact and direct Shura* (consultation) *is very much appreciable, acceptable and in fact desirable. It gives a sense of proximity and responsibility and it satisfies one of the Islamic rules and therefore works well in Omani society. For me, I see it as a clever strategy from Sultan Qaboos. GO12*

This quote which mentions, though generally, Ibadism, Shura and the Islamic approach to participation, stimulates the need to give some more deep information about the concept of democracy in Islam and explain the effect of Islam in Oman and how it shaped the understanding of democracy and centralization which I will do later in the following section.

Besides the royal tours, the participants mentioned Majlis A'Shura (Consultation Council) and the Municipal Council, both are formed of elected representative members from every Wilayat (province) in Oman. Majlis A'Shura was initiated in 1981, in the second decade of the new Oman. Since that time, there has been development in terms of the organizational and legislative aspects of the council. GO7 considers the A'Shura Council and Municipal Council as democratic platforms designed for societal participation in national development.

> *It is not only presidential elections that make a democratic state. For example, we have free and fair elections, whether in the municipal councils, which directly affect the interests of citizens or in the Shura Council, in which elections are also free and fair. What is important is that the function of the democratic system is present and is applied, and we need not to forget that the greatest democracy is that you are able to reach the ruler directly from any region.*

According to GO2, Majlis A'Shura is a unique democratic practice.

> *Majlis A'Shura is a unique democratic experience in Oman, it is built on the Islamic foundation of deliberation and matches democratic values such as having members elected by people by direct secret ballot. In the mission statement of the council, you can check it, is to engage people in building Oman, they work as a bridge between the governmental organizations, the authority and citizens.*

As stated on their website, the mission of the A'Shura council is: "Contributing to the national decision-making process based on engaging the community and integrating the state institutions". Engaging the community is also done through the Municipal Council and the recent activation of the role of the local municipalities in the direct planning, decision-making and implementation of the national projects in their respective areas. The activation, in January 2022, of the role of local municipalities in the direct planning and deciding about the development needs in their areas is good evidence of the continuous progress of introducing public engagement for national development. GO7 said in this regard:

> *Luckily, sultan Hitham, just two days ago* (from the interview date) *confirmed the role of the Wilayat's sheikhs* (tribal leaders) *and Municipal governors in the direct development of their areas, taking into account their community's input. And this is an organized activity, it is part of the 10th five-year national development plan and the 2040 Vision. GO7*

This engagement and democracy experience as described by the participants seems hypothetically great. Still, it is important to take into consideration the evaluation of these experiences and the genuineness and integrity of all of these democratic tools including the A'Shura Council and Municipal Council. Not many interviewees have a clear answer when I ask about this. However, they agreed that accountability and supervision are at the heart of the new nation-building efforts, represented especially by Oman Vision 2040.

> *The issue of evaluation is a basic pillar that is not overlooked and it is taken into account, whether orally, as Sultan Haitham stated in his recent speech* (January 2022 speech) *on the subject of transparency and accountability, or in other means of development projects such as the 2040 Vision and in the tenth five-year plan, all of which have the concepts of accountability, administrative and financial control and evaluation at both institutional and individual levels. Realistic*

supervision is present, but we are in a transitional phase and it is not possible to give accurate results of the evaluation at this stage. GO6

5.3.2 Western Democracy does not fit

All the interviewees agreed that citizen engagement of all kinds practised in Oman does aim to achieve a democratic ground and promote political participation. However, they all agreed that achieving democracy as normatively described by the Western world is not the target, because Western democracy does not fit the Omani context. GO7 was one of the participants who spoke a lot about this matter and was completely and strongly against the idea of putting Oman or any other country in comparison with Western countries in terms of the definition and the practices of democracy. In this regard, GO7 said:

Oman is a unique country, with its history, religion and conservative nature in terms of its heritage and values which absolutely won't fit in the standard theory of democracy. Democracy practised mainly in the West is promoted as the best political model but I think this underestimates the other political regimes and models that might work well given the context in which it operates. And I would say Oman is a good example.

What caught my attention here is two arguments that this participant is making. One leads to the other. The first is that Western democracy is promoted which might be to an extent true. According to Önsoy and Gürol (2018), Western-based democratic practices have been promoted as contributing to the peace of the world, especially after the Cold War. Önsoy and Gürol (2018: 15) suggested in their study which examines the problematic aspects of democracy promotion, that promoting democracy will remain challenging if "promoters of democracy continue to approach the process monolithically, without sensitivity to, and synchronization with, the cultural and political realities on the ground in target states". The second argument that stems from the two quotes above is that the reality of the country on the ground should be considered. This let me think of questions that might seem basic but are at the heart of understanding how engagement and democracy work in a given context. These questions include: what are the conditions of democracy? And how can one evaluate the existence of a culture of democracy in a country? Does simply an elected government mean democracy? How about the other unelected governments, is it as simple as undemocratic?

In the following sections, I try, based on the interview's data to elaborate on the reasons why Western democracy does not fit, taking into consideration the unique and complex interaction between the society, the culture and the religion in Oman

A. Islam and Democracy

While some scholars insist on the need to separate religion from politics, religions have been always a central component of political conflict and resolution across the world. Islam has received more attention, especially in media coverage. However, it is not the only religion that keeps entering the political world. For example, "Catholicism was critical in the overthrow of the communist regime in Poland; Buddhism is politically engaged in Sri Lanka; conflict between religious groups in India shapes political agendas there; and Pentecostal Protestants have entered the political realm, starting in the United States in the early 1980s" (Khatab Sayed and Bouma 2007: 1). Therefore, it was of no surprise that most of the participants consider the dominance of Islam in Oman as the first and perhaps the most influential factor to why Western democracy does not fit. Most of the interviewees believe that democracy in the Western understanding does not fit the Islamic values which constitute the basis on which the Omani society's values are built. According to most of them, democracy is related directly to secularism and is promoting secularism as one solution to the achievement of freedom and equality. GO11, for example, said:

> *I'm not speaking about democracy in the sense of freedom of expression or achieving equality or consulting people, I'm speaking about the separation between religion and politics. This can not work here. For us, as you know, our Islamic religion is providing us with ways of living in the economy, in politics, and in everything. We believe that Allah* (God) *knows the best for us and therefore our doings are referenced to the Quran* (Muslim's Holy book) *and Sunnah* (recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). *We don't refer to ideologies and philosophies set by people and other people think they are good. No…we refer to what God said and we believe that Islam is comprehensive and timely and so are its instructions and values*. GO11

According to the theories of democracy and secularism, the thought provided in the above quote is completely incompatible with modernity, individual freedom and liberty. The normative assumption of secularism that for a society to be modern, it has to relegate

religion to non-political spheres (Veer and Lehmann 1999) is not acceptable in the Omani context. It also does not coincide with the Islamic view that religion exists to organize people's lives in all matters. One participant goes further to explain the interaction between Islam, regulations and society by giving an example of the huge denial of alcohol consumption in the country. GO7, in this regard, said

> *According to the concept of democracy and liberty, it is democratic and reasonable to allow alcohol consumption in society, right? Now, every single Muslim knows there are explicit verses in the Quran that forbid alcohol consumption entirely. Not to mention that it is completely unacceptable in the social norm. When you know the reference on which the social norms are based, then you understand that such thought cannot be acceptable. To me, it looks more democratic to allow people to save their beliefs, rather than bringing ideologies from outside and promoting them as valid even if they go completely against people's beliefs.*

It's important to clarify here that the vast majority of Oman's population is Muslim. So, Islamic values are widely circulated and respected. GO7 in the above quote explained the idea of Islam as what I can call "a reference of life" based on which the social norms and values are created. And this imposes some questions like; why certain references are acceptable as universal while others are not even acceptable as locally appropriate. And I mean here that if Western democracy does not fit the reference that people in a certain context rely on for their entire life in all aspects of life, then why should it be the standard against which we evaluate the level of their democracy? This leads to another bigger question: what is democracy? Is there any universal definition of democracy? And who is qualified enough to set the standards of universal democracy, if at all it can exist?

GO12, described the people of Oman as "self-censored" and that they work as "gatekeepers" against ideologies in contrary to Islam and social morals. GO12 gave an example of an incident that happened and how the lay public reacted to it.

> *You probably have heard of all the active movements that happened online and offline when an Indian atheist was about to attend an event to present an educational philosophical lecture, here in Muscat. There was general anger in the Omani streets and people went crazy asking the government to stop that from*

happening. It was not the Mutawa (Islamic leaders), it was not the politicians, it was the people themselves who worked as gatekeepers to protect their identity.

This example is of good support to the statement made by GO7 above when he said: that *it looks more democratic to allow people to save their beliefs, rather than bringing ideologies from outside and promoting them as valid even if they go completely against people's beliefs and wishes.*

That is especially true when knowing that for this group of the world's population, "Islam is not just a religion, and certainly not just a fundamentalist political movement. It is a civilization and a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another but is animated by a common spirit far more humane than most Westerners realize" (Mazrui 1997: 118). It's clear that there is tension between the concept of liberal democracy and Islam, so this part of the thesis proves nothing new in this regard, but it just confirms the existence of this problematic relation and it also confirms that a possible first step towards having a mutual understanding between the western ideology of democracy and the Islamic ones is to accept that the " proprietary liberalism may not be the only model of democracy" (Akhavi 2003: 545) and to consider other models at least as applicable in their home countries.

B. Cultural Conservativeness

Culture is another vital factor to be taken into consideration to understand the political tendencies in the context of the study. Gaonkar (2007) suggests that the democratic practices performed by different countries, and the level of success of these practices are profoundly impacted by the cultures, histories, and perceptions of modernity in its specific context. The extent to which the country is open or resistant to modernity as well as the extent to which the cultural norms and morals are preserved is a factor that cannot be ignored when assessing the political environment. The interview data support this discussion to a great extent. For example, GO4 said, regarding how people in Oman understand modernity.

> *In Oman, we do not care about the details of modernity, which we have come to see in many countries, including neighbouring countries. We understand modernity as material, human, cultural, and social progress without affecting religion and the authentic Omani heritage. There are constants that cannot be touched, and I do not think this should cause a problem because these are our*

convictions. We believe that abandoning the heritage and cultural constants in any country can have dire consequences, even if they do not appear in the short term.

People's multiple perceptions of modernity should be considered, in the same way multiple ways of democracy should too. To many scholars, the normative conditions of democracy are hard to exist everywhere as they are limited only to countries where there is "firstly a system of peaceful public contestation through suffrage and representative assemblies (the existence of an opposition party) and, secondly, a certain degree of popular participation in this system" (Montero 2018: 784). This approach of viewing democracy as a universal concept ignores the specificities of the country's cultures which, as said earlier, can affect one's way of making sense of and understanding the social world. This is better understood through the concept of 'social imaginaries' which according to Montero (2018) constitute the base on which democracy relies. For Montero (2018: 784), social imaginary means "the way people imagine their social existence, the concrete content of which can only be filled attending to a specific political context". Montero took this concept from Taylor (2007) who stressed the idea of the existence of cultures (in plural form) of democracy, in the same way, many are now speaking about multiple modernities, rather than modernity (Taylor 2007). Social imaginaries of people are largely affected by their culture, heritage and societal norms.

In the context of Oman, social imaginary can be a good framework to understand how people perceive themselves and their roles as citizens or nationals of Oman and what implications this has on the political culture. Also, people's understanding of modernity, democracy, freedom and engagement will affect the practice of engagement and democracy and therefore can make these experiences such as citizen engagement and democratic practices, unique, local and specific to this country.

See, Oman is a collectivist culture, the people see themselves as a group which has to be bound by certain rules and regulations which help to govern the group for the sake of all. The society is conservative and therefore there is a limit to democracy, a limit to modernity which should be respected. GO6

Another participant talked about the need to preserve the culture and heritage of the country.

Oman is an ancient civilisation rooted in the past history yet still alive until the present day. There are well-established principles, values and morals to which the society refers. They form the foundations on which people's lives and relations are built. I know it might be difficult to explain since these are not written stuff but I think it is obvious to any Omani how much the people of Oman are adherent to their customs and traditions starting from everyday traditions like dress, food and language, personal relations, extending to major issues like political relations. GO5

Reflecting on this quote, first, from a personal point of view as an Omani, being born and raised in Oman, I do agree with this participant that Omanis, in general, show a high level of conservativeness regarding the cultural traditions of Oman. Not only that, in fact, Omanis, who are usually labelled as the peaceful silent population in comparison with the population of other countries in the region, would raise their voice, and sometimes stand against the government if a traditional, cultural or religious value is breached. Therefore, it comes as no wonder that the citizens of Oman themselves may not value the democratic practices as understood from the Western perspective, and may not seek to have them applied in the country. This is because it may clash with the conservative nature of this population, especially in regard to their religion but also their understanding of modernity and culture. GO10 stated in this regard:

I do not think that Omanis are convinced of the idea of absolute freedom and democracy in its Western form. This is because absolute freedom means that they will have to make some religious, ideological, social, educational and cultural concessions. I don't think this is acceptable to them. You see that despite the impact of globalization on the merging of cultures and perhaps the disappearance of some values among some civilizations, in Oman the vast majority still adheres to their cultural and religious principles and categorically rejects many of the so-called manifestations of modernity and progress, and this fact alone suffices to conclude that we cannot simply import political foundations and its application to people who do not value its origins.

From another perspective, some participant sees engagement as deliberation and consultation which aims to create a consultative environment, and open dialogue to foster

mutual understanding rather than to ensure the representativeness of the public or the total consent of the public. In this regard, GO9 explained:

> *I think participation is done to let people participate in the building of their country. I don't think it is done to achieve higher scores in the international political participation indicators or the like. It reflects the traditional sort of engagement which was carried out a long time ago in Oman which does not necessarily mean the participation of all, nor consent of all, but it ensures the representation with the use of a mechanism to control this representation.* GO9

Considering the history of Oman, this is what has been done (see, for example, Al Barzah and Al Sablah explained in Chapter 4, section 4.4.1) and is still done, *"yet in a more institutionalised and modern way"* GO7.

Based on this discussion, therefore, I argue here that a linear universal democratic development might not exist. It may not be required in every context. However, a progressive local democratic line can be designed to suit the different localities and nations' progress should be evaluated based on how much progress they have accomplished in their designated line, rather than in an assumed universal line of democracy. The other question that also arises here is; Is it necessarily a linear progression? Linear indicates that there is an end where the country has reached the optimal democratic practice and that there should be no turn back which, at least to me, can never be the case, as human experiences keep changing and so do their beliefs and practices.

On the social imaginary discussion, it is also useful to remember that in Chapter 4, I discussed the relationship between public relations and communication efforts and the nation-building stages in Oman and how these efforts have contributed to the creation of national unity and national identity which are all parts of the creation of the imagined communities as described by Anderson. Reflecting on the discussion above, the social imagination of the people of Oman, especially about citizenship, nationalism, Omani identity and other political thoughts has been partly created by the mass communication efforts since the start of modern Oman in 1970. Of course, the culture and beliefs of the Omanis may have a great impact on their perceptions but the governmental communication efforts since that time have contributed to shaping a lot of people's political understanding, including engagement. Hence, it is unsurprising that Omanis

themselves may, to an extent, be happy with the engagement level practised by the government today and do value the previous engagement efforts such as the annual tours by Sultan Qaboos and others as we have seen in this section. A closer investigation of citizens' perspectives will be presented in Chapter 7.

5.4 ENGAGEMENT AS A DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION ACT

Dialogic communication has been central to communication studies, especially public relations studies (Pieczka 2011; Sanders and Gutiérrez-García 2020). The overwhelming responses of the participants about the engagement act as framed around the concept of dialogue, therefore, is expected. Participants have expressed their understanding of dialogue and its role in citizen engagement around basic key terms such as listening, responsiveness, transparency, inclusion and building mutual understanding, all are elements found in the study of dialogic communication and dialogic public relations, especially in the public sector. For many participants, dialogue means a conversation between the government and citizens and allowing dialogue is an indication of advancing the community engagement process.

> *To engage citizens, you need to open a space for conversation, for a dialogue, allow for two-way communication, allow for feedback and ultimately embrace the results in the decisions made. GO9*

The participants see that during Oman Vision 2040, dialogue has been allowed in different forms, such as in the form of actual face-to-face interaction.

> *We wanted to hear people's conversations, so we organized big events such as All of Oman which allows governmental actors to set on roundtables with citizens from different affiliations and specialities and social and educational levels, they had interaction, they had discussions, then all came up with a result and they reported it to the facilitator. All the tables then were allowed to enter into a discussion in order to amend or keep the suggestions. The process was full of live interaction and it is worth it. GO2*

Another form of dialogue has taken place in the online environment. Some participants have focused on the use of online tools, especially social media for this purpose.

> *We have activated our social media accounts and we allowed for comments on the Vision and any other related matters. In fact, there were some contents that we*

created for the purpose of receiving feedback from the public. For example, we post a tweet asking directly for people's opinions, and we received answers from people but at the same time, it facilitated the interaction and dialogue between the public themselves, in this example in the comment section. GO3

Interestingly, few participants see that dialogue can be also opened in the traditional media, for example in TV and Radio shows.

We go on the TV or the Radio and we open up a conversation and we allow people to respond, for example, through live phone calls or with the help of social media, people can comment and send their messages. GO7

5.4.1 Listening as a foundation for dialogue

The participants agreed that citizen engagement for Oman Vision 2040, was done, partly for the sake of listening to the citizens and many of them, such as GO12, considered the act of listening as *"the building block towards a successful dialogue"*. This reflects the governmental practitioners' understanding and appreciation of the importance of listening and its role in the dialogue, an element which according to Gordon (2011) rarely considered in relation to dialogue. According to Macnamara (2018), listening is a crucial part of effective engagement. The author suggested that many organizations, including governments and corporations, focus more on speaking rather than listening to their stakeholders. According to Dobson (2014: 36) "virtually no attention has been paid to listening in mainstream political science". According to Macnamara (2018), true engagement involves a two-way conversation, where both speaking and listening are important for better understanding and decision-making that benefits everyone. The lack of proper listening has contributed to declining public trust in institutions. To address this, organizations need to develop systems, or an "architecture of listening," which includes gathering feedback, analyzing it, and incorporating it into decision-making. Listening is key to building trust, improving communication, and fostering a more engaged and equitable society Macnamara (2018). Listing can contribute to democratic objectives by: (1) strengthening legitimacy, (2) helping to resolve deep conflicts, (3) enhancing understanding, and (4) fostering greater empowerment (Dobson, 2012). Gordon suggests that listening should be understood in the context of dialogue, especially if we want to make sense of the idea of *embracing the other*, a concept developed by the philosopher Martin Buber in his philosophy of dialogue. Gordon finds it surprising that almost nothing

has been published on Buber's notion of dialogue and listening and according to Gordon (2011: 207), "listening plays an essential role in initiating many dialogues by creating a space in which two people can embrace each other as complete individuals". I find this thought useful to interpret the data of the interviewees, as they have attributed listening to dialogue in different ways. For example, just as Gordon describes listening as a tool to start the dialogue, does GO5, who said in this regard,

> *In the engagement hall, we open a space to listen to the citizens. This is how you can start a talk, leading to a discussion, to an open dialogue, and eventually to the deliberation that is based on the mutual understanding created by the discussion.*

While this quote can suggest an ideal world where listening leads necessarily to mutual understanding, I find it important, for understanding governmental-citizens' listening process to consider the type of listening being practised as well as how the listening process itself has started. For Gordon (2011: 207), "listening involves a kind of active attentiveness to another's words or actions, engaging them as though they are directed specifically at us". For me, I see active listening as surely important but also the motives behind listening and the result of listening are essential, in the context of such kind of political relationship. For example, GO4 described that in certain moments during the citizen engagement events, the government is practising empathetic listening and he considers this as engaging.

> *Look, sometimes we let citizens speak, they need to speak and we have to listen. Sometimes their inputs are irrelevant or inapplicable or out of context but we need to sympathise with them. And this is not far from engagement. Indeed, I see it as part of it. Citizens feel relief that they have expressed themselves. They feel more confident. They are facing difficulties and they want to share them with us. So, we provide a space to raise their voice.* GO4

GO4 described listening as engagement in itself, which also goes well with the thought of another participant who thinks that citizen speaking is an empowerment in itself.

> *We empower people by listening to their complaints, issues, and opinions…. We might not take every single input but at least we listen which should give citizens a good impression that their voice is heard and also develop a culture of listening, between the government and citizens in the long run.* GO10

Building a culture of listening is vital. According to Gregory (2015), it is the role of public relations and communication practitioners "to build a culture of listening and engagement". However, practising empathetic listening, empowering citizens and creating a culture of dialogue and listening may seem a good practice but is this the best practice in the context of citizen engagement? And will it create genuine listening and dialogue and therefore genuine engagement? or is it just public relations efforts that work for the sake of the government? Now, this can be evaluated through monitoring and evaluating the results and the effects of listening and engagement on decision making which is not the kind of data available for this research. However, unlike the above two participants who focus on purposes that are not directly linked to the decision-making process, GO1, confirms that listening has opened dialogues that have changed some decisions, for example about the basic pillars of Oman Vision 2040.

> *We started at first with three basic pillars on which the 2040 Vision will be built; people and society, economy and development, and governance and institutional performance. As we started the citizen engagement activities and the communicative initiatives, citizens created a dialogue about the necessity to give the environment its position in the vision just as the other mentioned pillars. There were requests from people in the engagement halls to add a fourth pillar related to the environment. And we did. This is an example of good effective listening that affects decision-making. GO1*

I admit that this is not sufficient to evaluate the effectiveness of the listening process, however, I can fairly say that listening to citizens is practised. And while not necessarily affecting all decisions made by the government, they can still be a tool for opening up a dialogue and empowering people.

5.4.2 Two-way communication for mutual understanding

In dialogic communication, a two-way exchange is needed to achieve mutual understanding between the two parties. According to Innes (2007: 2), dialogic communication can be described as a "form of two-way communication where participants support their own positions with justification and actively listen to others' positions with the goal of mutual understanding"

This coincides with the participant's description of the dialogue process as "*a reciprocal communication that allows for discussion and feedback which is necessary for building*

common grounds and paves the path for mutual understanding between the government and citizens. GO6

Mutual understanding in the context of government-citizens relations and nation-building as described by the participants is about understanding each party's needs and how relevant these needs are to the nation-building goals.

> *We do societal engagement, not only for listening to citizens and taking their account into consideration, it is more than this. It is about mutual understanding, where the government understands citizens' needs, citizens understand the government conditions and then surely the country's development needs. GO9*

About understanding the government conditions in the above quote, another participant explained the necessity for the government to make itself clear, especially regarding financial hardship and consider it as a step towards mutual trust.

> *It is an obligation that the government explain its situation, a major example is the financial hardship the country is going through. People need to know the country's financial situation so they can make sense of the limitations and understand some hard decisions that affect them directly. You know such as postponing promotions in the public sector, taxation, lifting the subsidy on water, electricity and oil and other major steps done for the sake of financial recovery. In fact, this could help in raising the level of mutual trust. GO5*

There is a clear indication in this quote that being transparent can lead to citizens' trust. However, the relationship between transparency and citizens' trust is problematic as it cannot be inevitably assumed that a positive correlation will always exist as will be explained in the following section.

5.4.3 Transparency and public trust

As mentioned above, the relationship between transparency and trust is problematic. There is an account in the literature which claims that the engagement efforts are introduced after what has been identified as a "crisis of citizens' trust" in public sector organizations and that a major reason behind citizen engagement activities across the globe is to address this problem (Canel et al. 2022: 2). Therefore, it can be fairly assumed that being transparent may be no more than another tool used to increase citizens' trust. And the questions that arise here are: is it a genuine engagement? And is it genuine

transparency? To address these questions, we cannot ignore one of the most critical debates in public relations studies, especially when related to governmental communication around the term propaganda (as explained in Chapter 2). There is a debate about what is propaganda and whether or not it is public relations. For example, Wimberly (2019) contends that propaganda is the same as public relations and that public relations as a name was given to the industry of propaganda in the twentieth century when the term propaganda was associated with negative connotations. He even used the two terms interchangeably in his book: *How Propaganda Became Public Relations: Foucault and the Corporate Government of the Public.*

Whether it should be called propaganda or public relations, the main argument here is about the integrity of the engagement and transparency and this requires putting the term transparency under the scope and examining what it means and how it is achieved. Moore (2018) argued that transparency should not be naturally regarded as a factor to gain public trust. For Moore, transparency is not making government data open to the public but further making the data intelligible and facilitating public scrutiny over governmental decisions and policies. Taking this into account, I can fairly say that the government in Oman Vision 2040 was transparent in terms of revealing data but this transparency lacks making the information clear and understandable to the public. For example, several officials revealed that people do not understand exactly what Oman Vision 2040 is for, even though, they publish constantly about it.

> *We are sure that despite our huge efforts in publicity and our communication initiatives, many of the Omani public do not understand what is Oman Vision 2040 and what it aims for. GO12*

Another participant attributed this to factors including faults in governmental communication and citizens' unwillingness to be part of it.

> *I think it is true that until the moment, some people may not understand the importance of Oman Vision 2040 and its goals. Perhaps because they don't reach out or maybe understand the published information about it, or perhaps because they are not interested. GO8*

However, almost all the participants agreed that a big step has been taken already towards transparency and revealing more information about governmental conducts, planning and decisions.

It is clear how much change has been introduced in regard to governmental communication. One of the main changes is sharing information openly with the public. It is very clear. You now see press conferences through which governmental units reveal information about new decisions, their future plans and the evaluation of the previous plans. You probably noticed the introduction of the citizen's annual book by ministries that are published on their websites. You, of course, have noticed the activation of the websites and social media accounts of all the ministries through which they constantly publish their news and updates. This is a huge progress towards transparency. GO3

This participant obviously links the amount of data revealed to transparency which should not be the case according to Moore (2018) who suggests that visibility does not necessarily mean transparency and that transparency should be associated with intelligibility and increasing the public's capacity for scrutiny over governmental decisions. Regarding this, GO2 said when I asked about the level of comprehensibility of the information revealed in the Twitter account of Oman Vision 2040,

You are right, some of the data are not clear enough. Some lack explanations that can make them understandable. But you know there is a certain time when you want to publish to make yourself present, making yourself visible. Of course, this is not the case every time but sometimes you need this strategy. Another thing is that the staff responsible for preparing the content, are sometimes, not knowledgeable themselves which results in content that is not really clear. GO2

This saying coincides with Moore's (2018) hypothesis that many governments value visibility over intelligibility which results in transparency that is not transparent. Another thing is whether transparency can necessarily lead to public trust. According to the participants, transparency is a key to public trust. For example, commenting on the austerity policy to compact the financial crisis in the country, GO5 said

If people understand clearly why such a policy has been taken, I think mutual understanding will be promoted and therefore, we can gain citizens' trust. Personally, I think the financial situation of the country requires such kind of hard management of money, but people may be not aware. Even if we tell them there is a financial crisis, they don't understand. I think we should be more clear about

the procedures, the timeline and the results. Only in this way, we can gain back their trust.

I can argue here that although Oman has taken a big step in transparency, more attention should be given to the necessity of making data revealed intelligible and understandable in order to foster mutual understanding and therefore public trust. At the moment, there have been increasing publicity efforts in terms of how much information is revealed but this does not necessarily mean transparency which requires clarity and intelligibility of the data and therefore will not mostly lead to increasing citizens' trust in the government. "Transparency promises to make citizens more informed, engaged and better able to understand and trust the state" (Moore 2018: 417). Other than this, it is nothing more than a propaganda activity.

5.4.4 Inclusive participation for a better dialogue

Public engagement has been explained in the context of inclusive participation by many of the respondents in this study. Inclusion was described in many forms such as access to participation. For example, GO10 said

The good thing about citizen engagement in Oman Vision 2040 is that it was inclusive. For most of the engagement events, either online or in person, there will be a link published through which people can register for participation and it is open to everyone.

GO1, however, suggested that in certain events there was a kind of targeted inclusion which helps to ensure inclusive dialogue.

In some activities, we target certain groups, for example, there are some programs designed specifically for the youth or women to ensure that this group have access to participation. An example of such events is the youth incubators in which we encouraged only the youth to take part and we ensured that a dedicated number should be allocated to young women as well. In this way, we tried to be inclusive and it helps marginalised groups to take an opportunity to participate.

The Omani society, according to some participants is diverse in terms of its traditions, beliefs and level of conservativeness and this makes it sometimes difficult to include all segments of the society.

When we move to certain areas in Oman, especially the rural areas, women either are not allowed or are by themselves too conservative to participate. In some places, people do not appreciate participation in such events. This makes it hard to promote inclusion. However, we did our best through intensive media campaigns promoting participation as a national responsibility. Also, we designed some engagement activities that travel from one governorate to another to make sure we provide access to everyone. Also, for each governorate, there was a special promotion campaign that suited the target public attitudes and traditions in that governorate. GO2

The above quote also suggests the importance of understanding the target audience which according to GO7 is a *"necessary step in any communication activity"*.

You have to understand your target audience and design your strategy, and your message and choose the channel of communication accordingly. One of the challenges we faced was the attitudes of the people, especially in certain locations. You need to work on their attitudes and convince them to take part at first without necessarily looking for a perfect result. The important thing at first was the dissemination of a culture of participation. GO7

While inclusiveness might be challenging in a country where public engagement is still developing, GO11, however, thinks that the repetition of engagement initiatives will eventually make it inclusive which will create better dialogue.

I think that citizen engagement should be recursive, and this will make it inclusive after some time. The inclusivity will make a better dialogue since more inputs and more opinions will get into the dialogue table, making therefore better decisions.

Having explained the problematic relationships between trust, transparency and inclusiveness, especially in the context of Oman, it is important to understand what sort of openness and inclusiveness we are talking about here as both are keys to trust. OECD (2009) suggests that open and inclusive policymaking processes should be evaluated within the context of representative democracy, including its decision-making authority and responsibility. Therefore, participants in these participatory policymaking initiatives need to understand that the final decisions will be made by the relevant governing body. In most cases, the role of these participative projects therefore is to provide consultation or advice rather than making decisions. In the context of Oman, while the country's

overall political system is not a representative democracy, traces of representation can be clearly seen in its inherent political system, for example, through Majlis A'shura (Consultation Council), direct consultation through the royal tours and local municipalities and the other forms of consultation and engagement explained earlier in Chapter 4 and Section 5.3.1. This representation is also traced in the engagement activities of Oman Vision 2040 where participants play major consultation roles which affect decision-making but are not necessarily part of the process of making the final decision.

5.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I offered an articulation of engagement from the perspective of governmental communication practice in mediating engagement initiatives from one side. On another side, it provides a multi-layer explanation that varies across communication, political and developmental fields, confirming that the term lacks clarity. However, navigating the engagement in these various fields is useful to provide some highlights about the developmental, political and communication aspects of engagement which give a good grasp necessary for understanding what has been explained in another chapter about public relations capacity to create and maintain the citizens' political capital (see Chapter 6). The main argument of this chapter can be summarised in one sentence: the engagement which has become a necessity for Oman's governance is practised locally, aiming for local democracy, yet striving to adhere to the normative communication practices like listening, dialogue, two-way communication and mutual understanding.

CHAPTER 6

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS INTERMEDIARY WORK IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Having historized the practice of public relations in the context of Oman's nation-building and articulating engagement in the last two chapters, the next question that will assist in examining public relations as an intermediary practice: what does public relations in the context of engagement, particularly in Oman Vision 2040 entail? And what is its impact generated from mediating citizen engagement for national development?

In answering these questions, I respond to two dimensions of the cultural-centred approach, inspired by Moor (2008) and Hodges (2008) (See Chapter 2). These dimensions are the material practice which refers to the everyday functions of public relations and the impact of public relations which are presented from the perceptions of its practitioners. According to Stuart Hall (1980), producers send encoded meaning through their texts. In the case of public relations, this may start with identifying the target public, segmenting them, and designing carefully tailored messages through different forms of texts, for example, press releases, speeches, events, social media posts and others. And since the production is not isolated from the personalities of its producers and because the text does not produce itself, examining public relations practitioners' (PRP) views on their work, its merits and its value in constructing social meaning is as necessary as investigating the text and consumption. Understanding the extent to which public relations shapes social realities is heavily reliant upon our comprehension of "PRP culture – their values, attitudes and behaviours, their perceptions of effective practice, their stories, experiences and visions for the future, and their perceptions of their relation to other fields" (Hodges and Edwards 2014: 95). With that being said, however, we need to put in mind that the encoded messages are then decoded by the public/audience. And that the decoding process does not necessarily go in line with the encoded message, therefore while this chapter focuses on the perspectives of the encoders (PR practitioners), the citizen's perspective will be examined in the following chapter (Chapter 7).

Figure 8 presents a summary of the themes extracted from the interviews with governmental officials and covers the two dimensions identified earlier. It is important to acknowledge that public relations functions are interlinked which underscores the

interconnectedness of their impacts as well. Therefore, although there may be instances where explanations and quotations appear repetitive, they are instrumental in facilitating comprehension of distinct yet interrelated concepts.
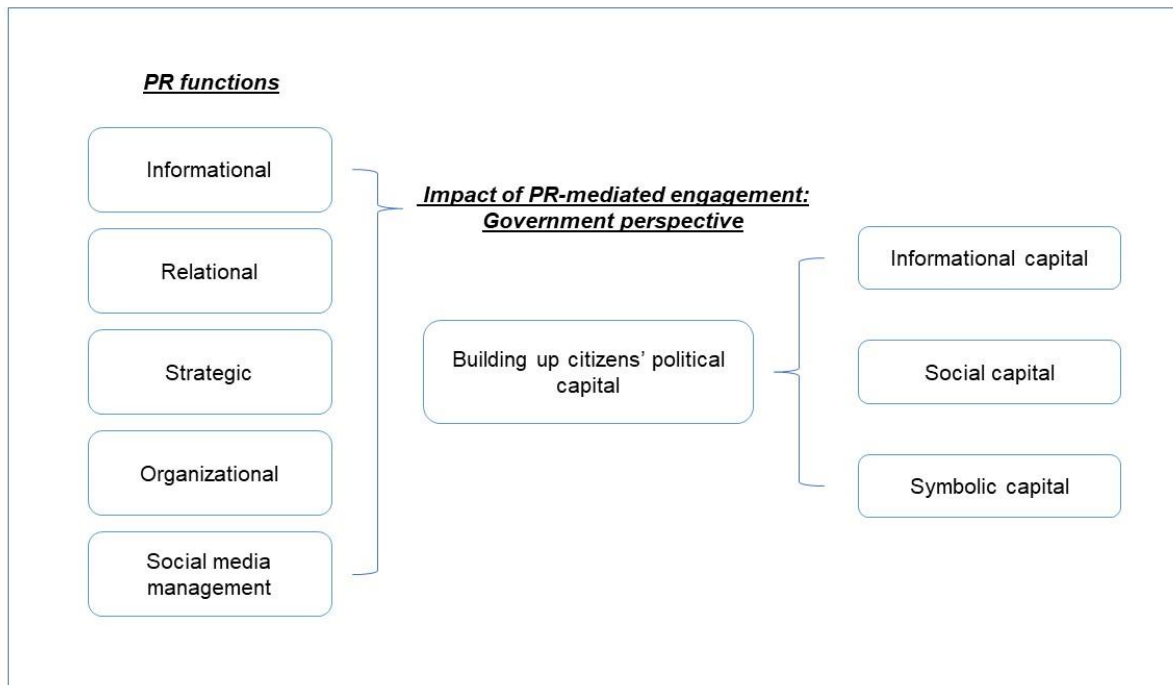
Figure 8 PR functions and impact in mediating citizen engagement, government perspectives

6.2 MATERIAL PRACTICE: WHAT DOES PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR OMAN VISION 2040 ENTAIL?

6.2.1 Is it PR?

To understand the structural organizations and functions of public relations in Oman Vision 2040, it's vital first to mention that all PR and communication activities were carried out by the Oman Vision 2040 Office which was established in 2017 by direct instruction from the main committee responsible for the development of Oman Vision 2040. The committee was chaired by, Haitham bin Tariq, the Minister of Heritage at that time and the Sultan of Oman since 2020. The Office was established with the main goal of preparing the 2040 Vision with societal consent and worked until the Vision document was released in the middle of 2019. In August 2020, the Oman Vision Implementation Follow-up Unit was established to take control of all the vision-related activities, including media and communication work.

> *The office's primary role is the preparation of Oman Vision 2040 in tune with societal inputs. For this goal to be achieved, we implemented many*

> *communication initiatives and public engagement activities which led ultimately to writing up the Vision document in the way you read it today.* GO10

Regarding where public relations or communication in general fit, GO1 described:

> *In the office, we were a team of around 15 persons, most of whom have communication-related education or experience, for example, public relations, journalism, branding, and project management. We were assigned the task of basically planning, organizing and implementing engagement and communication initiatives.*

The office was an independent body in terms of its activities and was established temporarily to meet the needs to prepare the Vision. However, the office was "*administratively and financially, supported by the Supreme Council of Planning and the Government Communication Centre, yet it reports its work to the main committee responsible for preparing the 2040 Vision*" GO4. Not having public relations or even communication-specific structure as well as not having clear job requirements or specifications is not surprising as public relations position in the organizational hierarchy and its contribution to management vary considerably, not only when you depart to another country but also from one organization to another. In a study to examine the structure of public relations departments across the globe, Moss et al. (2017) found that there is no clear structural model that has appeared from the empirical data, driven from the five continents and that the structure is "situation-dependent" (P.80) to suit the needs of the organizations. Indeed, even in contexts like the US and UK in which public relations is believed to have been born and evolved, the field of public relations, its structure and functions are not coherently defined (L'Etang 2004; Yoon and Black 2011). In our case, the Oman Vision 2040 Office was established to suit the situation which is the need to prepare the vision with societal consensus and all its communicative activities are designed for this purpose.

It was also unsurprising that most respondents did not call it public relations, although they all admit directly or indirectly that a big part of their work is public relations. Only one participant linked this to the negative connotations that are associated with public relations. GO7 said: "*Lots of people think that PR means manipulation of truth… you know it is also linked to notions of negative persuasion and influence*". However, this doesn't seem to be the reason as most of the other interviewees spoke about the

misunderstanding of what is public relations and they confess that what they are doing is public relations. It is just that it is not called so. For example, GO3 noted that *"the practice of PR in Oman is misunderstood, I've been taught something in the university, but what I see in practice is something else, I would not like to call it PR"*. GO1 gave more explanation, saying: *"PR departments in Oman are known to do hospitality, reception of guests, organizing events and conferences, and in the best cases, writing press releases or preparing newsletters"*. This tally with the result of the study conducted by Al-kindi (2019) who concluded that PR departments in Oman have been identified to do these three functions: media relations, like writing press releases and arranging interviews with media, and service functions like the reception of guests, organizing events and issuing visa, and other functions including internal communication and participation in events and conferences. This was also indicated by other previous studies like Al-Hinai (2012) and Al-Qamshoi (2015).

Despite the misunderstanding of public relations, GO9 mentioned: *"but we know that what is so-called as media and communication departments is actually public relations. It's just the misunderstanding of titles, not the practice itself. Anyway, PR is a communication practice"*. This was confirmed by GO3 who noted:

> *There was a proposal from the Government Communication Centre in 2019, as part of the government communication plan, to restructure all the departments responsible for communication. It was raised to the cabinet and it got approved. This is why today, they are all given the name communication and media departments, although many of them previously had the word public relations in their titles.*

That's why in this thesis I use government communication interchangeably with governmental public relations because governmental PR is practised in Oman but is mostly referred to as government communication.

6.2.2 PR functions for engaging citizens in Oman Vision 2040

When asked about their role in the whole process of engaging citizens in Oman Vision 2040, the participants identified some functions at both strategic and technical levels and did not go far from the functions of public relations identified by many scholars, not only in PR but also in the communication in public sector and communication studies in

general. I categorized these functions, based on the empirical data, as informational (educational), relational, strategic, organizational and social media management.

A. Informational (Educational) Function

The interview data revealed a great emphasis by the communication practitioners on their function as information disseminators. They all described that a big part of their work is to make information available to the public, for example, through mass media, social media, publications, websites, and others. This role is very well-established and widely studied in public relations literature. Among four prominent models of functional public relations developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), is the public information model, a one-way communication in which public relations, utilising media relations, work to disseminate information to the public. It is also linked to the notion of publicity in PR. Although there is a debate about what publicity really means and its potential use as a propaganda tool, particularly when practised by the government, it is widely acknowledged as essential to empower citizens to take part in the debate and is considered one of the normative conditions of deliberation and engagement (Edwards 2016). Publicity in this context is about openness and accessibility to everybody. It also means "making something public or "discussing in public" (Kleinstüber 2001: 97). As described by the interviewees, public relations' role lies in providing citizens with sufficient and quality information to help them make decisions on the subjects of their participation. It also helps maintain relationships based on trust between the government and its people and hence, encourages people to participate in the debate.

> *We aim to let people know and understand what is Oman Vision 2040, why it is important and why people should care about it. We did that by constantly publishing about the vision, the relevant initiatives and events through the mass media, our social media accounts, our website and some publications we produced. Previously, citizens were not engaged. Information, for example, about national development plans, was not made available to the public. It is different now. We shared all the steps that we went through in the preparation of the Vision.*
> GO2

From this quote, it's obvious that the respondent considers revealing information as an engagement practice. Arnstein (1969) who developed the concept of "the ladder of citizen engagement", considers informing as a sort of engagement, although other conditions that

ensure the empowerment of citizens should be achieved to have genuine participation. Rowe and Frewer (2005) also consider public communication as one type among three types of engagement (public communication, public consultation and public engagement). "Informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation" (Arnstein 1969: 219). In this regard, GO9 said:

> *We had a responsibility at first to inform people to join us, to take part. People are not used to this kind of participation. You've got to tell them that it's both their right and their responsibility to participate and personally, I think, regardless of the results of this participation, what is more important is spreading this idea of citizen's role in planning for the development of our country.*

Educating people about their rights was one goal but also others describe publicity as education to ignorant citizens who need to understand what is going on to involve themselves in the discussion.

> *Lots of people, I mean ordinary people, lack the knowledge that is necessary to participate in the discussion. When you speak about a national vision, you often address complex economic, administrative, political and social issues. People may feel ignorant, so they prefer to step away, or they simply do not care.* GO6

I see this education as empowering to people because, as known, knowledge is a prerequisite to power and knowledge is, indeed, power. Inspired by George Herbert Mead (1930), Heath et al. (2009: 196) state "Power and knowledge are interdependent, co-produced constitutive perspectives that are the foundation for cognition, self-identity, and societal legitimacy". To inform people, GO2 described part of their everyday routine as:

> *We write press releases, design infographics, tweet about the 2040 vision-related matters, contact journalists, and arrange for interviews on TV and radio to get our message across, either about the engagement activities or any of the vision's four pillars, in the most effective way.*

Disseminating information is also seen as a tool for fixing, building and maintaining good relations between the government and citizens. For example, GO11 noted

> *In the past, the absence of adequate information made individuals misunderstand things, and sometimes made the society aggressive towards the government or the*

decisions made. Adequate information is needed to let the society understand why and how decisions are made and provide a space for mutual understanding between both parties.

GO10 support this with an example of the result of not sharing information with people in previous projects as in Oman Vision 2020.

Some citizens are frustrated already; this frustration is affecting the engagement process. Partly, it might be the lack of trust between citizens and the government which creates this feeling. I will speak, for example, about Oman Vision 2020, Omani people were hearing about planning for national projects, but they did not hear about the achievements, this could be attributed to the lack of information, both from media and governmental organizations.

Publicity is vital; however, there is a fine line between publicity to inform people and publicity to manage information that may affect the quality, transparency, and reliability of the information being published. It is essential, here, to look at the media system, which is one of the primary sources of information diffusion. For example, during the preparation of Oman Vision 2040, the Government Communication Centre (GCC) was a strategic partner in developing the vision and worked integratively with the communication team of Oman Vision 2040 to produce favourable news coverage in mass media. GO3 defined the role of the GCC in the communicative efforts for Oman Vision 2040 as:

The Government Communication Centre, provide support to the communication and media teams in all governmental organizations. Our primary role is to ensure that the national efforts are represented fully in the mass media. We want to ensure that unified national messages are passed to citizens. We want to ensure that Oman Vision 2040 is presented positively, this is why we take part in important national projects like this one.

It's important to note here that the GCC is working under the Ministry of Information which, as explained in Chapter 4, directly or indirectly controls the media system in Oman. The positive presentation of the vision as described by GO3 can be considered by many as propaganda. When I asked a senior official about this matter in different forms of questions, he repeated that the media system is fit for the context of the country, without going into more detail.

Yes, we can call our media, development media, and that's fine, it's totally fine, the media system should work to facilitate the development efforts and I guess even in the longstanding democracies, they have been through this stage, I think it fits us very well for this stage. GO7

This brings questions of transparency and reliability of the information from one side but also questions the role of PR and its capacity as to what extent PR is needed in this context where public servants are circulating information between themselves, for example from a governmental organization to a state-controlled media organization. And the other question that will be addressed in another chapter is about the role of audience agency in this process. However, the communication efforts of educating and informing citizens, I argue, should not be ignored as even when not creating an instant impact, it can have an impact in the long-term as will be discussed later in this chapter.

B. Relational Function

Respondents also identify building networks and connections with different actors as one of their tasks during the preparation of Oman Vision 2040. This function is widely discussed in public relations (e.g., Kim and Ledingham 2015; Ledingham 2003; Ledingham and Bruning 1998) and PR is known as the profession of relationship management. One of the prominent definitions of public relations developed by Cutlip et al. (1999: 6) described PR as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends". For most of the interviewees, it was essential to build understanding and relations at both micro-level (in which they refer to the other governmental bodies) and macro-level (which they identify as local governors, media people, social media influencers, the private sector and citizens).

We needed support from everyone, we have a big project for developing a new vision for the country, and we have a new way for its preparation (the engagement process), we first, wanted the governmental members across the country to support the idea and the method, I mean the idea of having a vision that will guide the development projects in the two coming decades and the way in which it will be developed. GO2

GO1 described the range of communication activities directed at the governmental organizations as:

We conducted workshops, lectures and briefings for the different governmental organizations, it is important that they support our efforts. Eventually, Oman Vision 2040 will be a guiding framework for them. They need to understand it, support us, particularly support the participatory way of developing the vision which should be then their way of doing. We also need their support to help us publishing about the vision, for example, through linking their activities to ours or the vision in general.

Another important segment was the governors and sheikhs (tribal leaders) in the society. They worked as gatekeepers to reach citizens. GO2 mentioned:

It was important to approach the governors and Sheiks, they helped us to understand the nature of each governance and the characteristics of its people so that we can design suitable messages and use suitable channels. Also, we wanted them to help in reaching the citizens, I mean everyone, including women as an example, who were reluctant to participate, especially in certain very conservative areas.

Two other participants have identified influencers in social media as another target to expand their network.

We prepared a list of all the social media influencers, we approached them to help us pass our messages and reach as many of our target public as possible, you know the target was to reach all of Oman and to make the chance of participation available to everyone. GO12

GO9 also described influencers in social media as *"opinion leaders"* who can help in convincing people to take part in the preparation of the vision. *"You know many citizens, for whatever reason, were not really encouraged, so those opinion leaders helped partly in promoting the vision and also notions of nationalism, participation and so on" GO9.*

And lastly, media people were identified as a major target. GO5 said, *"We want them to attend our events, receive our press releases and report both the vision and the engagement efforts positively"*. GO10 described their activities to attract journalists and have good relations with them as: *"We were providing them with stories, inviting them to all our events, even our meetings sometimes, arranging for TV or radio interviews, and that include targeting both public and private media"*.

The respondents here focused on building relations with all these segments for reasons related to the achievement of engaging citizens, either through helping in disseminating messages, tailoring messages, reaching the audience, promoting their activities or even getting support through other activities like governmental-based activities. In this sense, the relational function of public relations is useful for Oman Vision 2040 because relationships can be seen as a resource to the organizations through which they can build up their social capital which is defined, at an organizational level as: "the ability that organizations have of creating, maintaining, and using relationships to achieve desirable organizational goals" (Kennan and Hazleton 2006: 322). Social capital helps the organization "to facilitate organizational cohesiveness, and ultimately the success of organizational actions" (Sommerfeldt and Taylor 2011: 198). In another way, it helps in implementing their strategies which can be through "gaining support, external trust, and internal commitment" (Ni 2006: 279). As indicated by the respondents, gaining support and trust from the segments outlined above is seen as primary to the success of the engagement and a better relationship with citizens.

C. Strategic and Organizational Function

Strategic functions of public relations have become a common description of the planning function in public relations. However, the concept is loosely defined and PR practitioners themselves describe it differently (Khodarahmi 2009). Strategic public relations is mostly associated with the idea that "public relations should be planned, managed by objectives, evaluated, and connected to organizational objectives" (Grunig and Grunig 2000: 308). This distinguishes it from technical public relations which include the communication tactics implemented by communication officials. The interview data reveal that public relations officials have practised both technical and strategic public relations. Strategic planning for the participation programmes was one of the key functions that interviewees identified. For example, GO4 mentioned:

> *I, with my team. sat together, and developed a proposal in which we identified our objectives, target audience, the messages, the channels, the tactics, our intended sponsors, and the ways of evaluation, we then passed it to the main committee to get it approved.*

GO2 supported this idea when identified some of the events they have planned and implemented:

We planned and implemented many initiatives, workshops (both physical and virtual), 'media of the future', 'all of Oman' which was the biggest public engagement event across the country, 'the national conference' and in fact all the other events in relevance to Oman Vision 2040 preparation.

GO6 described the focus on strategic planning as one trend in government communication in general when mentioned:

For me, I see the most important change that has occurred in the government communication in Oman is following a clear, planned and deliberate approach that has clear strategic goals.

Besides the strategic role, some interviewees have identified an organizational and administrative role. For example, GO1 said

We are not only organizing the events but also doing some organizational tasks, for example, after the 'all of Oman' campaign, we came back with thousands of notes written by citizens, we sorted them out, and categorised them before passing them to the main committee". GO4 also said: *the main committee will often return to us for an explanation of the process when needed.*

The involvement of public relations practitioners at all levels, strategic and technical, indicates the understanding of the management, represented in our case by the government, of the importance of communication activities in engaging citizens. The establishment of the Oman Vision 2040 Office, which was mainly responsible for communication and engagement, in itself is a good indicator of the government's willingness to change its communication practice and adopt a participatory communication approach. GO1 supported this when describing the members who worked in the office as *"mostly coming from communication backgrounds, for example, public relations, journalism, branding and project management"*. GO2 also mentioned that *"the government understands the potential and impact of communication, this is why all of us in the Office are coming from communication-relevant backgrounds in our education or experience. The government chose those people and that for me is a big change towards the appreciation of communication.* The appreciation of communication and public relations by the higher authority is important. According to Plowman (2005), public relations is less effective unless it is valued and takes part in top management and strategic planning.

D. Social Media Management

The use of social media and online tools, in general, has increasingly become vital and in many cases central to public relations. The interviewees identified three functions related to social media; informing, interacting, and monitoring. GO3 mentioned, *"Social media provides us a space for publicity and opening up a channel for participation"*. It's important when considering the effectiveness of using social media, for social good, to evaluate how social media is used. Kent (2013) said that social media should be "genuinely social" and called for not using it as simply social marketing. It can be effective for social change and democracy, only when is used to raise issues for discussion, and facilitate dialogue and debate about topics of public interest, which should distinguish PR from advertising and marketing Kent (2013). Relevant to this, GO12 gave an example of how they open up the space for discussion through social media.

> *Once the first draft of the vision was ready, we published it on our social media accounts and we announced that two weeks will be dedicated to everyone to put their suggestions, you can go and check our Twitter account and see the huge number of comments we received in the reply section. It was not only that people expressed their opinions to the government but also it opened a space for them to have a discussion between themselves about several aspects of the vision and development in general. For longer feedback, people were able to log in to our website and submit a form designed for public suggestions. We then actually, extended the period to a few more weeks because of the huge number of comments we received.*

Public relations' capacity to open up a space for discussion through social media will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. For GO5, opening up such kind of discussion, even if virtually, is a sign of empowerment.

> *Our existence in social media allows people to interact with us, feel part of the vision, and criticize it in many times, I believe this is an important part of empowering citizens.* GO5

In addition, almost all the respondents have described monitoring public opinion as both a new trend in Omani governmental communication in general and as an essential function for Oman Vision 2040.

The GCC (Government Communication Centre) has a unit responsible for monitoring public opinion, particularly the one developed in social media. I guess you know Twitter has become a platform in Oman where people discuss matters of importance to them…anyway, monitoring public opinion becomes important, we evaluate the matter and see what strategy of responding should we take. Usually, we discuss this with the ministries of relevance to the issue and see if we shall, for example, write a release, explain the issue or just simply be silent to deal with any arising public opinion. We also do horizon scanning, we do sentiment analysis, we report issues to the relevant management and suggest a response strategy. GO9

As part of the government communication plan for 2019, the GCC has produced a guideline directed at all media and communication departments in governmental organizations for monitoring public opinion. Omani population, just like their counterparts in the Arab world, find the virtual environment useful to promote civic culture and civic participation, through the formation of public opinions (Ayish 2018). The government now is responding to public opinion which was described by the participants as *"a healthy new trend"* in government communication GO10, and as *"a good move towards the interactivity with citizens"* GO8.

Now that PR functions in engaging citizens have been explained, it is good at this point to acknowledge that the Omani government communication in general and engagement practices, in particular, are responding to the international trends in political communication and engagement. This can be seen as mentioned previously in Chapter 4, through the Government Communication Centre in Oman which, on many occasions, offered training, programs and guidelines for the practitioners that are based on international experiences in communication and the participatory approach of governance (see section 4.4.4.A). Besides, as so far explained in this Chapter but also as explicated throughout the thesis, engagement tools used in Oman Vision 2040 align with the globally recognized practices. This is particularly interesting when looking at the political features of Oman as a non-democracy as the tools used reflect the global trends of engagement. However, we can notice that there is a specificity to the local practice of engagement in Oman. Indeed, public engagement practices around the world vary significantly, often reflecting the democratic maturity and institutional frameworks of different countries. For example, Turnbull & Aucoin (2006) explained that in the UK and Canada, public

consultation is a standard part of policy-making, like through "public consultation" on the government's websites. The Cabinet Office of the UK has a code of conduct that requires all governmental departments to conduct public consultation. Another example is Denmark and Germany's deliberative methods like Denmark's "consensus conferences" and Germany's "planning cells" which allow diverse citizens to discuss policy issues. While both are considered less institutionalised and are typically focused on specific areas, this method allows for testing people's opinions about certain policies and is considered a successful involvement practice as suggested by Turnbull & Aucoin (2006). Also, online and social media engagement is massively growing in OECD countries, enabling real-time discussions and feedback on policy (OECD, 2009). Publications, town hall meetings, public events, opinion polls, surveys and digital platforms are used to engage people in different countries but the important thing is the extent to which engagement will have an impact on the policy-making.

In Oman, different tools are used. For example, through its digital strategy, the Omani government has used online tools to expand participation, particularly during the nationwide campaign "All of Oman.". Also, consultations with governors and sheikhs, as mentioned earlier by GO2, mirror the practices, of town hall meetings with local leaders acting as intermediaries to ensure participation from all societal segments. Moreover, Oman has recognized the role of social media influencers and "opinion leaders" as key actors in promoting citizen participation in the 2040 Vision. Workshops, events and interaction in social media have been used. Therefore, we can reasonably say that Oman's engagement efforts are informed by international expertise. It also shows that regardless of the political style of the country, some shared characteristics of engagement and communication are present. However, while Oman utilizes familiar tools for public engagement, their application often reflects a more controlled and top-down approach. For instance, the Government Communication Centre disseminates information through official press releases and social media updates, focusing on promoting Oman Vision 2040 and maintaining a positive public image. This might be seen as prioritizing informing citizens about governmental initiatives rather than fostering a two-way dialogue. The "All of Oman" initiative, while designed to gather public input, still operates within a framework, limiting therefore the scope for genuine citizen influence on decision-making.

In contrast, many international examples demonstrate a stronger emphasis on interactivity and citizen empowerment. For instance, in countries like Denmark and Germany, deliberative forums such as consensus conferences and planning cells actively involve citizens in shaping policy outcomes through structured discussions and collaborative decision-making (OECD, 2009). In Oman, the focus remains mainly on information dissemination. This highlights the need for Omani practices to evolve towards more participatory models that empower citizens and enhance democratic governance which I think is developing gradually as Oman's experience in institutionalised engagement is relatively recent.

6.3 ASSESSING THE IMPACT; INTERMEDIATION IN PROMOTING THE CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERING CITIZENS

Based on the interpretations derived from the interviews as will be explained in this section, public relations practices for Oman Vision 2040, I argue, have, to a certain degree, a positive impact on disseminating a culture of participation and empowering citizens. Through intermediation between government and citizens, its activities have contributed to the build-up of *citizens' political capital*, which I grounded in this context to describe citizens' capacity for political participation. That's through facilitating people's acquirement of informational, social and symbolic capital which I see as prerequisites to the political capital. Besides, while many researchers have addressed the different roles of public relations in social change, up to my knowledge, no research describes public relations' role in change management, at least not in a developing and potentially, a country in transition like Oman. Particularly, taking into account that citizen engagement in national development and the participatory approach to communication is a new practice in Oman, change management is needed. Change management, in this context, is used to explain PR's role in changing pre-existed ideologies about the role of government and citizens in national planning, citizen engagement and public communication in general.

6.3.1 Building up citizens' political capital

In his significant work, *"The Forms of Capital",* Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 78) described capital as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or in its "incorporated," embodied form) that, "when appropriated on a private, exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.".

He noted that capitals have the capacity to produce profits and that the amount of capital an actor has can determine his position in the field. Bourdieu classifies capital in three main forms: economic (e.g., money), cultural (e.g., education and knowledge) and social (e.g., networks). The collective possession of these capitals will lead to earning symbolic capital, for example, prestige. In his 1986 article, Bourdieu did not mention anything about political capital, although he mentioned it in an earlier article published in 1981, *"Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field"* in which he refers to political capital as owned only by powerful dominant politicians. "Bourdieu understands political capital as the political power enjoyed by politicians, a power that is derived from the trust (expressed in a form of credit) that a group of followers places in them. Then, it follows that whenever this trust increases or decreases, the political capital of a politician changes accordingly" (Schugurensky 2000: 433). It was not only Bourdieu who understood political capital as the amount of power a politician has, other scholars such as Grossman (1994) have also framed it in this way. Political capital is not well-defined but is described as the "most authoritative form of capital" and is linked to dominant powerful figures, for example, governments and politicians (Casey 2008). However, if we consider Bourdieu's own idea that capitals are accumulated, can be redistributed and gained over time, then political capital is no exception. Political power should be understood in terms of changing the nature of "human agency" in the sense that education, social movements and changing public policies can have a role in redistributing power in societies, democratizing societies and empowering the subaltern or marginalized segments (Schugurensky 2000: 443). Political capital, hence, should not be seen as exclusive to politicians but as an asset that citizens can develop and accumulate over time. Based on this theoretical understanding and drawing from Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital and the analysis of the empirical data (interviews), I understand citizen's political capital as the collective informational, social and symbolic capital that a social actor has in the political field, which can be accumulated over time, and that will ultimately empower the social actor and allow for active political participation. Researchers like Sørensen and Torfing (2003) have approached the notion of citizens' political capital. However, I attempt in this research to situate public relations in this discussion, proposing the question of where does public relations fit in building citizens' political capital. The answer is derived from the interviews' data, to evaluate public relations contribution to citizens' accumulation of informational, social and

symbolic capital which are all essential, as I see, for the development of citizens' political capital as explained below.

6.3.2 Connecting social players, building up social capital

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as:

> The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. Bourdieu (1986: 248-249)

Bourdieu is not the only one who addresses social capital, Putnam is another scholar who contributed to this concept. As cited by Sommerfeldt (2013: 284), according to Putnam (1994), social capital refers to:

> The collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. . . social capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam (1994: 664–665)

It's been long argued that social capital works as a "social glue" that is necessary for both economic and political health (Kane 2001: 6). According to Newton (2001: 210), "healthy stocks of political capital cannot be built up in nations lacking social capital". From this standpoint, I argue that public relations have contributed to citizens' political capital through the build-up of citizens' social capital.

In the context of engagement in Oman, it is the extent to which engagement can create social capital through creating ties and bonds between citizens that are of interest here. Although it may be difficult to form civil organizations in Oman because of the current politics in which all civil and social organizations are in one way or another controlled by the government, the interviewees think that somehow, they were able to connect different social players, bring them together and form some bonds and ties between them. This was through the engagement events and the way in which they organized the events. In a description of the workshops that were held, on the side of the "All of Oman initiative" to discuss each pillar of the Vision. GO1 mentioned:

People themselves chose which workshop they wanted to attend. So, if you are interested in environmental issues, you enter the room dedicated to this subject. If you are interested in governance issues, you go to the workshop room for this subject and so on. In there, you find people of your same interests, you can discuss, share, come up with suggestions and I know some people took their discussion even out of the rooms, they built networks with each other and this can be of high value for even later discussion of these subjects.

In this case, it could be said that engagement events can help in creating relationships between previously diverse people. Public relations' role here lies in facilitating communication spaces and offering room for relationship building which helps in building up the community's social capital in this case. In Oman, while many civil organizations are developed under government control, other informal associations do exist. For example, GO12 said

A group of young youth have created their online platforms to discuss youth issues. Most of the members were participants in a program entitled "Youth Vision" that we organized as part of Oman Vision 2040 activities. At first, they met physically in our setting, but then they shifted their interaction to their own platform. This is one example I'm aware of, I'm pretty sure there are some more.

In fact, in an interview with one of the participants in Youth Vision, he confirmed this and was happy to be a gatekeeper for reaching some more citizens for interviews through this platform. C2 said:

We discuss matters of youth, problems and aspirations. We even sometimes plan and implement activities and campaigns of our interests. it's a very informal and friendly place and it gives all of us the capacity to speak and act.

In this case, the communicative efforts work to mediate between the social actors in the society in a way that can empower the subaltern counterpublic through bonds and trust-building between them to form a collective unit and alliance to be able to stand for their views which might be out of concern in the predominant public sphere (Sommerfeldt 2013).

On how the connection between citizens can be extended beyond public engagement and communicative initiatives, GO7 also noted:

Such interaction is fruitful, not only in terms of helping in preparing the Vision. Those people will go back to their family, friends, work and other social networks, they will let them know what happened, explain the national priorities and may have discussions.

There is a great chance that the flow of information and opinion will not be limited inside the closed halls, but will naturally flow to the society because the participants are representing different segments of the community. This reflects the flow of information from and to both the open (the public space) and the empowered space (the government-created space).

6.3.3 Educating citizens, building up informational capital

Information sharing, which is a primary function of PR as explained earlier, is another important tool for building up social capital and political capital. An informed public can better engage themselves in social affairs and take part in civil participation (Habermas 1991), which also helps in the build-up of social capital (Yang and Taylor 2013). This was confirmed by the participants as explained in the section above about the informational function of PR. For example, GO6 said

Lots of people, I mean ordinary people, lack the knowledge that is necessary to participate in the discussion. When you speak about a national vision, you often address complex economic, administrative, political and social issues. People may feel ignorant, so they prefer to step away, or they simply do not care.

Another participant also said:

We publish information so citizens can know so they can participate in the discussion, even during the engagement events, we do briefings and we try to explain everything. I think this is important to encourage people to take part in the discussion. When you know, you are more likely to involve yourself in the debates. So, we explain the pillars of the vision, the targets of the event, what is expected from the participants and so on. GO2

Informing people therefore can be as important as building relationships between them. It is both information and relationships that empower people to engage themselves in a discussion in the public sphere. Heath et al. (2009: 191) noted that "power resources arise from information flow and relationships that variously foster harmony or suffer

disharmony". In our case, it could be said that public relations, here, played an important role in mediating between previously diverse public and allowing, to some extent for sharing information, forming sorts of associations and allowing for a flow of information in the public sphere and hence for people to take part which might foster power for those participants. However, it is also important to think about "whether meaning is fully co-created through the discourse of many voices, or the product of one (or a few) voices, constructing social reality" Heath et al. (2009: 191) and, therefore, it is equally important to think about citizens voice and opinion which I will address in the following Chapter.

From another perspective, considering the informational role described by the participant earlier in section 6.2.2.A, one could think of publicity efforts as propaganda which might be true. However, the communication efforts of educating and informing citizens, I argue, should not be ignored as even when not creating an instant impact, it can have an impact in the long term. Taking Bourdieu's account of cultural capital (informational capital), the knowledge that may be passed from one generation to another in the social space (Bourdieu, 1984) is vital for empowerment. A relevant example is given by Ihlen (2009: 83), "when citizen groups meet with accusations that they do not know what they are talking about or that they must be "constructive" in their criticisms. Having "enough" education to pose the "right type" constructive of criticism seems to be an essential strategy for being taken seriously by actors who are struggling to present their definitions and perspective". This tallies with how GO9 described citizens as *"armed with information about different aspects in national development and the pillars of Oman Vision 2040".* GO10 described their job in this case as:

> *We publish constantly about the vision, the matters related to it and to national development and the planning process. That makes people informed or urged to be informed in their own ways. When you come to the engagement halls, you see experts and this was appreciated by many seniors who did not believe that citizens had this much capacity and knowledge. They are confident. So, they attend and you see confidence in how they discuss, how they criticize, and how they suggest.*

While I'm not saying that public relations is the only source of information citizens can be educated through, it is one source that provides part of the information. In fact, through their practices, even if withhold some information or present information in a favourable way that serves the government, they are educating citizens about the conduct of

government, media and other actors. Ihlen (2009) explains that there are two types of knowledge capital, one is related to the political process itself, for example in our case about the vision itself and the other is about how the system, for example, the media system works. Both are empowerment tools for citizens. Also, these types of knowledge are prerequisites to the development of public opinion, and debates in the civil society and the public sphere; which are all essential to democracy. The public sphere developed by Habermas (1989) is a space in which public dialogue and debate are encouraged. Publicity plays an important role in "attracting attention for issues and messages in the different areas of public communication and/or to influence the processes of public discussion" (Raupp 2004: 314) as cited by (Sommerfeldt 2013: 281).

> *I think when we publish a post, for example about one pillar of the vision, I think it stimulates people to reply and debate. I think when we share information, we attract attention to that topic. We get different sorts of feedback that range from interests, criticism, clarifications, suggestions and so on. I don't know but I even feel some people go further and do their own research.* GO5

It's in this sense that I see public relations' publicity activities fit in encouraging, either intentionally or unintentionally multiple diverse opinions which is central to the function of the public sphere (Hiebert, 2005).

6.3.4 Building up the symbolic capital of citizens; changing pre-existed ideas, improving capacity for participation

For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is a result of legitimising the other forms of capital. He defines it as "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu 1989: 17). Therefore, while Bourdieu described it alongside the other three types of capital, it comes as a result of the recognition of the other forms of capital. Simply put, any capital needs to be legitimised in order to acquire a symbolic value, for example, in terms of reputation, and prestige. Before articulating the forms of capitals in 1986, Bourdieu (1984: 291) defined symbolic capital as "a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability". In the case of my study, informational and social capital will not serve the political power of citizens unless citizens are legitimised as politically, intellectually and socially competent. It makes even more sense when we know that citizen engagement as in Oman Vision 2040 is among the first institutionalized activities aiming at national development and therefore

the first citizen experience of direct participation in national development plans. This puts citizens' competence and capability under question, for both the government and even citizens themselves. This is why Schugurensky (2000) identified attitudes as one of the factors that need to be considered in studying citizens' political capital for democratic engagement. Attitudes in this context mean the psychological features that affect a person's participation. For example, it may include "self-esteem, motivation, extroversion, endurance to accept defeat, persistence, patience, interest in political matters, inclination to participate in the political process and trust in the political system" (Schugurensky 2000: 435). It is also about a person's belief in his ability to influence decisions made. In political science, this is referred to as the "political efficacy" which means "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell et al. 1954: 187) as cited in (Craig and Maggiotto 1982). It includes internal (the person's perception that he is able to take part and affect policies) and external efficacy (the perceptions about the political system and its responsiveness to citizens' opinions and actions) (Craig and Maggiotto 1982).

In our context, to satisfy these two conditions, it is needed for the citizens to value themselves as competent participants and for the government to value the participation of citizens so that a feeling of responsiveness will be generated. The interviewees described this as change management and they believe in the role of communication in changing the previous ideologies about the Omani citizens who are previously seen as passive and incompetent for political participation. Change, in their view, also includes changing ideas about public communication and government engagement activities and therefore government-citizens relationship. This will be described under the two subsections below.

Changing the government's attitudes

As mentioned before, the responsiveness of the political system is important to the political efficacy of citizens. This cannot be achieved if the government actors are not used to the idea of engaging citizens. Therefore, a new culture of participation should be first, introduced and promoted among the governmental organizations. GO6 said:

> *The way in which we engage people in the preparation of Oman Vision 2040 can be described as a new culture, and you know like any change, there might be*

resistance to this change, communication plays a role in spreading the culture of participation and I believe Oman Vision 2040 initiatives have widely encouraged other organizations to follow the same style.

The participants described the communicative initiatives implemented during the preparation stage of Oman Vision 2040 as promoters of this participation culture. GO4 mentioned:

The goal of the vision is much deeper than solely promoting the government and its deeds, and the evidence is the increasing attention from all other organizations to the youth, women, and societal participation in general. Through the engagement in the Vision, we demonstrated the ability of the youth to discuss, which was believed by the other party (he means the governmental members) as not competent enough to give solutions.

GO11 gave a relevant example, explaining how through the engagement activities, people displayed their competence.

You may think that the 13 or 14 years old, has no experience and is unable to give solutions so, you think that it is not even necessary at all to take his opinion. However, the communicative initiative of Oman Vision 2040 was like a pulpit for all officials to see that these young people are capable and that they should be part of the decision-making. I remember how everyone was so impressed by a young student speaking about his suggestions to improve the education curriculum for secondary schools, speaking directly to the minister of education.

A question that comes to our mind is where public relations fit. Especially when we know that societal participation was a direct instruction from the highest authority in the country (Sultan Qaboos at that time) which means that everyone should anyway follow it. However, we should bear in mind that it was not easy to come all of a sudden and say to the governmental leaders that decisions are no longer centralized. GO2 said, in this regard,

Although the Vision development in consensus with the society was a direction from Sultan Qaboos, it was still not easy to convince ministers and other senior personalities that we will discuss everything with people. In fact, I don't blame them. It's not something they are used to.

GO4 gave an example when he said:

Some members were continuously asking what is the limit of the discussion with the public, we say no there should be no limit, everything can be discussed and this is why you can see, we discuss issues that we don't usually address in public and with citizens, like accountability, governance and transparency. These were not matters of discussion with the public in the past.

GO5 also said:

There should be a change in the mindset of the government organizations, everybody should know that we reached a stage where citizens need to know and be part of what is happening. And I think all the changes to many of the previous practices of the government communication, for example, reservation of information and the centralization of decision making, and also the change in the state's administrative apparatus have all contributed to a general change in public communication.

GO3 also mentioned:

You may have noticed since the introduction of Oman Vision 2040 communicative initiatives; many organizations have adopted the participatory style. More attention is given to youth, more participatory workshops and more information is made public to people. That's a positive change.

From another perspective and to understand the extent to which change management is seen by the government as a communication function, GO6 and GO8 have confirmed the establishment of a team in the Oman Vision 2040 Follow-Up Unit, given the title: 'change management team'. This new team works closely with the media and communication department to manage the change using strategic communication.

Now, we are creating a united team from both the change management (a newly established section in the unit) and the media and communication department. The result should come soon. GO6.

GO8 said, *there is a conflict of interests and conflict of opinions about what should we communicate and what should not, who should publicize and who should not, the change management unit came partly to solve this issue, particularly between the unit and the Ministry of Information.*

It is important to mention here that the public relations role is indirect, supported by the approval of their clients (Hodges and Edwards 2014), in our case the political authority. Once getting the approval, for example on introducing a public engagement style, only then public relations can work as intermediaries to get their messages across. As Hodges and Edwards (2014) noted, while public relations is criticized for working towards the self-interests of their clients (the authority in our case), their intermediary' practice (which focuses, in this case, on notions of engagement, empowerment, active citizens, and national development for everyone), can have an impact (for example on the overall field of the political environment in our case) and can challenge the pre-existing political and social norms (about government and citizens role in national development).

Changing citizens' attitudes

While the government's attitudes can help in increasing its responsiveness to citizens' inputs, it is equally important for citizens to value themselves and to trust the responsiveness of the political system. For this, the interviewees think that the communicative activities of Oman Vision 2040 have contributed to this through restructuring the government-citizens relationship, promoting participation as a national duty and organizing the engagement events in an empowering way. In a description of the organization of the "All of Oman" campaign, the largest public engagement initiative which travels around the country to collect citizen's opinions for the 2040 Vision, GO11 said:

> *During All of Oman, we designed the setting in a way that helped people from different backgrounds to sit together and connect with each other, no matter who is who, who is doing what.*

GO2 described this in more detail when noted:

> *We used round tables, in which a minister, a junior governmental official, an employee in the private sector, a job seeker, and a fisherman are sitting together, discussing an area of their interests, and coming together creatively with solutions. We actually opened the door for anyone to sit anywhere based on their interests.*

This can promote symmetrical relationships in the community, which Heath (2006: 106) described as only symmetrical if it reflects what he called "communitas", which means

promoting "the reality of community as transcending the structures and functions of individuals and organizations", in our case that the reality of community is not in the hand of ministers, or governmental organizations. This could contribute to citizens valuing their role as active participants in the development. GO7 said in an explanation of the slogan of the vision:

> *The vision with its slogan (moving forward with confidence) is a national umbrella for all of us and that's great, we did not specify who's doing this because we want to say that it is a duty and right to everyone to take part in both its development and implementation. Even in the evaluation.*

This also reminds us of the importance of public relations rhetoric as inclusive or exclusive which therefore may create or maintain a certain sort of power structure. Rhetoric in public relations can be seen as a strategy in itself used to "rhetorically adapts organizations to people's interests and people's interests to organizations by co-creating meaning and co-managing culture to achieve mutually beneficial relationships" (Heath 2001: 36). While it is mostly seen as "a strategy of the powerful, a form of control" (Hartelius and Browning 2008: 33), it can be used to suggest a change in the power structure. For example, public relations rhetoric is seen by the interviewees as a way to break the power distance, between different segments of the public, such as between ministers and citizens, educated and less educated and so on. The participants gave some explanations and examples about the use of empowering discourse. For example, they mentioned:

> *Our speech was targeting every single person in the local community. You know, usually, the welcome speeches in the events start by welcoming the honourable guests, like ministers and sheikhs, but this time we say... the people of the governance, Welcome to you all.* GO1

> *In our discourses, we always say, that development is for people and it is by people, and people here means everyone in Oman as long as they work towards public good.* GO7

> *It is such a huge change in my opinion, we don't have chairs in the front for the special guests, everybody sits at round tables with whoever, regardless of their positions. The speeches are directed to everyone, with no use of special long*

> *introductions and welcome words to certain personalities. These all give a sense of equality and partnership.* GO11

Such practices can, to an extent, encourage citizens to trust their value in participation and promote a trust that the government is changing its way of making decisions and encouraging people's participation. For GO9, it was a success as he described:

> *Although we receive sometimes negative comments from the public, the number of citizens taking part was increasing every time. At the final national conference in which the first draft of the Vision was to be released, many people wanted to attend. We had then to close the gates of the halls three hours even before the start of the conference.*

Having explained the three forms of capital (informational, social, and symbolic), which I argue are important to creating and maintaining citizens' political capital, it is important to say that these capitals are not isolated from each other. They are all affected by each other and can be converted into another capital. Following Bourdieu's idea that economic capital is the root of other capital in the economic-cultural field (Bourdieu 1986), political capital can be seen as a root of other capital in the political-social field which makes it mostly in the hand of the powerful. However, in light of the struggle over power, especially in countries in transition, it is fair to say that informational, social and symbolic values can help the least powerful group to politically strengthen themselves, which will help in, at least, entering the field as a start, before establishing themselves as a powerful active party. Many can indeed argue that PR is striving to serve the governmental interests and is directed to legitimise political authority, particularly in non-democratic societies. However, I argue, that even if PR is there mainly to serve the governmental interests, it may potentially serve citizens as doing PR can mean publicity, being more open, opening up dialogue and helping build networks. Therefore, I argue that while the short-term could benefit the powerful parties, the benefits to society, in the long run, should not be ignored. This includes the build-up of citizens' political power through all the forms of capital explained above.

With that being said, however, we need to consider a critical question: is it possible to accumulate political capital only on a symbolic level? That is; symbolic capital without the actual material of the political, social and cultural capital. Responding to this question can be difficult, especially when taking into account how engagement is understood in

the context of Oman. For example, in the previous chapter (Chapter 5), governmental officials described engagement as a result of the change in the social contract which needs to be done due to the economic and political pressure on the government. Also, they described engagement as a sort of local democratic act which is influenced by the historical, cultural, religious and societal context of Oman and therefore participation is practised differently, compared to the dominant model of democracy. In this sense, we need to equally consider that the loose definition of engagement and democracy makes it difficult to evaluate the reality of the political capital and whether it is symbolic only or can hold actual possession of capital, including, informational, political and social. That is also applicable to whether engagement is genuine or not. Answering such questions is difficult at this stage as longitudinal studies are required to be able to evaluate the situation.

With that being said, however, my intention in this work is not to adopt an overly optimistic perspective on public relations. Instead, I aim to outline its complex dual impact, wherein it can function as both a catalyst for democratic change while simultaneously advancing the interests of its affiliated organizations.

6.4 SUMMARY

In conclusion, public relations for engaging citizens in Oman Vision 2040 functions at both strategic and technical levels and has adapted itself to suit the need to develop an institutionalised participatory communication approach to mainly serve the aim of the vision. As we saw in Chapter 4, since 1970, PR has had a central function to help promote notions of national unity and national identity and therefore national development. As the country flourishes, so it communicative needs. In the current stage, the development efforts require a participatory approach toward the inclusion of citizens in national planning. Public relations in this sense can be seen as an intermediary work that mediates between government and citizens and helps in creating and promoting new social meaning, including, citizenship, empowered active citizens, participation and society's role in the development matter. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, I argue that public relations practitioners who worked as intermediaries in the political/ social field have also contributed to the strengthening of citizens' political capital while working for their clients (the government). The communicative engagement activities for Oman Vision 2040 have contributed to the citizens' political capital, which I understand, as the

collective informational, social and symbolic capital of a citizen that can accumulate over time, allowing for the political empowerment of citizens. While such engagement activities should be sustained to help citizens accumulate their capital, PR in our case has set the foundation which if continued in the same scenario will even strengthen the political power of citizens. Lastly, we should remember that all data in this chapter are built on the perspectives of the communication officials. Therefore, the argument made is to be cross-checked in the following chapter, based on citizens' perspectives to have a better picture of PR impact and limitations and the consumption process in general.

CHAPTER 7

THE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT MEDIATED BY PUBLIC RELATIONS: CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVES

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last two chapters, I described how citizen engagement and public relations are understood and represented by the governmental public relations officials and I described the potential roles that public relations, as an intermediary work, can play. The main findings reveal that engagement as a democratic act is practised in a way that suits the local context of Oman and is designed to achieve a local democracy that does not necessarily fit into the Western style of democracy which is used enormously as a benchmark in most of the academic and non-academic reviews. The analysis of the data also reveals that public relations work as an intermediary work to achieve this governmental philosophy of local democracy while facilitating citizen engagement. Public relations' mediation, however, resulted in empowering citizens, mainly through the creation and enhancement of citizens' political capital as I defined in Chapter 6. However, this analysis remains weak if not being tested by the other part of the story, the audience or the consumers (the Omani citizens in our case). In this chapter, therefore I aim to cover the last element of the theoretical approach used for this research; the audience, addressing the consumption part. The chapter aims to discuss citizens' understanding of the engagement, their views of their roles in the participation initiatives for nation-building and mainly their perceptions of the impact and outcomes of the engagement and government communication. It's important to note here that this is not a sort of evaluating or measuring the satisfaction level of citizens. It rather aims mainly at investigating the outcomes and impact of citizen engagement as a government communication practice from the viewpoints of citizens. Using the interviews data generated from the members of the general public (see Chapter 3 for a full description of the methodology), I aim in this chapter to test the findings stated above, allowing to make an argument about the role of public relations as an intermediary work for citizen engagement in the political context and situating public relations in democratization and nation-building theories. The main question of this chapter, therefore is:

What are the outcomes and impacts of the citizens' engagement activities for Oman Vision 2040 from the perspective of citizens?

Using a deductive approach to analyse the data from the interviews, I outlined the following themes as outcomes of engagement from the citizens' perspective (see Figure 9).
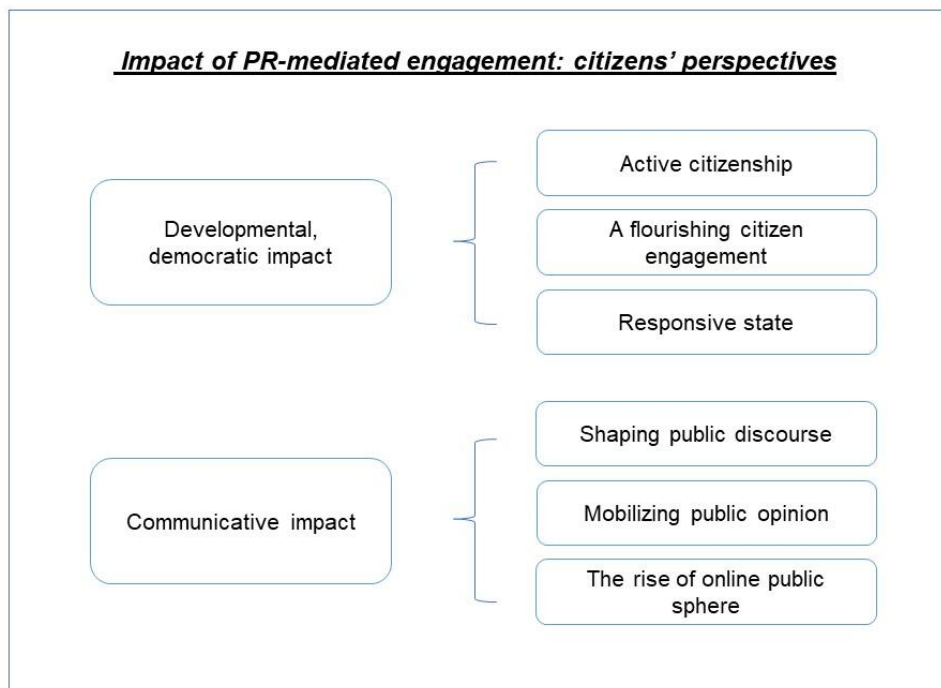
Figure 9 Impact of PR-mediated engagement, citizens' perspectives

7.2 DEVELOPMENTAL DEMOCRATIC IMPACT

7.2.1 Active Citizenship

The first outcome I identify from the thematic analysis is the impact of the engagement on the attitudes and capacity of citizens towards being active citizens. While most interviewees stated in a direct or indirect way that there has been a change to their understanding and attitudes of being both good and active citizens which has also affected their actions, there are few respondents who still feel passive. For example, C14 explained that most citizens are less interested in being involved because it should be the government which works for its citizens.

> *I think until today many of us feel powerless and less informed, maybe many are even less interested in what is happening in the country, especially in terms of financial management and developmental matters, you know it is like you have no camel in this fight [a local expression of no horse in this race]. For me personally, I don't care. I just want to get the basic living requirements which I think is the*

responsibility of the government. You know, this is why we have a government. It is their job. Why should I bother myself?!

This represents the sort of old social contract explained in Chapter 6 which seems still acceptable for some people. Similar to the perception of C14 is the perception of C18 who described the government *as the service provider* and citizens as the *customers.*

If you are a service provider, it is your responsibility to know what services the customers need and what will satisfy them so you can continue your business, it is not the customer's responsibility to tell you what to do.

This passive attitude of these two respondents contradicts the views of all the other respondents and it also contradicts most of the mainstream theories of public administration that are calling for changing the state-citizens relations to an approach which is more citizen-centric (Morse 2012). However, such perception is totally understandable and predictable, especially when referring back to the concept of the social contract explained in Chapter 5. Since the establishment of modern Oman in 1970, people have been used to this form of paternal relationship in which the government is offering all citizens' needs without taxation and the citizens are receiving but with no representation. The centralization and the power concentration in terms of making decisions for a long time, of course, has a deep effect on citizens' perceptions about their rights and obligations, their capacities and their interests. For some researchers, the political hierarchy and structure in Oman indicate a strong concertation of power in the hands of the few political elites, making some scholars like Al-Hashimi (2016) to describe the country as a power state, not a state of power. This research does not aim to confirm or contradict this hypothesis but rather aims to reveal another side of the story, representing the extent to which governmental communication strategy, represented by citizen engagement activities, can bring about developmental and democratic outcomes, in a non-democratic context. That is done regardless of the potential aims of these activities which could be seen as merely strategic propagandistic governmental tools to gain legitimacy. I believe that political maturity develops gradually and that the accumulation of political knowledge, attitudes and behaviours is a determinantal factor for a democratic transition. In this sense, most interviewees feel that the recent engagement initiatives have changed their understanding of how and what it means to be a good and active citizen. For example, C2 stated:

The continuous societal participation events for Oman Vision 2040, with less consideration of people's absolute impact on the decisions made, gives me personally a sense of belonging, a sense of being part and a sense of witnessing what's going on. Sure, I cannot evaluate what was exactly my contribution to the vision but it feels like I'm part of it. It makes me feel like an active person which is to me great.

This respondent highlights the importance of the person's attitude of being an active citizen which I think is significant, especially as a prerequisite to improving citizens' political efficacy in a state that is entering a new phase of political openness as viewed in Oman. Gaventa and Barrett (2012: 2402) in their work, suggested that one basic function of citizen engagement is the "development of greater civic and political knowledge, and a greater sense of awareness of rights and empowered self-identity, which serve as a prerequisite to deepen action and participation". Both knowledge and self-appreciation are important for improving the level of direct participation and its genuine impact. However, we cannot expect to have a real engagement from the first attempts which is indicated in the quote above when the respondents said: *sure, I cannot evaluate what was exactly my contribution to the vision.*

From another perspective, it seems that people not only recognise the change that happened in their attitudes towards being active, but they also recognise that the meaning of active and good citizen has changed. For C20, for example, the definition of a good citizen today differs from that perceived by people in the past.

To me, I think that making your nose clean [that is not intervening] worked well in the past, as I would say until a few years ago, but it is changing now, a good citizen today should be active, not anymore passive, should strive to be heard, should stay involved when called to, should express himself whenever, and wherever he could. That's what makes a good citizen.

This knowledge of being politically active has been also expressed by some other respondents. For illustration, C9 agrees with the previous saying.

For my grandfather and my father, it was not ok to say that this or that governmental figure is wrong or to speak in public about governmental misconduct, which is fine, because this is what they used to and maybe this is what the country at that time requires for its development. But it changed now, today

we are knowledgeable, we can provide good input and more importantly the government open the door in different ways for us to express ourselves, so why not?

Besides that, the engagement has helped to create a collective understanding in the community about the importance of taking part, being active and in the future probably taking action through disseminating a culture of participation.

I did not participate in any of the events for Oman Vision 2040. Honestly, I was not interested at all. But I think I know a lot about it. I've heard from some family and friends about how they got access and about their experience in participating and I think next time I'm willing to participate. C10

This tallies with the perceptions of the governmental officials explained in the previous chapter about the engagement role in disseminating a culture of participation. With all these positive outcomes at hand, we should not ignore the tension around the reality of being active good citizens and the governmental discourses about this concept. While citizens do acknowledge their role and their capacity to be active, some of them are still affected by the governmental rhetoric about it. For instance, when asked a follow-up question about what makes a good active citizen, C11 said:

I think you can be a good and active citizen. Good in the sense that you do not obstruct the basic rules and values of the country like the country's safety and security and the personality of the Sultan. But you can be active by entering discussions wherever possible, about the matters of development and by participating whenever possible.

Not obstructing the rules as described in this quote does nothing but prove the tension between the international description of active citizenship and the local national promotion of what makes an active citizen. This problematic debate is present not only in Oman but in other international contexts. For example, Janmaat and Piattoeva (2007) in their study describe this strain in Ukraine and Russia. However, in non-democracies, it is a more critical discussion because it could indicate a way of control where good citizens can be promoted as those who are loyal to the nation and obedient to the law, not those who are open to different opinions and could stand out for their thoughts. The following quote is another good example of understanding the level of people's capacity represented by how they understand being active citizens.

Active citizens, in a way that is suitable to the governance system of the country, could result in a more responsive government, a connection between people and communities and also definitely a more developed society. C2

While this respondent covers the possible benefits of being an active citizen, he made it conditional by being active in a way that suits the governance system of the country. It is clear that citizens understand the active role they could play by participating in national development. However, some of them may lack the self-trust, self-recognition and awareness of the various opinions that could go beyond the current political governance. One could attribute this either to the influence of the governmental rhetoric or the political immaturity or as described in Chapter 5 by GO7, the unique Omani personality, which then requires further studies to understand the correlations. However, taking this discussion into account, it is worth describing how citizens feel about the political system of Oman and democratization in general to make sense of the hidden attitudes that could be a reason for the responses reported in this chapter. Interestingly, the vast majority of the respondents describe that they are happy with the political system and that they don't want the sort of freedom and democracy which they see in liberal contexts. This is aligned with the local democracy concept described previously in Chapter 5 as a result of the analysis of the interviews with governmental officials.

I think we need some reforms to make the country better, we don't really want to have presidential elections and political parties and all the alleged freedom that we see in other countries. We just want some more reforms which I think are already happening, especially after Sultan Haitham took over the governance. We want the government to be responsible, more transparent and very important to fight corruption and manage natural resources in a better way. That's all that we need. C7

As an Omani person who is very involved in Omani society, I was not amazed by such a response, because from my own personal observation, whenever there is a discussion about politics and reforms, people will always make it conditional with peaceful movements and the preservation of the Omani culture and Omani values and also with respect to the Sultan. While Sultan Qaboos gained great loyalty from the Omani population because of his long service to the country and considering him as the main

builder of the country, Sultan Haitham now is going in the same direction, building the image of the reformer.

> *I think both leaders did their best. We know how much Sultan Qaboos has done for this country and now Sultan Haitham is also making great efforts to ensure reform and fight corruption in different fields and to take the country out of financial difficulty. C1*

Such sorts of ideas are there throughout most of the interviews. What I observed is that regardless of the respondent's opinions about the government, the politics and the engagement, most of them praised the rulers and some of them blamed the government which represents an executive body, not a legislative one, when it comes to the highly important decisions. This could be attributed to either a fear of saying anything about the personalities of the Sultans, a hypothesis that I exclude because I build a good connection with the interviewees to let them feel more comfortable, especially since these interviews are non-recorded which makes many of them critical in other concepts like speaking about corruption and the protests. The other possibility is that they are influenced by the governmental speech which according to Al-Hashimi (2016) promotes a fear that the end of the regime currently in power may result in terrible consequences, especially when benchmarking the consequences to what happened in many of the Arab countries, after the Arab Spring. This idea will be discussed further, in section 7.3.1 of this chapter. Additionally, there might be another possibility that since the establishment of modern Oman in 1970, only two rulers have taken over, which makes the maturity in this particular concept still developing and that this experience is also affected by the reality in the other neighbouring Gulf countries in which Oman is part of. All of these countries also follow the same system of inheritance of the ruling.

Having explained all of the interactions around being an active citizen, the respondents have highlighted some other crucial benefits for the nation-building of Oman. Besides facilitating being an active citizen, the other benefit is activating the whole community, making an active community as well.

> *I think the engagement in Oman Vision 2040 makes the whole of Omani society active, curious and awaiting what will be going on next. This is important because it puts pressure on the government to perform better and to achieve all the highly*

ambitious promises they made in the vision; which I think is super important. It could lead us to see therefore some wider societal participation. C8

Another respondent explained why the society's involvement and reactions have developed, using a comparison between Oman Vision 2040 and Oman Vision 2020.

Tell me what you know about Oman Vision 2020. It was planned by I don't know who made the plan and its period finished without being noticed by the society. It is obvious why it took a different direction now for Oman Vision 2040. First, there was societal participation and second, the media coverage is huge. And it is good. I think yes, it is for sure a promotion for its participatory approach but this in itself will make a good chance for people to question its implementation and ask for evaluation either in formal or informal ways. C3

From this quote, one could raise a question of how citizens in this context could question the conduct of the government. The respondents have interesting views about that, including, the expansion of the usage of social media, the influence on the mainstream media discussion and the shaping of the public opinions. These will be discussed below when addressing the communicative impact (see section 7.3). Generally, active citizenship may be taking a different route and version in Oman. Citizens may still have not acquired the full awareness of the potential of active citizenship. However, we cannot ignore the huge development in citizens' potential, awareness and attitudes towards being active which is crucial for developing citizen's political power and therefore stimulating more effective democratic actions.

7.2.2 A Flourishing Citizen Participation

The expansion of citizen engagement in terms of both its quantity and quality is also essential for making a better experience of citizen engagement and maximising its potential impact for nation-building and democratization. From the views of citizens, there is a flourishing citizen engagement, seen in terms of the increasing numbers of such initiatives by the government but also in terms of the improved versions of engagement activities. Many participants think that it is a noticeable and a good sign towards governmental openness and its willingness to involve citizens while some think that it is a governmental strategy and that they doubt the actual real effect of the increased numbers of participation events.

The expansion of participation events was one of the most mentioned effects, following Oman's Vision 2040.

I noticed that after the societal participation introduced in the 2040 Vision, many other governmental organizations started following the same approach. It is very noticeable but I'm not really sure why. Sometimes I feel it is a serious positive change in the way the government listens to citizens, other times I feel is just a show. I seriously don't know. C13

This respondent is not alone in his confusion. Most of the respondents do acknowledge the increase in participation initiatives. However, they vary in their understanding of the reasons behind this change which I think indicates a trust issue. Some of them think that the government is serious about listening to citizens. For example, C10 said

Well, I think it is a slowly progressive move towards bridging the gap between citizens and governmental institutions. Most citizens' complaints are directed to particular organizations. I think Sultan Haitham, from his own experience of leading Oman Vision 2040, I think he gave this instruction to everyone in the government to follow this approach. In this way, I think they are trying to find a middle area between people and the government.

Another respondent has an optimistic view that the expansion of citizen participation will lead to increasing citizens' agency and will open up the horizon for more real participation.

Look, for me it's an equivalent equation. Today it started with limited community participation, tomorrow you will need to add more advantages to increase its popularity, and the day after tomorrow you will be forced to provide a better level of participation. Otherwise, you will need to confront the people who are no longer weak but have become intellectually strong and behaviourally more willing to change. And therefore, either you offer a better form of engagement or you bear the consequences in the presence of qualified citizens. I think there is no way back once you start. C7

The quote above emphasizes two essential points which are both fundamental to nation-building and developing the political ground in any context. The first is about citizens' strength gained through their continuous participation in the sense of acquiring

knowledge and changing attitudes about themselves which reflects Anderson's (1983) idea of the imagined community mentioned earlier in Chapters 2 and 4. For Anderson, media can play an important role in shaping identity and building communities through the imagination of being part of a united national community. The engagement activity with all its material and communicative practices, could in the same way play an essential role in building, over time, the imagined power and agency of citizens. The second point is about the government's approach which cannot find a way back to its political closeness. It is as mentioned before that there is an international urge which puts all the political systems under pressure to introduce engagement in their governance systems and just as the respondent stated, once you start, you need to continue.

From another angle, about introducing a better version of participation, one respondent mentioned an example of how engagement has developed, reflecting on the increase of the responsivity of the higher authorities in the country.

> *I loved the "together, we progress" forum. It was an open gathering, attended by important governmental figures. I loved the direct and live interactions between citizens and governmental representatives. It reminds me of the royal tour performed by Sultan Qaboos. But this time it is live and more organized and it is open for anyone to register to attend. I think it is amazing and if such an approach continues, the effect will be great because governmental officials know they will be questioned in live settings and citizens know that they will have a chance to ask and to express themselves with fewer interruptions. C11*

The "Together, we progress" forum was conducted in March 2023, patronised by Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham, the minister of Culture, Sport and Youth and the Crown to be. The forum was attended by some influential governmental representatives to discuss some axes which are all derived from the basic axes of Oman Vision 2040. Three major axes were discussed which are: Oman Vision 2040 and its implementation and follow-up measures, the financial measures and the market and unemployment measures. All these are very basic to the discussion of the Omani population. It is important to note that The General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers has previously opened the receiving of requests to attend the forum to the general public through digital platforms and the applications were sorted according to sub-statistical methodologies that ensure complementary diversity by including different age groups, and academic qualifications,

including students, employees, employers, and job seekers. The forum represents a good sign of the progressive nature of participation in Oman. However, one should not ignore that some respondents are not convinced of all the engagement matters and think that all of this is nothing more than a show by the government

> *I did not participate in any of these events because I don't think they really want to listen to us. Maybe they want to show that they are listening but they are not really listening.* C6

Similar to the last quote, another participant indicated:

> *How does engagement affect real-life problems in our daily lives? Take the example of unemployment. It is one of the biggest issues in the country. How does engaging people affect this issue? I don't see any noticeable changes. Lots of promises in Oman Vision 2040 but what is the direct effect? Or are we going to wait until 2040 to start seeing the change? I mean there are urgent issues that do not wait for engagement or anything else. They are more important than all of these formal procedures.* C9

The last two quotes clearly indicate a trust issue between the government and citizens which is also acknowledged by some governmental officials as previously explained in Chapter 5. According to OECD (2009: 221), governments must follow up in order not to fall under doing "just for show" participation projects. Not following up as well as "conducting consultations or promising participation on issues that cannot actually be changed – solely in order to "tick the box" is necessary for governments to restore their citizens' trust. That can speak back to the quote by C9 about the reality of the engagement outcomes, especially in such issues where the governments cannot change the issue in the short term which may widen the trust gap between the two parties. While in this section, I argue that initiating citizen engagement could potentially mean expanding citizen engagement in a way that will be beneficial for the development and democratization of the country, the effect is not guaranteed. It is not only that citizens understand their capacity and are willing to take some steps towards the change, but it is also the government and the higher authorities and their work which should exceed engaging people in a formal way to one that is more genuine. It depends also on the government's capacity to accept the change and work towards it. As discussed in Chapter 5 about the

social contract in Oman, it is not an easy change for both parties, the government and citizens, and it needs time, effort, dedication and willingness to change from both sides.

7.2.3 Responsive Government

Another major outcome extracted from the interviews is the creation of a more responsive government. At first, it is essential to understand what it means for the government to be responsive and then to evaluate the aims behind the responsiveness of the government which could indicate both positive and negative implications to the political openness in the country. Responsiveness in its simple definition means responding to the preferences of the citizens. According to Manin et al. (1999: 9), the government is responsive if it "adopts policies that are signalled as preferred by citizens.". Following this definition, it is important to reflect on whether citizens' preferences are reflected in the policies made. The definition also indicates that the two actors involved in this dynamic are government and citizens. However, in a context like Oman, it is essential as a start to understand that the interaction is much more complex than a government responding to citizens. The political context of Oman should be studied as having three influential actors instead. The first and most powerful is the monarch (the royal family), especially the Sultan, who holds great power over policy-making and implementation and who holds control over the budget and the important decisions in the country. The second actor is the government (the bureaucratic) which serves as a tool through which the monarch publishes, plans and implements policies. And the last actor is the citizens who are the receivers of the goods and services provided by the government. Such dynamics make the evaluation of the responsiveness of the government to be a hard work which is interestingly understood by the citizens as I observed from the interviews. For example, C3 said

> *I cannot blame the governmental institutions, of course, they hold a degree of accountability but many basic influential decisions are made through royal decrees, making it hard even for the government to change or refuse. In this sense, I'm not saying that this is a system which I don't like but I want to say that there is sort of censorship on the government itself from the higher authority in the country.*

Citizens vary in their views about the effectiveness of this governance style. For example, C1 said

I think in all ways, there will be people who work for their own interests, regardless of the political system they work in. For example, in democratic countries, politicians and governmental actors sometimes work for their private interests or for their party's interest, not necessarily for citizens' benefits. it is like this everywhere. So, in my opinion, I think the royal family as the higher political party in the country is dedicated to working for the development of the country and therefore, I see that they serve as a monitor of the government actions which could prevent many corruption cases.

Most respondents are fine with the existence of the monarch as the most powerful political actor. Most of them have also expressed a sort of dissent, to the practices of Western democracy, considering it as a non-desired system for them.

We don't want a democracy that promotes the Western style of freedom. We want reforms to the current governance style which does not at mean that we want to be like America or any other Western country. C16

Another respondent also said:

In a democracy, there is no recognition of revelation or sanctification, and this is something that completely contradicts our religion and we cannot accept it. Democracy also claims absolute freedom, although I am certain that this is not true, but if we assume that it is true, then this is unacceptable. It contradicts our religion, culture and identity. C1

These thoughts about Western democracy align with the explanation of the local democracy described by the governmental officials in Chapter 5. However, the refusal of a particular political system (in this case the normative model of Western democracy) does not mean that people are totally happy and satisfied with the political system of Oman. The empirical data as well as the general scene in Oman today suggest a need for reforms that could mean a democratic transition which suits the culture and religion, a democracy that people find themselves in. Respondents, on many occasions, signalled directly and indirectly to the reforms they wish for, which interestingly does not include anything about the way the ruler is chosen. For instance, some think that more power given to the government will make ultimately better decisions.

I see no harm with the presence of the royal family but I think the actual decentralising and separating the Judicial and legislative power is a critical step for democratizing the country and sure for the country's development as a whole. C12

While it is beyond the focus of this thesis to evaluate the effectiveness of the political regime in Oman, it is obvious that evaluating the responsiveness of the government is a complex task. It is more like evaluating the responsiveness of the higher political party through the government that is more relevant in this case. This is observed greatly by anyone who studies the context of Oman. For example, in the 2011 protests, all the demands were raised by citizens to Sultan Qaboos himself directly. This indicates the awareness of the people that the change they wanted could come only from the Sultan himself and that was true. As a containment strategy, Sultan Qaboos has declared some royal decrees that deal directly with the citizen's demands, including stepping aside some higher governmental personnel as requested by the protesters and declaring employment opportunities (Valeri 2015). The government, therefore, could be seen as an executive body that helps to serve the planning body and perform the strategic plans of the higher authority.

With all this in mind, overall, as noticed from the interviews, citizens still do acknowledge the improvement of the state responsiveness which they notice especially after the ruling of Sultan Haitham which also synchronizes with the beginning of the implementation stage of Oman Vision 2040. People have explained this responsiveness in the form of three main features: a. increasing government transparency, b. increasing accountability and c. increasing interactivity. In terms of transparency, respondents refer to the change they noticed in how much information is revealed and also the kind of information revealed. Interestingly, all respondents, even those who seem so critical of the government have acknowledged the increased transparency in the country.

For example, C2 think that the engagement in itself is a sort of increasing the level of transparency.

From my experience as a participant in the "All of Oman" campaign, I think there was a reveal of information about the government plans which are represented by the 2040 Vision, I mean since when do we know about future plans? So, to me, I think this is in itself a big improvement.

Another participant supported the last quote when said:

I knew absolutely nothing about Oman Vision 2020. In fact, I did not know it existed until I heard about Oman Vision 2040 which indicates that there is a change. They are telling us now that they are planning. C8

Aside from the citizen participation, the respondents have given interesting examples of the remarkable change they observed in the transparency level. One of the prominent examples that was mentioned by some of them is publishing the annual plans and reports of each governmental institution, especially those with a direct impact on citizen's service. C20 said about that:

A major improvement in my opinion is making the annual plans and annual achievement reports available online. Access to information is the starting point for any other evaluation. C20

I personally agree with the last statement made by this respondent. Accessing information is a key, not only to evaluation but also to initially understanding and accumulating knowledge, which as I explained earlier in Chapter 6 is essential for the build-up of the informational capital which is necessary to the enhancement of citizen's political capital. Without information, people are limited in their actions. The revelation of information could also partly be a prerequisite to accountability. One of the major issues that people speak about is corruption and how the government deal with it and how accountability should be promoted so that corruption can be confronted. Many respondents have spoken about corruption as a major challenge to the country's development. C12, raised some interesting questions to explain the situation from his point of view.

In a country full of natural resources like ours, what could make a huge general debt like what we have for years now? What could make a poor population? What could make the unemployment crisis like what we have? From my point of view, it is corruption and the misuse of natural resources which also come as a result of corruption. And if the government did nothing about it, I think the country will keep going down. If people in charge do not feel that they will be questioned, then it will just go to the worst.

Some respondents brought to my attention that since Sultan Haitham ruled the country, more actions have been taken for the sake of promoting the culture of confronting corruption.

> *What I like is that recently, the government started to announce in public about the corrupt people, no matter what is their position. In the past, the rule was to let bygones be bygones, which I believe is a catalyst for corruption. I'm happy that it is changing now. That's the first step to combat corruption. C4*

It is worth mentioning here that the State Audit Institution has recently started since 2020 to share reports about corruption cases, including mentioning the names of the corrupts which is sort of new to the Omani society. The institution has begun also to share its annual reports on its website. The reports are accessible to anyone and they include information about the annual audit which includes reporting corruption cases. This is *"a huge advancement witnessed by the society since the start of Oman Vision 2040"* C3. Another advancement also is the assigning of spokespersons to the governmental ministries. It is a sign of the government trying to be *interactive, responsive and up-to-date with citizens' complaints and issues*, according to C15.

To C15, the spokespersons are needed for a healthy managed governmental speech.

> *With all the changes that are happening, many officials come out and declare about controversial topics that are directly in public concern, sometimes in an inappropriate way which results in huge negative reactions from people, especially on social media.*

The effect of spontaneous government communication will be explained in detail later in section 7.3 of this chapter. However, it is useful to bring this topic to attention here as assigning spokespersons is a sign of the increased level of government responsiveness but also the awareness of the government of the need for well-tailored, strategic responses to the public which could indicate an increased level of citizens' impact.

After all, one could question here whether this responsiveness is a sign of democratization or repression and whether it is used to be really transparent and authentic or just to be legitimate in the views of citizens. While this research does not aim to answer such questions, it argues that no matter what is the purpose of this responsiveness, and whether it is merely public relations' strategic effort to serve the government or the monarch's

interests, these actions do still form a base for the lay public to understand, accumulate knowledge, be better informed and engaged in a way that will empower them and eventually will allow them to have better actions. Simultaneously, it will also put the government in a race to develop its communication and engagement style for preserving its legitimacy and acceptability, assuming they making it to preserve their legitimacy which will also mean better versions of engagement. These actions do serve the democratization of the country and they work for developing the political landscape. However, if non ideally, the government pursue its passive way of communication or assumes that the public will be happy with the level of change that is implemented, that will form a big challenge for the survival of the government which has been identified by many scholars. For example, Abouzzohour (2021) suggested that the government of Oman is facing a real challenge of not introducing more political openness and better opportunities for citizens to be heard and genuinely engaged.

It is also interesting to note that, while researchers such as Gaventa and Barrett (2012) consider the increase in government responsiveness as a result of citizen engagement as witnessed mostly in democratic countries, others such as Grossman and Slough (2022) see that responsiveness could be equally seen in less democratic countries and that sometime, it could even exceed its democratic counterpart. Even though the context of this study is less democratic, the responsiveness is seen as improving, allowing better chances for the citizens to be better informed, connected and engaged. All of these are important for building the political capital of the citizens as described earlier in Chapter 6.

7.3 COMMUNICATIVE IMPACT

The participatory approach of the government has also impacted the wider communication environment. The dynamics of communication and citizen-centric communication (the bottom-up approach) have been affected, towards more open, transparent and empowering communication. The themes below are extracted from the interviews and reflect the communicative impact of citizen engagement.

7.3.1 Shaping the Public Discourse

The public discourse needs to be fed by news, information and discussions to take shape. Of course, the governmental communication through all its strategies, including citizen participation activities does aim to shape the public discourse in a favourable way to the

government. And this is what is mostly argued in the academic literature about governmental communication and public relations which cannot be denied. However, once an idea or ideology is passed to the public sphere, usually there will be a counter idea. The existence of these contrasted ideologies will have an impact on the knowledge and understanding of the people exposed to this public discourse. From the side of citizens, it was interesting that interviewees have proven this dynamic through their understanding of the government communication as striving to shape the public discourse and from another side, through the improving capacity of the lay public to produce counter-discourses, both of which are competing in the public sphere as will be described shortly in section 7.3.3. An interesting and relevant example was the one given by C7 who described the government rhetoric of safety and security.

> *In the media, we always hear about the safety and security of the country as the main asset of the country and the people. I agree that it is a priority and it forms the foundation for a peaceful nice life but I think it is being over-emphasised.*

Another respondent described the use of safety and security slogans as a persuasive act to help promote only peaceful movements if to be done.

> *I think this rhetoric is used with the intention of promoting the idea of a peaceful Omani man to prevent any unwanted action against the politics in the country.* C9

This contradicts the thoughts of the governmental official GO7 reported in Chapter 5 who described the Omani person as naturally loyal to his country and his Sultan no matter what and described that this is the unique nature of the Omani person. Now, this could be seen as a soft power used for more coercive actions in such a context. It is similar to the politic of harmony promoted by the Chinese government as described by Hagström and Nordin (2020). Public relations here is seen as a shaper of public discourse and as a soft power tool which was obvious in the last two quotes. In contradiction to the last two respondents, some other respondents have expressed their high appreciation for the safety and security of the country. For example, C16 said

> *Of course, we want some change, we want improvements to our living standards and everything but we thank Allah (the God) for the safety and security of our country. That's the most important thing.*

Another respondent goes even further to describe the situation in the region and compare that to Oman.

> *You see, the violent movements have resulted in terrible consequences, see what happened to Syria, Libya, and Egypt. They wanted to change for the better and look what happened. Hunger, poverty, conflicts, immigration and more violence. We do not want all of this.* C12

The use of this analogy has been studied by the researchers. For example, Al-Hashimi (2016) suggested that this rhetoric is used to legitimise the government, which is aided by the failure of the Arab Spring in most Arab countries. In this way, we could see public relations as a soft power tool used to reinforce the current power relations. However, one should not ignore that where an ideology is present, a counter-ideology will often be present. Looking at the mentioned example of the safety and security speech, some people acknowledged their awareness of this speech as stated in the quotes above. Second, some respondents have signalled the existence of a counter ideology as in the following responses.

> *In the informal setting, the safety and security thing has become a joke. It is widely circulated. I'm personally happy that I live in such a safe place. But we should exceed that. We should keep it up and do some more for people. We cannot rely only on safety.* C18

Another participant also said:

> *What could I do with safety, will safety feed me? Will it create my future? Will it give me a job? What could I do with safety?!* C6

This example has been given to describe how communication actions, even in less democratic countries, can contribute to shaping the public discourse, not necessarily as what is meant initially by the government communication. If we consider citizen participation in Oman Vision 2040, we will experience the same flow of information in the sense of an existing ideology and a counter one. The wide range of opinions about Oman Vision 2040 and all the citizen engagement initiatives is good proof of that (See Appendix B for the range of topics about the Vision discussed in X). That helps to amplify diverse voices which enriches the public discourse and therefore increases people's capacity to evaluate the situation, politically, economically and culturally. Perhaps this

could eventually challenge the dominant discourse. The existence of diverse competing accounts about Oman Vision 2040 is necessary for the rise of the public sphere. As explained earlier in Chapter 2, the public sphere can function effectively when multiple diverse opinions exist and "a public sphere in which multiple competing voices may be heard is central to the functioning of democracy" (Hiebert 2005; Sommerfeldt 2013). I will describe shortly the existence of the online public sphere in Oman. However, it is essential to stress here that it does not only exist in the online environment as all the respondents express that there is a huge discussion that is going on in the Omani communities about the vision, the government, the development, the citizen's concerns and so on. C10 said about that

> *Omanis are peaceful but they are fraught. Wherever you go today, you hear people speaking about all the plans and changes and the new decisions happening in the country. And they are all linked to a long-term future plan (Oman Vision 2040). people are not sure, many hope it will be positive, but many are not so optimistic. But it is the talk of the Omani street today.*

Another respondent also stated:

> *Because there is too much news about Oman Vision 2040. And all the governmental organizations and even the private sector, they all link their work to the Vision. Today any change, any decision, any policy is linked to the Vision. Of course, people will talk, will give their opinions and will form groups like some are with, some are against. I see this everywhere, in family gatherings, at work, and even when you go with your friends. The Vision is portrayed in a way as if it is the magical tool to solve all our problems. Sure, everyone will be interested. C7*

The description of this respondent gave an account of the effect of government communication on shaping people's talk and therefore the discourse in the public sphere. Not only that the lay public will discuss but it will improve their capacity to understand and analyse the situation. C12 indicated:

> *It is amazing how all the Omanis become experts in economics and politics, you can notice the change in the modes of discussion physically and online. People discuss the financial plans, they analyse, they give opinions, they talk about politics, accountability and transparency and all of this stuff which I think is kind of recent experience to our society.*

The potential of governmental public relations, regardless of its hidden motives, therefore is essential for diversifying and amplifying the voices, shaping the public discourse, and strengthening people's ability to discuss, evaluate and conclude. I hence, emphasize my argument here that public relations as a communication act with all its strategies, especially its participatory approach, can be well situated as a democratic enabler and as a potential changer of power relations, even in contexts where political openness and democratization are seen as elusive and far-reaching.

7.3.2 Mobilizing the Public Opinion

With all the changes in the public discourse and therefore public opinion, one cannot assume that a change will happen. Public opinion, if not mobilised, its effect of change might be limited. Mobilizing public opinion which could be simply described as influencing the general public to support a particular cause, idea or movement is crucial for evaluating the effect of communication at the citizens' level. Again, there are two competing sources for mobilizing public opinion, the government and the lay public, with the first holding much more power and resources. But this is not enough to assume that the lay public cannot mobilise public opinion. In Oman, the government with all means of control, especially with the huge media control, and all the other persuasive communication activities can shape, control and mobilise the public opinion towards the beliefs, attitudes and actions that support the legitimacy of the political authority. However, as mentioned above, citizens can be active and they can mobilize public opinion and be part of the political forces. We should remember though that mobilising public opinion can be gradual and slow and perhaps require persistence and determination. Mobilizing public opinion, as per the interviews, can take different forms, for example, raising awareness and educating the lay public about the development plans, citizens' rights and governmental conduct which is happening through people's discussion either in reality or in the virtual environment.

> *There is an increasing culture of politics among people in Oman. People discuss a lot now about their concerns and the issues they care about. They question things and so on. Today, you search on Twitter [known today as X], it is full of political discussion. C19*

Feeding the public sphere with such discussion is crucial for mobilizing public opinion. The government publishing or engaging people about political and development matters

is a catalyst for people's discussion and therefore could result in increasing the political efficacy of people and in a more crystallised public opinion.

> *You know, sometimes I find it a funny thing when the government publish something and then most of the comments are negative. I mean if they stay silent it is better for them because they open people's eyes to them and they in this way encourage people to speak about something that otherwise may not be visible to people. C4*

It is like the more you talk, the more responses you will get. But that's important to mobilize public opinion and affect the views and sentiments of people. On the other hand, the respondents gave an example of a citizen movement which they think was a result of the public opinion charged with anger and dissatisfaction, fed basically by the discussion on social media.

> *The situation is changing, people do not only talk, they also act. The 'Suhar rising up' protest is a good example. For years and years now, Omani youth have been suffering from unemployment. They discuss a lot, they raise their grievances many many times, they receive many many promises, they discuss a lot on social media and finally, they go in the field to express their dissatisfaction and peacefully ask for their basic right of employment. This movement has passed with little effect. But we cannot anticipate what the next movement will look like. C20*

'Suhar Rising Up' was a peaceful protest that was held in the city of Suhar in May 2021. The protesters demanded employment and improved living conditions. This protest coincided with the beginning of the implementation of Oman Vision 2040, raising a red flag for one of the most critical challenges (the unemployment crisis) for the success of the Vision as identified by the researchers and political experts. One respondent highlighted this tension when saying:

> *If people hoped that the 2040 vision will improve their living, they would not have gone out to protest (he talks about the 'Suhar rising up' protest). The most important thing is that this is a vision for the next 20 years. Will the youth be patient for all this time so that the government can work to improve the economic situation so they will get jobs? C17*

Such discussion as I noticed from the interviews and my observations of the sort of discussion on the social media platforms, especially on X, as well as the discussions spreading in the society have a great effect on people's minds and therefore actions as seen in the "Suhar Rising Up" protest. However, the respondents have identified a major challenge to the mobilisation of public opinion and the creation of a healthy public sphere. The absence of free independent media for some respondents hinders the citizens' movements and helps the government to maintain a status quo in society. For example, regarding the 2011 protests, one respondent criticised the kind of news published in the mainstream media which he called the politicized media.

> *Our problem is that we do not have free media, it is a politicized media that serves only the government. During the protests, they were silent and when they reported, they only reported that there were destructive behaviours and that the people were not happy with them. They focus on harming the safety and security of the country which is rejected completely. And they totally ignored the peaceful acts of the protesters that stayed for days. They ignored all the demands, they ignored everything else and who knows who sent those vandals so that the media could find a way to represent the protest and the protesters in such a negative way and to legitimise arresting of some of them. C15*

This respondent has summarised the result found by Moza (2019) in her PhD thesis written about the media coverage of the 2011 protests. It is more than ten years now and the media control scenario does not change. What has changed, however, is the increased number of Omani people using social media, their increased capacity to report news from their own perspective, and their increased capacity to discuss, analyse, write and publish using the online environment. This has resulted in the rise of online citizen journalism and the flourishing of the online public sphere in Oman as will be discussed in the following section. The active feed of news and discussions on social media has made these platforms to be sources of information for many Omanis, which can potentially change the public discourse, previously dominated by governmental-fed information.

> *I opened Oman TV only for declarations of Holidays and so on but for such news about reality on grounds, I use Twitter. In there, ordinary people report, I believe them more. C5*

People have found alternative ways to receive the news which may affect their views of the issues and realities around them and therefore may eventually mobilise public opinion in a way that is favourable to the lay public.

7.3.3 The rise of the online public sphere

The absence of civil society due to governmental restrictions as well as the existence of controlled media outlets did not stop Omani people from expressing themselves and being part of the political discourse. In Oman, where approximately 70% of the citizens are aged under 30, this emerging new environment catalysed a rapid societal transformation, particularly following the wave of protests in 2011 (Windecker 2019). The interviews reveal that Omanis are to a great degree reliant on social media, especially Twitter (X), as a platform through which they can express their opinions, criticise certain aspects of the governance, provide suggestions and importantly form networks and groups of either opposition or agreement.

> *People like to use Twitter, either for reading commentaries from other people or to write their own thoughts. I think despite the increasing amount of public participation events that has become like a trend for the government in recent years, I think people do still feel like they are left out and many feel that these events are not authentic enough. I mean many feel that participation is pointless and they instead prefer to express themselves in a less controlled place like on social media. C19*

This quote provides a crucial understanding of how citizens comprehend their rights to be engaged in the political discourse and the alternative way they have chosen to prove their existence and worthiness of being noticed, as active party. To some participants, the culture of hashtags has been significant in empowering the Omani public, gathering them around a particular cause, sharing information about it and asking for changes. The interviewees have spoken about different examples. One example was when the undersecretary minister of oil and gas declared in a statement that the increase in the oil price would be only the same as the price of shawarma [a sandwich] per month.

> *Is it reasonable for an official to come out to the public with a silly comparison like this: the oil with shawarma price?! It was not strange that people went crazy and they launched a hashtag to express their dissatisfaction and anger. Some used*

it to make fun of him, some used it to express their disrespect as such a statement is insensitive to the poor. C13

Online power has two important effects in such contexts. The first is empowering people and the second is changing the communication landscape, allowing therefore for potential change in the political environment. Evidence of that is that the government has adopted strategies to respond and react to people on social media, increasing therefore the reciprocity of the government. For example, as a response to the digital trend to use online communication, Oman Vision 2040 widely used social media as a tool of publicity and a tool for engagement as described in Chapter 6. Given the interactivity features of social media and the little control the state has on social media, this publicity opens up the discussion. It allows citizens to express their opinions freely in the reply section, for example. Public relations, in this case, through disseminating information, contributed to making conflicting interests and values known to the lay public, allowing them to position themselves in the discussion and take part in the civic engagement, which is also necessary for the build-up of the social capital (Yang and Taylor 2013).

A variety of views, suggestions, criticisms, praises, and opinions can be found in the reply section of the official Twitter account @OM-2040 (the official account of Oman Vision 2040). Just as an example, not a comprehensive list, in response to a tweet by @OM-2040 that says: *"Oman Vision 2040's national conference is ending now, but we will continue to receive your views about the initial vision document for two weeks. We will continue drawing Oman's steps towards the future together",* a variety of replies that carry the public sentiment towards the vision, and their views and suggestions can be found. Some interesting examples of the replies under this tweet are:

> *"I suggest getting rid of the abhorrent centralization and activating the role of citizen's censorship over the performance of the government and allocating a free media platform through which people can express their grievances".*

> *"We need to grant full power to Majlis Al-Shura (the consultative council), saving the public money and most importantly is the implementation, implementation, implementation of the Vision".*

> *"Do you guys believe it? It is all hypnosis for your minds".*

"If you are serious about it, I doubt, take the advice of the Singapore prime minister: fight corruption first".

"You plan for 20 years ahead! and you do not know how to manage issues of one year!! Study well for our children's future, though I am sure they will live the suffering we are living today".

These tweets are some examples of how the lay public responds to the governmental announcements on Twitter and it proves the creation of the online public sphere in which multiple competing voices can be presented. Also, the sort of discussion seen in the above tweets is really interesting and it proves the complexity of the context of this study (Oman). It's important to know that a lot of the PR literature is based on European or American models which presume a democracy. Oman's case is very interesting for speaking back to such literature because it's a complex case in a non-democratic country. It's clear that Oman is in a rather different position as citizens don't have the direct opportunity to change a government through voting. Yet at the same time, it seems that citizens speak quite freely and criticise certain aspects of the governance in Oman.

From another perspective, people are not passive. They do initiate a bottom-up sort of communication. They can create their own discussion, and that is important for the development of "pluralism of values" (Moloney 2004), which is important for citizen's empowerment and, therefore, democracy (Hiebert 2005); (Sommerfeldt 2013). An example of this bottom-up communication is that citizens took it further and led discussions about a variety of issues and themes relevant to Oman Vision 2040 in a popular hashtag #Oman-vision-2040, opening space for public debate. Another interesting thing is that people started to use X (Twitter) to form collective opinions and respond to the government. For example, on the 8th of June 2021, there was a trending hashtag which was created to respond to a senior governmental official who said in an interview on Oman TV that: "Oman Vision 2040 aims to achieve an individual income of 26,000 OM (67546$) by 2040). The sarcastic hashtag become a trend in Oman and people express their opinions not only about this announcement but also about the Vision in general. One interviewee spoke about this hashtag which was launched as a response to a statement by one of the officials working in Oman Vision 2040 when he declared that the 2040 vision aims for per capita income to be 26,000 OMR. C15, said

I like to read people's reactions after some statements from the government. It is funny. Isn't it? They don't know what to say. People in the government initiate sensitive discussions to the citizens. As you may remember, the declaration made by a governmental official that the Omani individual income will be 26 thousand OM in 2040. What is this? This is a vague and reckless statement that does not take into account people's current circumstances, such as the suspension of promotions, the crisis of job seekers, the high prices, and the drop in the economic situation of people in general.

From my personal observation of this hashtag, the hashtag which was created in June 2021 was linked to the popular hashtag #Oman-Vision-2040. The reactions of people ranged from criticising the communication style of the government and evaluating the transparency level to some responses which consider such announcements as foolish to others who are sceptical of Oman Vision 2040. People also used this statement to evaluate the potential aims of the Vision and the chance of its success.

Another evidence of the change in the political power is the increasing citizen's bottom-top discussions and movements. Sohar rising up which is mentioned above is a good example of a citizens-led-movement, which was facilitated by the discussion of the crisis of job seekers on social media. People used Twitter, in this case, as an arena to express themselves and form connections with others with similar interests. Pieczka (2019: 239) called this type of public 'the self-organized public' which she defines as "a collective constituted at both subjective and intersubjective levels by individuals directing their attention to ideas that flow through public discourses and are concerned with things that people care about".

From another angle, when diverse opinions are present, those with an established power like states and business organizations are challenged Moloney (2004). It does not, however, have to be in the empowered space. The lay public here finds the public space through social media as a safe environment to freely discuss whatever matters they want to raise with no previous predefined agenda. However, these ideas can be transmitted from the public space to the empowered space and may then have more possibility to affect decisions. C4 who had an experience participating in one of the engagement events for Oman Vison 2040 greatly supported this idea when described that he was influenced by the discussion on social media which forms the base for his contributions.

To be a good participant, I think you need a certain level of knowledge and an ability to be critical and also an ability to express yourself in a way that will be acceptable. I think, for me, because I'm a regular user of Twitter, I think I have lots of information about the different issues Omanis are facing which are in many times beyond my own experience. Indeed, I used them as inputs for my participation. C4

Another respondent also explained that he was affected by the job seekers suffering which let him move it to the discussion table during his participation.

I have my job secured, but I know how much suffering unemployed people are living, you could read on social media, it is heartbreaking stories we read every day about these people. So, the main issue I discussed during my participation was the job seekers issue. C2

In this sense, the online public sphere can be seen as a contributor to challenging the existing power relations, changing the status quo and changing the political communication environment, for both sides, the government and citizens. This could to a degree, lead to increased civic engagement in the country. With the help of social media, citizens are better connected, better informed and actively participate in the political discourse. That all proves the increasing political capacity and efficacy of the Omani citizens and increasing political capital as explained in Chapter 6. On one hand, the changing culture of communication and globalization contributed to this increased political power, but on another hand, it is government communication and public relations that facilitate it, while it is working to enhance the legitimacy of the government. Discussions, campaigns and calls for actions that happen in social media, eventually flow to the real ground, mobilizing the citizens from a position where they only observe to a position where they take part and become important stakeholders in the decision-making process.

7.4 SUMMARY

The findings of this chapter reveal a great consistency with the main findings discussed in the last two chapters. Using different terms, and expressions, I found that citizen engagement managed and mediated by the government communication (governmental public relations) has helped to empower citizens politically while at the same time preserving the understanding of democracy as a sort of system which can be tailored in a

way to suit the local culture, identity and religion of Oman. In addition, I argue here that public relations is definitely a representative voice of the government that affects the perceptions of people. However, in doing so, it still brings some positive impacts as discussed in this chapter. While there are some gaps between what has been expressed by the governmental officials to that of citizens, represented mainly in transparency, accountability and trust issues, I argue that engagement as a governmental communication practice facilitated and mediated by public relations promotes some positive outcomes, even in less democratic countries and even if it is potentially targeting to achieve governmental interests. However, the outcomes vary based on the level of political openness of the country. The outcomes in less democratic countries differ from those expected in democratic contexts. While a higher level of inclusiveness, responsiveness, accountability and transparency could be seen as the prospective outcomes, in non-democratic contexts, the impacts are basic to the democratization and citizens' level of involvement (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). The outcomes, as seen in the context of this study, include raising citizens' attitudes towards being active citizens, improving and sustaining the practice of engagement and developing, mastering and diversifying the communicative tools and techniques by both parties (the government and citizens). This chapter does not only emphasise the findings of the previous chapters but it speaks back to the PR literature which is overwhelmed by the discussion of engagement practices and experiences in democratic countries, highlighting the significance and the impact of PR in mediating citizen engagement in less democratic countries and therefore in nation-building. It is important to remember that the outcomes of engagement "emerge from, and reflect community based values. These outcomes therefore can be measured by the collective social benefit from being involved in the process. Community outcomes of social-level engagement can also be conceptualized as an empowerment construct as it places the community at the centre of community engagement processes and allows measurement of how community members have benefited" (Johnston 2018: 28). The emphasis is on the collective social benefit that engagement generates, which may not always result in a direct impact on decision-making, aligning with Yang et al. (2016: 156), who state that one advantage of engagement is that individuals can "engage in relationships with all sorts of economic, social, and political organizations".

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis has investigated the functions and roles of public relations in mediating citizen engagement for nation-building in Oman. Oman Vision 2040, one of the most prominent national development projects in the current and future period, has been selected to serve as an instrumental case study through which the perspectives of governmental officials and citizens about citizen engagement and public relations have been examined. In this study, I mainly employed a qualitative data collection method as described in Chapter 3. I conducted interviews with two main categories; governmental officials and citizens. The findings of the thesis reveal an optimistic view of the potential roles that public relations, as intermediary work in citizen engagement, play in nation-building and democratization, even in less democratic settings as explicated in the last three empirical chapters. The thesis has built on and hopefully, with valid evidence has situated itself in the broader critical debate about public relations' role in societies, particularly in nation-building and democracy. The thesis has departed from the predominant Western-based debate to a new context that is far away from the Western political, economic and social experience. Choosing Oman as a non-democratic, with a rentier-based economy and religiously, culturally and socially conservative country as a context of this study, is hoped to be an addition and support to the literature that claims the positive impact of public relations in societies. At the same time, it is also an attempt to de-westernise the public relations literature which lacks, to a degree, the understanding of public relations practices on the international scale (e.g. Culbertson and Chen 2013; Sriramesh and Verčič 2002). Interestingly, the findings of this thesis show that despite the political, economic and cultural features that differ greatly among different contexts, public relations, through its strategic, informational and relational functions could play an influential role in facilitating social change, with or without being intended. And that is vital for nation-building and democratisation. The details of the key arguments will be discussed shortly in this chapter. Divided into three parts, this chapter will cover; a summary of the key arguments made in this thesis, the scholarly contribution to public relations literature, the research limitations and recommendations for future research.

8.2 SUMMARY OF THE KEY ARGUMENTS

The overarching research question for this study as stated in Chapter 1 is: How does public relations mediate citizen engagement for Oman's nation-building? In addressing this question, my examination revolves around three dimensions: citizen engagement, public relations, and nation-building, intersecting with the concept of democracy at different stages. Consequently, I examined these notions from the perspectives of government and citizens. In this section, I start by presenting the overarching thesis argument in the subsequent paragraph, followed by a summary of the three key arguments that respond to the research sub-questions articulated in Chapter 1.

In this thesis, I argue that public relations, as an intermediary work, assumes crucial roles in the context of nation-building, particularly within the realms of social and political change. The thesis suggests the dual nature of public relations impact in which it serves as a tool used by the government for its benefits, yet at the same time contributes to greater citizen agency. In Oman, public relations, represented by government communication has served as a facilitator of nation-building, by contributing to what Anderson (1983) called the Imagined Communities. Through its communication strategies, PR has worked as a mediator in creating national identity and unity in Oman since 1970. While it was featured mainly by a one-way communication approach, as the country developed, its communication style developed into a participatory approach. In Oman, citizen engagement may not mirror the democratic features seen in Western countries, however, it is evolving in a way that is suitable to the local context according to the empirical data. Also, engagement is adhering to the normative communication practices such as active listening, dialogue, two-way communication, and mutual understanding. These communication values form the foundation upon which public relations, as a communication practice, can employ its influence and contribute to shaping citizen engagement and its impact. I argue that citizen engagement facilitated and mediated by public relations has achieved many benefits. First, public relations, in this context, serves as a facilitator for raising the political capital of the Omani citizens, a vital component for reinforcing their political efficacy which is a prerequisite to facilitating political and social change. Second, this mediated engagement has paved the way for democratic and developmental advancements, fostering changes from both the citizens and the government sides. Lastly, it also facilitates a shift in the communication dynamics in Oman. This shift is marked by increased two-way exchanges and a shift from top-down to bottom-up communication patterns. Consequently, this has facilitated the proliferation

of public opinions and cultivated an enriched communication environment, a prerequisite for stimulating social change within any society. In this sense, the engagement has contributed to a sort of citizen control by introducing a transformative potential (Pretty 1995), in this case towards political openness and empowerment. However, I stress that while this transformative potential is present, it may or may not change the standing distribution of power; something that Pretty (1995) acknowledged in his typology of participation: the self-mobilization as described in Chapter 2. These arguments will be explained further as I summarise the three key arguments below.

8.2.1 Citizen engagement in Oman; Beyond the dominant Western political paradigm, embracing the normative communicative values

The first research question: "What does citizen engagement in Oman look like, and how does it influence the normative communication values associated with engagement?", intends to provide an articulation about citizen engagement in the local context of Oman which is crucial for setting the foundation for investigating the subsequent research questions. Chapter 5 of this thesis was dedicated to answering this question, mainly from the perspective of the government. However, some reflections from citizens' perspectives about engagement have also been discussed in Chapter 7. As I started to analyse my data, the first challenge I faced was realizing that defining engagement was not an easy task, as it involves intersections of political, governance, and communication perspectives which though vary in their focuses, remain deeply interconnected. The interviews' data navigate thoroughly between these three dimensions. The political dimension tends to focus on the overall politics of the country, the government-citizens relations and citizens' role in shaping policies and decisions. The governance framework focuses on the infrastructure, either tangible or intangible, to allow for institutional and meaningful engagement. The communication dimension tends to focus on the mechanisms of ideas exchange, channels for feedback, issues of transparency, access to information, and inclusion to facilitate meaningful dialogic interactions. The first thing I had to tolerate is that these concepts cannot be separated if to understand the complexity of engagement in Oman. This is why Chapter 5 specifically, but also all the other chapters keep navigating between ideas relevant to these concepts while focusing on the communicative aspect which forms the core of public relations practices studied in this research.

The analysis of data as described in Chapter 5 reveals that although the political landscape in Oman differs greatly from the democratic model, featured mostly by elected governments, engagement has emerged as a vital element of governance. Government officials perceive engagement as an important practice to develop political participation in the country, yet at the same time does not necessarily aim to replicate the Western style of democracy. Citizen's views as seen in Chapter 7 support to a great extent this perception. This viewpoint arises from a complex set of factors, including Oman's deeply rooted conservative culture, the unique identity of Oman and its people and mainly the influence of Islam, which often contradicts many of the normative conditions of democracy as practised in the West. Rather than seeking to match the Western systems, the data reveals that Oman's approach to engagement adapts to its distinctive socio-cultural context, acknowledging the value of participation while preserving the cultural and religious values that are integral to Omani society. Having said that, it was interesting to notice such a comparison between the Omani system of participation and the Western style in the interviews data from both segments (government and citizens). This in itself indicates the undeniable dominance of the Western style of democracy (the American model in particular), not only in the academic literature but also in the mindset of people. Its dominance is not only in the way it is often portrayed as the ideal system but also in how it has become a benchmark against which other political systems are measured as seen in Chapters 5 and 7. This dominance has led people to use the Western model as a yardstick, even when they intend to legitimise or describe the validity of their political system. However, this at the same time indicates an understanding of the different unique political systems and democracies that might fit different localities and that support to a great extent the debate which suggests that one size does not fit all (e.g. Cleary 2018; Gilley 2009; Önsoy and Gürol 2018; Youngs 2015). The argument regarding local democracy presented in this thesis aligns greatly with the arguments made by Lu and Chu (2021: 2-3) about participation and democracy, which they summarised in four points: "(1) people hold distinct understandings of democracy, (2) popular conceptions of democracy are significantly shaped by socio-economic and political contexts, (3) such varying conceptions generate different baselines for people to assess democratic practices and to assess their views of democracy and (4) such distinct conceptions also derive political participation in different ways".

The data also reveals that engagement in Oman became a necessity due to some factors, including the change in the social contract, the new audience, and the emergence of a new communication landscape. The traditional social contract, explained in Chapter 5, which primarily relied on state provision of services in exchange for citizen loyalty, has undergone significant shifts in recent years. As societal expectations evolve, citizens are increasingly seeking a more participatory role in governance and decision-making. Additionally, Oman has witnessed a demographic transition with a growing youth population that demands greater inclusivity and responsiveness from the government. In parallel, the proliferation of digital media and communication technologies in the new era has enabled citizens to access and disseminate information more freely. As these forces converge, citizen engagement becomes not just a necessity but a powerful instrument for adapting to the changing dynamics of governance and society in Oman.

Within the framework of local democracy, communication normative values, including active listening, meaningful dialogue, transparency, and inclusivity (Kent 2013; Taylor and Kent 2014) remain present and continue to evolve. It is important to admit that Oman faces challenges related to the level of transparency and inclusion in its governance system as signalled by some interviewees in Chapters 5 and 7, coupled with issues of trust between the government and its citizens, especially after the 2011 protests. However, it is equally noteworthy that Oman has been experiencing a significant evolution in its approach to these matters. The ongoing transformations, including citizen engagement efforts, demonstrate such evolution. While there is still room for improvement, the progress in Oman's citizen engagement suggests a future where transparency and inclusion could continue to evolve, ultimately fostering a more responsive relationship between the government and its citizens.

8.2.2 Public relations; a catalyst for empowering citizens through fostering their political capital

After elaborating on the role of public relations in the different stages of Oman's nation-building since 1970, as detailed in Chapter 4, and offering an articulation of engagement in Oman in Chapter 5, I turned the attention to the second research question: What does public relations in the context of Oman and particularly for Oman Vision 2040 entail? And what is the role and impact of public relations in mediating citizen engagement for national development? These two questions are answered in Chapter 6 from the

perspectives of the government but have been crosschecked in Chapter 7 from the perspectives of citizens.

The first part of the question: What does public relations in the context of Oman and particularly for Oman Vision 2040 entail? aims to address the production process and evaluate the occupation of public relations from the perspective of its practitioners. In recognising the everyday material practice, we can identify the possible impact of the profession (Moor 2008). Drawing upon the interviews' data, I started Chapter 6 by providing a general picture of what public relations is and how it works in Oman. While this might appear as a fundamental task, it is significant for comprehending the impact of public relations in this specific context. This importance stems from two key considerations. First, there is a misconception regarding the nature and scope of public relations in Oman, a matter that has been noted by several scholars (e.g., Al-Hinai 2012; Al-Qamshoi 2015; Al-kindi 2019) and has been approved in this thesis. This misinterpretation has led to confusion surrounding the definition of public relations, its operational boundaries and everyday material practice. Second, in a country categorized as authoritarian within the global context, questions arise regarding the role that public relations can play in its political environment. Thus, providing a comprehensive description of public relations within this specific context assumes significant relevance. This is particularly true when we reflect on the findings in section 8.2.1 of this chapter about the complex political system of Oman and engagement as a local democratic act.

In Chapter 4, I argued that public relations in Oman, known mostly as government communication, has held a prominent role in nation-building since the establishment of modern Oman in 1970. Adapting to different contextual demands, the roles of public relations have changed and progressed in a way that I argue is important for the nation-building of the country. For example, public relations, represented by the government communication efforts as described in Chapter 4, has played an influential role in developing the national identity and national unity and setting the foundation for the development process in the country, playing mostly a development communication role (mainly one-way communication) which is consistent with many of the scholarly work describing the role of communication in development (e.g. Beiner 1999; Marsden 1990; Schramm 1964). However, as the country flourishes and the economic and social life changes as described in Chapter 5, there have been demands for a more participatory approach which simultaneously affected the role of government communication, its

functions and therefore its impact on nation-building. The public relations practice, while adapting to different nation-building demands, performs functions that align with those identified in the literature of public relations (e.g. Bowen 2010; Ledingham 2006). As I identify in Chapter 6, these functions span both the strategic and technical ones and encompass five dimensions: informational, relational, strategic, organisational, and social media management.

With the functions described above, the second question that becomes relevant is: what is the impact, especially in a context like Oman featured by a political system described as a closed one (Koch 2013a) as explained in Chapter 1.

In the second half of Chapter 6, the analysis of the interviews helps to make an argument about the potential role and impact of public relations in the context of engaging citizens, from the government perspective. My argument here is supported by the theory of cultural intermediaries by Bourdieu (1984). Unlike Bourdieu's analysis which is based on the economic-cultural field, I took the same concepts but with applications on the political-social field. Based on the themes outlined in Chapter 6, I argue that public relations professionals who worked as intermediaries within the political and social domains have also played a role in enhancing the political capital of citizens while working on behalf of the government. The concept of citizen's political capital, in my interpretation, encompasses the informational, social, and symbolic capital possessed by citizens, which facilitates their participation in national development efforts. The political capital has been facilitated by the communicative initiatives carried out during Oman Vision 2040. While it is important to sustain engagement practices to enable citizens to further accumulate their political capital, the foundation laid by public relations has helped strengthen citizens' political power and disseminating a culture of participation in the country.

8.2.3 Mediated Citizen Engagement: A nexus of democracy, development and enhanced Communication

The previous analysis remains weak without considering the other side of the story, the audience or consumers, which in this case are the Omani citizens. The last sub-question: What are the outcomes and impacts of the mediated citizen engagement for Oman's democratization and nation-building? aims to address the citizen's perspectives. Utilizing interview data, the main goal of this question is to validate the previously stated findings,

enabling to building of a well-supported argument, verified by both the government and citizens. Chapter 7 of this thesis offered mainly an articulation of the outcomes of engagement and government communication from the perspectives of citizens. It's important to mention here that it is not an evaluation of citizen satisfaction level but rather an exploration of their perspectives on the outcomes and impact of the engagement as a government communication practice.

The findings deducted from the interview data align closely with the primary findings discussed in the previous two arguments. While citizens used different terminologies and expressions, I argue that citizen engagement has effectively reinforced citizens' political capital while preserving the concept of democracy as a flexible system adaptable to Oman's local culture, identity, and religious values. Furthermore, I admit that public relations serve as a voice representing the government, influencing people's perceptions. However, in fulfilling this role, it also generates some positive impacts (developmental, democratic and communicative) as explicated in Chapter 7. While some differences exist between the viewpoints expressed by governmental officials and citizens, particularly in matters of transparency, accountability, and trust, I argue that engagement, as a form of government communication facilitated and mediated by public relations, fosters positive outcomes, even in less democratic nations, and even if it primarily serves government interests. However, the outcomes differ depending on the level of political openness within the country (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). In a less democratic settings like Oman, a country with a relatively short history of institutionalized citizen engagement, the outcomes as mentioned in Chapter 7 seen to be fundamental to the democratic transition and citizen empowerment. It primarily relates to citizens' evolving knowledge and attitudes towards their rights and responsibilities on one hand and the sustainability of participatory practices on the other. Additionally, I argue that besides the developmental and democratic outcomes of citizen engagement, there has been a creation of a better communication landscape which contributed to a greater freedom of expression and the flourishment of the public opinion. And that creates an arena for diverse competing ideas which are necessary for the functioning of the public sphere (Hiebert 2005; Moloney 2004; Sommerfeldt 2013).

The findings presented in Chapter 7 do not only validate the arguments made in the previous sections but also allow for a comprehensive conclusion to be drawn regarding the dual impact of public relations in less democratic nations. This thesis suggests that

while public relations may initially serve the interests of the powerful parties, its influence extends beyond this, creating a vital platform for citizen empowerment. This nuanced perspective challenges the dominant viewpoints found in much of the public relations literature, which primarily draws from experiences in democratic countries. What makes the context of this study a unique one is the unexpected and significant impact which is the facilitation of citizen empowerment. This dual impact offers a fresh perspective on the role of public relations, particularly in regions where democratic processes may be limited or underdeveloped.

In Chapter 7, citizens have emphasized the democratic, developmental, and communicative outcomes resulting from their engagement. However, it's important to note that this does not imply complete satisfaction with Oman's political landscape, as criticisms have been noted, particularly regarding transparency and accountability issues as described in the same Chapter. Such criticisms highlight the ongoing challenges within Oman's political environment. Public relations, serving as an intermediary work should be recognized as playing a significant role in this dynamic. Its role in providing information, helping social players to get connected, adopting a participatory approach and bridging gaps in communication remains crucial for nation-building and democratisation.

8.3 SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

Engagement has become central to the studies of public relations (Avidar 2017; Dhanesh 2017; Taylor et al. 2018). However, "while the practice is embracing engagement as a crucial driver of change, it tends to be under-researched, undertheorized and inadequately addressed in public relations scholarship" (Jelen-Sanchez 2017: 935). That is especially true when considering engagement in the context of government communication, and state-citizens relations, from one side, but in different international contexts beyond the Western contexts that dominate public relations literature Sriramesh and Verčič (2002) from another side. According to Jelen-Sanchez (2017: 934) who conducted a study to investigate the state of engagement studies in public relations, "scarce studies on public engagement tend to be mostly concerned with social media and online engagement, studied from management/functional and relational perspectives, focussed on organizations, anchored in western traditions and dominated by quantitative methodology".

With that being said, the contribution of this study is clearly significant. First, far from the functional perspective, this study reflects the turn to the socio-cultural paradigm in public relations which focuses on the essence of public relations as functioning in societies (Edwards and Hodges 2011). Second, engagement is discussed in the context of government communication (government public relations) and state-citizen relations which is also rarely framed (Liu and Horsley 2007), especially from the lens of the nation-building approach. Third, the study aims to de-westernise the public relations literature by shedding light on Oman; a country that is largely omitted from the public relations literature and which is totally distinct from the Western model dominating the academic work of public relations. In doing so, the study challenges the predominant narrative in public relations literature, which often focuses on democratic settings where engagement is assumed to be open and accessible. By shedding light on the unique dynamics at play in less democratic environments, this thesis contributes to a broader understanding of the role and impact of public relations in shaping the socio-political landscape, emphasizing its dual nature as a tool used by the powerful but also a contributor to citizen agency.

8.4 THE LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter 3 of this thesis explains some of the research limitations. One of these limitations is relevant to the interviews, particularly regarding the participant's hesitation to take part, reveal information and record the interviews. Another one is related to the generalisability and representativeness of the sample, especially, in the case of the interviews with citizens where the sample can be considered insufficient as explained in Chapter 3.

Although the data collected are sufficient to build the arguments of this thesis, some limitations which may have affected the results need to be considered for future work. The first is the temporal factor. During the course of this study, many central decisions and changes have been made, for example, the changes in the state administrative apparatus, the reshaping of the Council of Ministers, the introduction of a new taxation scale, the introduction of a new social benefit system, the change in the law of manpower, the rearrangement of defence and security institutions and some others (Alani 2023). These changes have affected the perceptions of the participants and therefore their responses. Also, the Oman Vision 2040 is an ongoing project and therefore measuring the impact of its communication and engagement strategy may require tracing the changes

and the perceptions of people over time, rather than relying on interviews which are conducted at a particular point in time. This can limit the ability to capture changes or developments in public relations strategies, citizen engagement dynamics, or the political landscape in general. Therefore, a longitudinal time frame is recommended for future studies.

In addition, investigating a particular case study requires, mostly, a diversity of resources used to provide an in-depth analysis of the situation being investigated through the case at hand (Baxter and Jack 2008). Although some methods like document analysis and tweets analysis have been tested for the specific purpose of this study as explained in Chapter 3, the research ended up relying on only interviews. Future studies can benefit from the inclusion of other resources, especially, real-time observations of engagement events. That will be helpful in (1) understanding, using the researcher's observations, the practical part of engagement and communication which is unfortunately not covered in this research, (2) overcoming the challenges observed in doing interviews in such a closed context, for example, hesitation to reveal information, reluctancy to participate and fear of recoding, (3) allowing to understand the engagement and PR role from different sources other than the personal perspectives of the participants.

Lastly, with the crisis facing democracy a long time ago as identified by many scholars such as Gilley (2009) and Lu and Chu (2021), today it faces more criticism and huge pressure than ever with the emerging conflicts around the globe. A major one is the historical Israel-Palestine conflict which was further raged by the 7th of October 2023 war which stimulated unexpected tremendous responses around the world, on the levels of governments, politicians and most importantly citizens around the globe. People's trust and expectations of democratic regimes but also government communication and mainstream media have fallen significantly. This crisis may change our understanding of engagement and democracy from one side but also the media system in general and the government communication in specific, in both democratic and undemocratic settings. Also, the significant role of social media in the coverage of this conflict stimulates the need for more investigation of the implications on the media landscape. Having said that, there is a clear indication for future studies to consider the problematic correlations between engagement, democracy, government communication, public relations and the media system in general, especially after this global crisis of trust and credibility in democratic systems, governments in general, the media system and even the major

international bodies. The impact and implications on the media landscape and the government's public relations constitute a promising rich area for future studies.

Appendix A

List of official documents

	The documents	The source
1.	The five-years National Development Plans (NDPs) 1st–9th NDPs (1976-2020)	Ministry of Economy
2.	Oman Vision 2020	Ministry of Economy- Available online
3.	The Development Law 1975	Ministry of Economy
4.	The basic statute of the State 1996	Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs- Available online
5.	Oman's Constitution Law of 1996 with amendments through 2011	Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs- Available online
6.	The basic statute of the State 2021	Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs- Available online
7.	The internal tours of Sultan Qaboos bin Said and their political, economic and social dimensions (1971-2000)	Ministry of Information- Available online
8.	Words and speeches of Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970-2015)	Ministry of Information- Available online
9.	Oman Vision 2040 official document	Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit- Available online
10.	Communication initiative 1- Future Foresight Forum Report for Oman Vision 2040 (December 2017)	Oman Vision 2040 Office
11.	Communication initiative 2- Oman Vision 2040 workshops for Oman Vision 2040 (March 2018)	Oman Vision 2040 Office
12.	Communication initiative 3- Media of the Future Report for Oman Vision 2040 (May 2018)	Oman Vision 2040 Office
13.	Communication initiative 4- All of Oman Report (May 2018)	Oman Vision 2040 Office
14.	Communication initiative 5- National Conference for the Oman Vision 2040 (January 2019)	Oman Vision 2040 Office
15.	A Guide to Public Engagement	The Government Communication Centre- Available online
16.	A Guide to Managing Media Relations	The Government Communication Centre- Available online
17.	A Guide to Integrative Communication for Managing Mutual Projects	The Government Communication Centre- Available online
18.	A Guide to Media Crisis Management	The Government Communication Centre- Available online

19.	A Guide to Dealing with Rumours and False News	The Government Communication Centre- Available online
20.	A Guide to Preparation for Government Decision	The Government Communication Centre - Available online
21.	A Guide to Mentoring and Analysis of Emerging Issues	The Government Communication Centre- Available online

Appendix B

The initial themes emerged from the analysis of 2040-عمان-رؤية # (#oman-vision-2040), in the period from February 2020- September 2021

1- Demands for comprehensive reform including:
  - Combating corruption
  - Freedom of speech
  - Replacement of some senior governmental officials in critical positions
  - Restructuring the governmental administrative system
  - The issue of unemployment
2- Demands for transparent communication:
  - The need for transparent governmental communication
  - Establishment of local communication centres/channels
  - Need for free independent media
  - PR and governmental communication
3- Demands for Economic diversification:
  - Reduction of oil as the primary resource
  - Boosting the economy through other sectors, tourism, industrial revolution and others
4- The perception of previous national development plans
  - Oman Vision 2020, results? Failure? Responsibility and accountability
  - The five years plans, success or failure?
5- Public participation and empowerment
  - Criticism of governmental social media interaction
  - Demanding for real citizen engagement; criticisms of Oman vision 2040
  - Demands for empowerment of youth and women
6- Discussions about new rules, policies and changes that were introduced recently as an introduction to the implementation of Oman Vision 2040:
  - The new retirement laws, the establishment of the Oman Investment Authority, the changes of many senior governmental officials, the new administrative system, the financial balance plan, The 10th five-year development plan

Appendix C

Participant description sheet- governmental officials

The participant	Years of experience	Educational and occupational background	Interview duration	Date and mode of the interview
GO1	5 years	Public relations and media relations	90 minutes	February 2021 Online
GO2	4 years	Marketing, branding and strategic communication	72 minutes	February 2021 Online
GO3	4 years	Public relations and media studies	60 minutes	March 2021
GO4	17 years	Development, strategic planning and and marketing.	100 minutes	March 2021 Online
GO5	3 years	Media and strategic communication	60 minutes	April 2021 Online
GO6	15 years	Public relations and advertising	45 minutes	January 2022 Personal
GO7	29 years	Media and strategic communication, diplomatic communication	120 minutes	January 2022 Personal
GO8	6 years	Public relations and marketing	40 minutes	January 2022 Personal
Go9	14 years	Mass Communication/ Journalism	85 minutes	January 2022 Personal
GO10	7 years	Public relations and advertising	60 minutes	January 2022 Personal
GO11	7 years	Journalism and media relations	50 minutes	February 2022 Online
GO12	4 years	Digital media	70 minutes	February 2022 Online

Appendix D

The interview guide (for governmental officials)

No.	Questions	Relevant points, probing questions
Section one: Introductory questions?		
1.	What is your job in the organization?	Position? Roles? Name of the department?
2.	For how long have you been working for this organization? And in PR?	
3.	Have you been involved in the Oman Vision 2040 project in any way?	What were your main responsibilities in the public engagement event?
Section two:		
Part A: General questions about Government PR and Strategic communication		
1.	In the time you have worked in PR, what are the main trends and changes you have seen in the field?	
2.	From your point of view, to what extent the government, represented by your organization, is successful in reacting to the trends in PR and communication with the public?	Have you changed your communication style with the public? How?
3.	How does your organization perceive the importance of your job?	Do you have direct communication with the top management? Are you involved in strategic planning in your organization? In what way?
4.	How could you describe the public?	In your opinion, who are they? How important are they for your organization? And for the government in general?
5.	In your opinion, what are the challenges that face you as a PR practitioner in the development of successful communication and relationships between your organization and its public (particularly citizens)?	Internal challenges? External challenges?
Part B: Communication, Public engagement and development		
1.	In your point of view, how could you define "public engagement"?	what could create a real "public engagement"?

2.	Do you think engaging citizens is necessary? Why?	In the specific context of Oman? And how?
3.	What was your task in the public engagement project?	How were you involved? How do you perceive the importance of your involvement in this project?
4.	Can you describe the communication strategy you have used?	Aims? Communication channels? Target audience? Media strategy?
5.	Do you think that you have reached your target audience?	How does your organization communicate with citizens during the PE event or even at any time regarding the Vision development? In what way do you think that your organizational strategic communication has an impact on the target audience?
6.	Why do you think the government (your organization) initiated this PE event? What do they want to achieve?	
7.	How could you describe PE in terms of inclusiveness?	How can the government ensure that they involve all citizens? Or have a good representation of the citizens?
8.	In your opinion, in what way, PE is important for policymaking?	Are there any limitations or challenges to that?
9.	In your opinion, what makes PE to be genuine, real, and transparent?	How government can do so? How frequently government should be in contact with citizens in relevance to national development? Is there any platform or particular protocol for public communication (in both ways from government organizations to citizens and vice versa)? How can citizens reflect their opinion about a policy or a decision? Is there any communication channel or platform? Any rules? Boundaries? Limitation?
10.	To what extent, do you think, PE influences government policy-making or decision-making?	Is that made clear to citizens? How? Have you been in contact with citizens in any way after the PE event about the policy or decision made?
11.	From your experience, what are the limitations of governmental public engagement for national development?	
Part C: Evaluation		

1.	Can you measure the impact of the PE events?	To what extent, do you think, citizens, by the end, have influenced the 2040 Vision? How can you measure it? Any tools of measurement?
2.	From your experience, to what extent the governmental PE event was successful?	What improvements could be made in the future?
3.	Considering the country's plan to shift to electronic government, to what extent do you think your organization is responsive to this strategy in terms of public participation through ICT tools?	Social media? Websites? How does it change government communication practices? How does it change citizens' interaction? Any future implications?
Section 3: Closing		
1.	Is there anything else about this project or communication strategies that you want to tell me?	

Participant Information sheet (members of the general public)

Participant information sheet

Title: **Public relations and citizen engagement in the public sector of Oman**

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about citizen engagement and public relations communication in the public sector of Oman.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to explore the role of public relations (PR) in mediating citizen engagement initiatives that are created and managed by governmental organizations for potential policy development. It studies the extent to which PR can work to facilitate or undermine a genuine public engagement and therefore critically examine its role in community building. This will be through a critical examination of the nature and flow of communication among and across the host organizations (organizers of public engagement initiatives) and the citizens.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because I'm interested in understanding how public relations in the host organizations manage and communicate about citizen engagement activities and how citizens perceive this communication and hence how they communicate back to these activities. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve the following:

You will be asked to participate in a 1-2 hour interview where I will ask you about your experience of participation in public engagement events, your expectations and reality, modes of communication you have used, outcomes from your point of view, perception about the host organization and their public engagement activities. If you agree, the interview will be recorded and I will take notes during the interview (if you agree the interview will be conducted, note taking will be done to produce a script of the interview which will be double-checked by yourself)

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
If you take part in this study, you will contribute to our understanding of the role of public relations and communication activities in public engagement initiatives by the governmental organizations in Oman. This will contribute to the knowledge but will also inform a future vision for policymakers in Oman by providing an evaluation of the nature and sort of existing communication and public

engagement and probably how to make it work more effectively to tackle issues of public concerns and to design potential policies.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before or during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 4 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages or risks to taking part. It's only that you will spend one-two hours for the interview to take part in this study (and that you will contribute to writing the script of the interview by double-checking the script that I will write to ensure your thoughts and comments are precisely reported).

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. I will keep all personal information about you confidential (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you), that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record (the script) of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example, journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.
When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in **our publications.**
If anything, you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisors. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself or my supervisors:

The researcher:
Rahab Al Niyadi, Department of sociology: alniyadi@lancaster.ac.uk. Telephone: +968 95190400

Supervisor:

Professor Anne Cronin, Department of sociology: a.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk. *Telephone:* **+44 (0)1524 593594**

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Head of the Department of Sociology: Professor Imogen Tyler. Email: i.tyler@lancaster.ac.uk. *Telephone: +44 (0)1524 594122*

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix F

Participant information sheet-citizens

Participant	Age group	Gender	Educational background Occupation Interests	Region	Has participated in engagement initiatives of Oman-Vision 2040?
C1	31-45	Female	- Postgraduate level - works in a governmental organisation - Interested in parliament experience in Oman	Al-Dakhliah	Yes
C2	31-45	Male	- Undergraduate level - works in a non-profit organisation - Interested and active in youth issues	Muscat	Yes
C3	31-45	Female	- Postgraduate level - works in an educational institution - Ordinary citizen	Muscat	No
C4	31-45	Male	- Postgraduate level - works in an educational institution - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-North	Yes
C5	31-45	Male	- Postgraduate level - work in an educational institution - Interested in GCC politics	Al-Batinah-North	No
C6	31-45	Female	- Undergraduate level - works in school education - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-North	No
C7	18-30	Female	- Undergraduate level - works in the private sector - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-North	Yes
C8	31-45	Female	- Postgraduate level - works in an educational institution - Interested in public relations and strategic communication	Al-Batinah-South	No
C9	18-30	Female	- Secondary education - an entrepreneur - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-North	Yes
C10	45-60	Male	- Undergraduate level - works in the health sector - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-south	No

C11	18-30	Female	- Undergraduate level - Job seeker - Active in youth issues	Muscat	Yes
C12	18-30	Female	- Undergraduate level - works in a private sector - Active and interested in law and diplomatic relations	Muscat	Yes
C13	18-30	Male	- Undergraduate level - works in governmental organisation - Ordinary citizen	Muscat	No
C14	45-65	Male	- Primary education - Retired - Ordinary citizen	Al-Batinah-North	No
C15	45-65	Male	- Undergraduate level - private work - Social media activist, active in politics, youth and development issues	Al Sharqiyah	Yes
C16	45-65	Male	- Postgraduate level - private work - Interested and active in parliament experience in Oman	Al-Batinah-North	No
C17	31-45	Female	- Undergraduate level - works for a news corporation - Interested in news production	Al Sharqiyah	Yes
C18	45-65	Male	- Secondary education - private work - social media activist	Al Sharqiyah	No
C19	18-30	Male	- Undergraduate level - works in a government organisation Ordinary citizen	Al-Dakhliah	No
C20	31-45	Female	- Undergraduate level - job seeker - Ordinary citizen	Muscat	No

Appendix G

Informed consent- written form

Project Title: Public relations and citizen engagement in the public sector of Oman

Name of Researchers: Rahab Al Niyadi
Email: alniyadi@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3.	I understand that I do not need to respond to any questions that I do not wish to answer.	☐
4.	I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
5.	I understand that de-personalised data may be offered to an archive and may therefore be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis).	☐
6.	I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
7.	I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
8.	I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines until the researcher successfully complete her PhD and have finished publishing journal articles from her PhD, upon which she will destroy the notes.	☐
9.	I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Informed consent- Verbal form

VERBAL CONSENT PROTOCOL

Project Title: Public relations and citizen engagement in the public sector of Oman

I have approached you because of your experience/expertise and because of the unique insight that you can provide to this study;

1) Have you had the chance to read the Participant Information Sheet that I have shared with you?

- YES => Ask if everything is clear and if they have any queries. Answer any questions about the study. Then ask: **do you have any comments or special wishes regarding preserving the anonymity of yourself/your organization?**

    o If YES => discuss the participant's wishes and make a note of them, commit to respect them if feasible. In the unlikely event that the participant would request something that you may not be able to do (like use their real name, or agree to talk but not agree to be quoted) this participant would be ineligible for participation in the study and the interaction would have to end.

    o If NO => proceed to question (2)

- NO => review and discuss the PIS there and then. In case of special wishes proceed as above.

2) Do you agree to participate in the study on the terms discussed in the PIS?

- YES => Thank you, make note of consent, proceed to questions.

- NO => Thank you, gather feedback if any, end interaction.

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