

Development of Strategic Communication Studies: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Research

Hassan Al-saify¹, Abdullah Alahmari²

Abstract

The study examined English and Arabic digital Strategic Communication research (DSCR) to determine the state of Arab compared to English research. It found that English studies are more focused on social media, while Arab studies are lagging behind in this area. Augmented reality has influenced cultural heritage archives, but its impact on strategic communication is not extensively explored. English studies have become more theoretical, while Arab research is primarily descriptive, except for the theory of dialogue. English studies emphasize concepts like dialogue, two-way communication, e-participation, and interaction, whereas Arab studies rely on traditional mass communication theories. Quantitative approaches dominate Arab studies, but English studies have seen a decline since 2015, with a diversification towards qualitative and mixed methods. Both Arab and English studies focus on organizations in strategic communication research, but there is a need for a comprehensive perspective that includes the public's viewpoint and emphasizes public involvement.

Keywords: *digital Strategic Communication, English studies, traditional mass communication theories.*

1. Introduction

The rise of digital communication technologies has revolutionized Strategic Communication (SC), dramatically impacting how organizations engage with stakeholders (Neyazy, 2018; Taha, 2016; Guillory & Sundar, 2014; Lock, 2019). This transformation has reshaped the communication process, making the internet the primary platform for interaction and influencing strategies, tactics, and the very conditions of communication (L'Etang et al., 2012).

At its core, communication is the lifeblood of relationships, be it their initiation, maintenance, or dissolution. This principle holds true particularly true in the digital realm, where interactive dialogue between organizations and audiences takes center stage (L'Etang et al., 2012). Recognizing the internet's immense potential, SC researchers have dedicated significant efforts to understanding its implications. Conferences like the 2015 Digital Relations Forum hosted by the Strategic Communication and Advertising Association in Riyadh, alongside numerous research studies (Mohsen, 2019; Kent, 2013; Jiang et al., 2016; Jaafar et al., 2015), have aimed to navigate the evolving digital landscape and its impact on communication dynamics.

The Arab region presents a unique case study. Despite boasting some of the highest global internet usage rates, optimal utilization of online platforms for SC remains elusive

¹ King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

² Islamic University of Medinah, Saudi Arabia

(Mohsen, 2019; Kent, 2013). Factors like limited virtual communication training and a preference for unilateral communication approaches impede the emergence of genuine online dialogue (Niazi, 2018). This contrasts with the global trend towards interactive communication, as seen in countries like the United States.

This disparity highlights the need for further research into digital relationships in both regional and global contexts. Understanding how effective online communication models are developed, how cultural nuances influence digital interactions, and how emerging technologies shape SC practices is crucial for bridging the gap between potential and practice.

The rise of digital communication technologies has significantly impacted Strategic Communication (SC) practices, prompting researchers to re-evaluate theoretical frameworks and explore the evolving landscape of communication dynamics. This paper examines the influence of internet applications on both Arab and English SC research, highlighting contrasting trends and potential areas for further investigation.

Despite boasting some of the highest internet usage rates globally, the Arab region faces challenges in optimizing internet tools for effective SC (Mohsen, 2019; Kent, 2013). Limited virtual communication training and a preference for one-way communication hinder the emergence of genuine online dialogue (Niazi, 2018). This contrasts with the growing trend of interactive communication observed in countries like the United States.

However, the internet's potential for disseminating information and facilitating stakeholder relationships should not be underestimated (Mohsen, 2019; L'Etang et al., 2012). Exploring how cultural nuances shape digital interactions and how emerging technologies influence SC practices in the Arab world presents a fertile ground for research (Guillory & Sundar, 2014).

The emergence of new media has prompted critical reflection on existing SC theories, particularly regarding social media's unique characteristics, communication modes, and impact on stakeholder relationships (Guillory & Sundar, 2014). Studies have shown social media's influence on practitioner orientations (Jiang et al., 2016) and organizational performance (Jaafar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the digital shift raises questions about the potential emergence of a sub-field within SC dedicated to online communication dynamics. This begs further investigation into whether traditional SC research questions remain relevant in the digital realm and if internet applications have necessitated a paradigm shift in research approaches (Eid, 2013; Huang, 2012).

Strategic Communication encompasses a diverse range of organizations, each with its own communication needs and strategies (Neyazy, 2018; Taha, 2016). Analyzing how digital technologies have impacted SC research and practices across different types of organizations, both in the Arab and English contexts, can reveal valuable insights. Do English organizations utilize internet applications differently than their Arab counterparts? Do sectoral variations influence the adoption and effectiveness of digital communication strategies? Addressing these questions can foster a deeper understanding of how cultural and organizational factors shape SC practices in the digital age.

Exploring the nuances of digital communication's influence on SC research can significantly contribute to the field's academic development, both regionally and globally. By bridging the research-practice gap and equipping practitioners with the necessary skills to navigate online platforms effectively, organizations can unlock the full potential of digital communication to build stronger relationships with stakeholders and achieve their strategic goals.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the impact of the Internet on Strategic Communication research. Huang (2012) qualitatively analyzed 33 papers published between 1998 and 2007 to identify the characteristics of digital public relations practices. Ye and Ki (2012) conducted a quantitative analysis of the content of 115 papers published in magazines from 1992 to 2009 to examine the influence of the Internet on SC practice. Duhé (2015) reviewed 321 research papers published from 1981 to 2014, while Adel (2016) analyzed advertising and SC research in Egypt to propose a future vision for its development. Fawzi (2016) discussed research trends in the field of digital Strategic Communication from 2000 to 2015, and Yi-Hui (2017) studied 141 scientific papers published from 2008 to 2014 on the relationship between the Internet and SC. Saad (2018) investigated the status of digital SC studies and media trends in the SC department of the Faculty of Information at Al-Azhar University, analyzing the period from January 2007 to December 2017. Eyun (2019) tracked the development of Strategic Communication research between 2010 and 2015 through the analysis of three magazines, while Fawzi (2019) attempted to analyze and explain the role of modern communication methods and applications in shaping and transforming SC functions in organizations across various service areas.

Previous Arab studies on Strategic Communication research have primarily consisted of narrative reviews, lacking statistical analysis, with the exception of Saad's (2018) study. These studies have not adequately addressed the cognitive aspects of recent research or the extent of its development, particularly in the context of global digital relations, which have undergone three stages of development. Some Arab studies have been limited to a single university, such as those focusing on digital relations at Al-Azhar University, or they have explored specific topics, like M. Fawzi's study on patterns of Strategic Communication functions. Other studies have taken a more general approach, such as R. Adel's study, which focused on trends in Strategic Communication and advertising research in Egypt alone. Additionally, some studies have relied on a limited number of research papers, as seen in A. Fawzi's study, which only included 19 Arab studies, all of which were from Egypt.

Despite these challenges, Strategic Communication has a significant impact on the agenda of Arab media. Journalists heavily rely on news provided by SC practitioners, often without conducting independent research or making efforts to reformulate the news. This reliance has led to the proliferation of what can be termed "Email Press," where news sent from Strategic Communication via email is published without significant alterations by newspapers or news agencies.

Given the emergence and increasing influence of digital technology, which has disrupted the traditional SC model, it is crucial to examine and study its impact in the Arab environment. Paradigm shifts occur when new discoveries challenge the dominant theories and practices in a field, ultimately replacing the old paradigm. Therefore, it is reasonable to anticipate that the appearance and popularity of Internet apps have progressively challenged and reshaped the dominant theories and areas of SC research. Initially, SC was considered a functional major, dominated by normative theories and a management perspective, particularly the Excellence Theory. However, alternative theoretical and methodological frameworks have emerged in the new millennium, exploring the complexity of communication and relationships. This shift can be seen as a social and cultural transformation in the field of Strategic Communication (Edwards, 2016; Jelen, 2017).

Based on previous review studies on digital public relations, this study sought to provide a visualization of the general scene of English and Arab digital SC research, to explore whether digital technologies have resulted in a qualitative change in the SC research model or not. This is achieved by monitoring the kinds of Internet apps studied and the

theories and approaches employed and research perspective prevailed. Moreover, the study sought to determine the extent of keeping pace with Arab research on the prevailing development, its position in the global research map and the extent of a gap between them in this modern vital SC research field, through the analysis of relevant research published from 2009 to 2020.

Thus, the research question is as follows:

Q1 How advanced are the numbers of Arab and English DSCR from 2009 to 2020?

Q2 What types of Internet apps have been analyzed from 2009 to 2020?

Q3 Which approaches, theories, and concepts were employed from 2009 to 2020?

Q4 What is the research perspective that dominated Arab and English digital SC research from 2009 to 2020? Was the research directed at studying the organization or the public?

Given the recency of Arab research in the field of digital Strategic Communication as

3. Method

This is a descriptive study, which aims to determine the characteristics of a specific phenomenon or a situation. The study used the meta-analysis methodology; one of the modern methodological methods that depend on reviewing intellectual production, or analyzing previous studies on a specific topic from a specific perspective to provide an accurate evaluation of these studies, set a direction of these results, or find a possible common relationship between them (Rothman & et al, 2008). The results are compiled by statistical methods, summarized and compared to each other, with an attempt to draw a total result that differs from traditional narrative scientific reviews. A meta-analysis is an integrated approach, as it includes research problems and questions, assumptions, variable measurement, sample selection, statistical data analysis, and result interpretation. Therefore, it is an integrated approach closer to descriptive and analytical studies as it is based on previous studies.

The meta-analysis was used to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Arab research and a random sample analysis of English research. The content of relevant research published between 2009 and 2020 was analyzed quantitatively as 2009 is the beginning of the emergence of Arab DSCR.

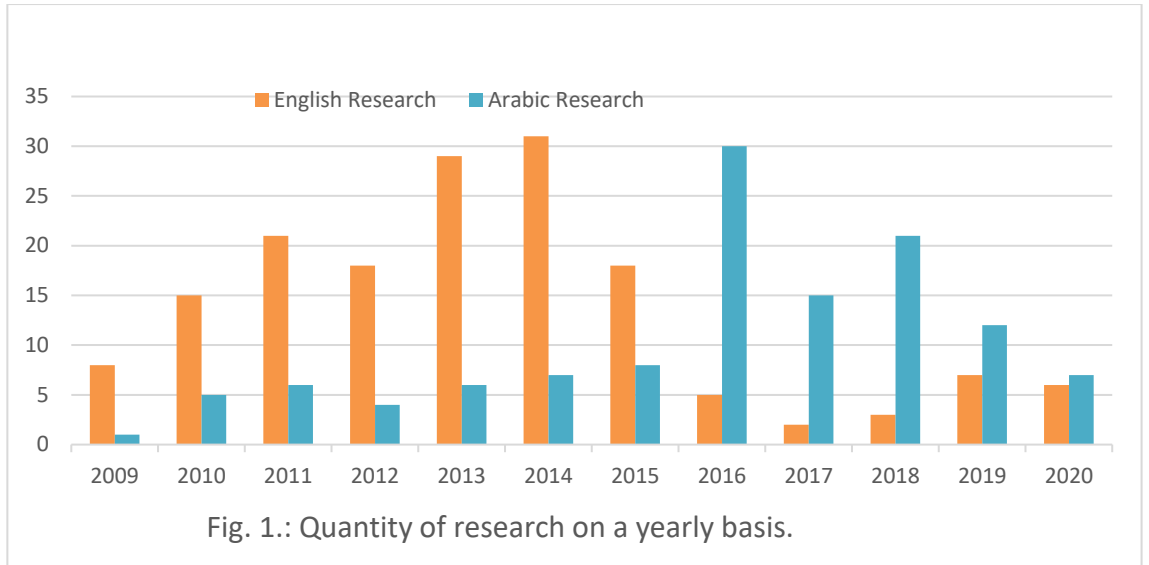
Inter-coder Reliability Tests

For the stability test, the researcher used two experienced KFU colleagues to analyze a random sample (10%), whereby 30 studies (15 Arabs and 16 foreigners) were selected. After applying the Holste's equation, the following stability coefficients were 1.0 For main information (journal name, year of publication, authors, and their institutional affiliations); 0.90 for institution type and research perspective, 0.93 for Internet apps, methodology, theory, and communication characteristics in each study. The general agreement rate was 0.92.

4. Results

4.1 The development of Digital Strategic Communication Research

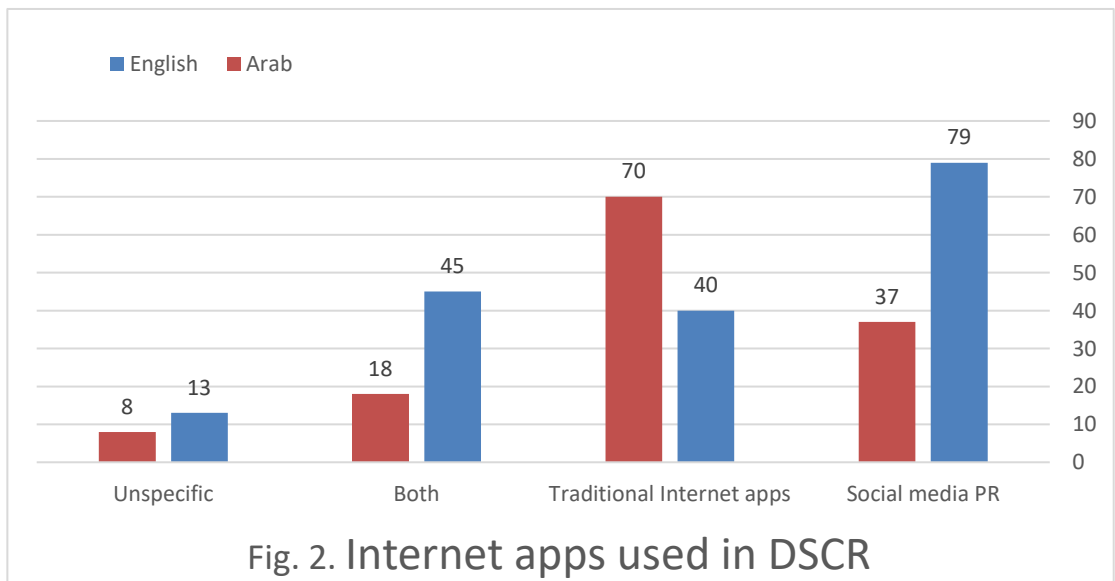
Figure 1 indicates a noticeable increase in English DSCR, which peaked in 2013, followed by 2012 and 2010.



As for Arab research, it appeared in 2009 then slowly increased until 2015. In 2016, it witnessed a boom as the number of articles reached 31, followed by 2017 (n=21). Despite the decrease in the number of English research in 2015, the topics of published articles were of great diversity. Crisis and brand communication was the most studied, in addition to PR management. That is to say, the academic focus of the study was the influence of social media on SC. Since 2011, it moved gradually to other sub-themes in this field. In contrast, Arab Strategic Communication research weakly began due to the weakness in Strategic Communication employment for Internet apps. However, it followed the path of English research after it formed a knowledge base. The United States was the most studied country due to the availability of researchers and a practical basis. As for Arab research, Egypt followed by Saudi Arabia and Algeria were the most studied.

4.2 Internet apps Studied by Digital Strategic Communication Research

Regarding the type of Internet apps studied in DSCR, the results showed that the majority of English researchers focused on social networks, 46.6%, unlike Arab research, which mostly focused on traditional Internet apps (54.9%). Both Arab and English researchers often examined organizations' official websites (number = 63 vs. 69). (See Tables 2 and 3).



Twitter followed by Blogs, Facebook and YouTube were the most studied social media network in English research, while Facebook followed by Twitter and YouTube were the

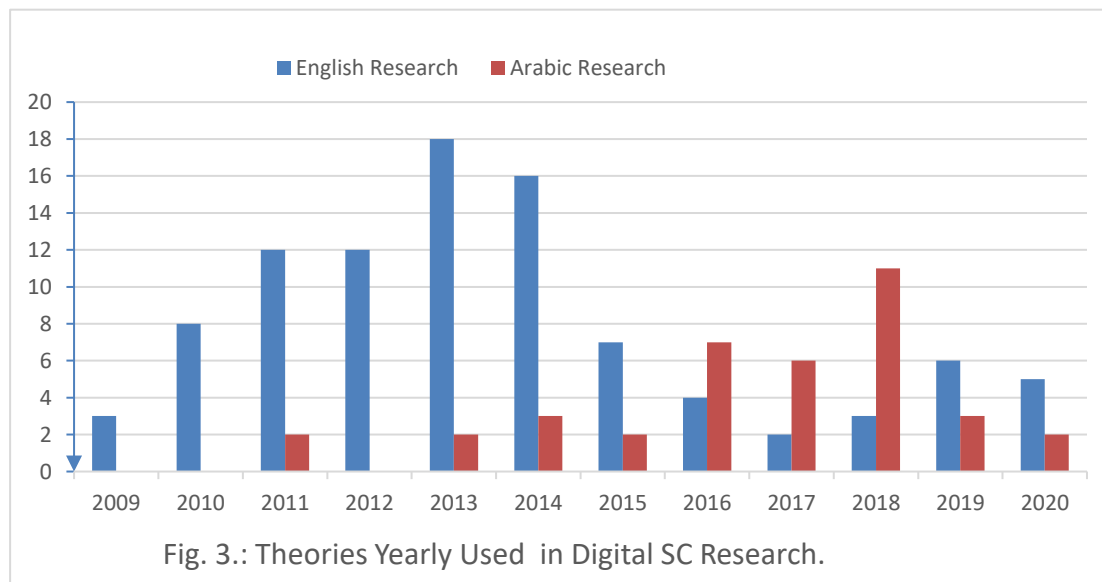
most studied platforms in Arab research. Facebook came first in Arab research because it was the first in the world and the most populated Arab countries like Egypt. Twitter came second in the Arab world for its widespread use in the Gulf States. It is worth noting that English studies include all social networks, while Arab research did not study platforms such as wikis, nor did it pay attention to blogs and other platforms such as Snapchat despite its popularity.

Despite the fact that official websites' analysis of organizations is still important, English studies conducted on Facebook and blogs have raised since 2009. Moreover, social media sites such as blogs and Facebook have received great interest in DSCR since 2009.

4.3 Theoretical framework

The results indicated that more than half of English Strategic Communication research (58.8%) relied on one or more existing theories, while Arab research relied less on theory, as more than two-thirds of research did not depend on theory and 31.1% of research employed one theory. In contrast, a significant increase in the dependence of English research on theory was witnessed in 2013 and 2014 compared to a lack of theory-based analysis in Arab DSCR. The results also indicate that there was a partial shift in Arab research from descriptions to theories from 2016 to 2019.

Reviewing the theories used in research from 2009 to 2015, the researcher finds that Kent and Taylor's (1998) Dialogic Theory is the most applied in Arab and English research (12.1%). This is primarily due to the emergence of networks that make dialogue accessible. However, Arab research did not take into account changes in the theory in 2018. Moreover, Arab research continued to employ traditional mass communication theories surpassed by English research, while English research employed relevant theories related to the Internet or Strategic Communication such as Excellence Theory and Relationship Management Theory came in second and third place consequently. None of the Arab research employed these theories but continued to apply theories of mass communication to online public relations; which does not optimally explain digital Strategic Communication such as Uses and Gratifications Theory, which ranked the second followed by Media Richness Theory.



This shows that most English studies shifted from description to theorization, and tended to use more appropriate theories of Strategic Communication and the new digital medium. In contrast, the majority of Arab research is still in the description stage, and studies employed the theory continued to adopt the same outdated theories and approaches. Therefore, for research to mature, Arab Strategic Communication research

"needs a coherent and appropriate theoretical structure for the new medium and public relations" (Nothhaft, 2016).

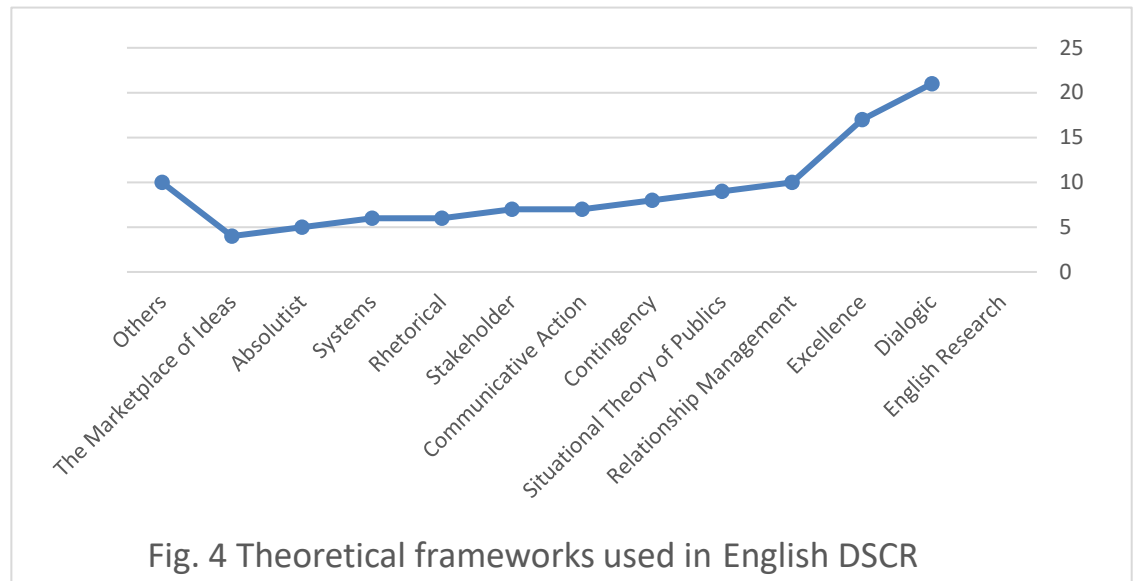


Fig. 4 Theoretical frameworks used in English DSCR

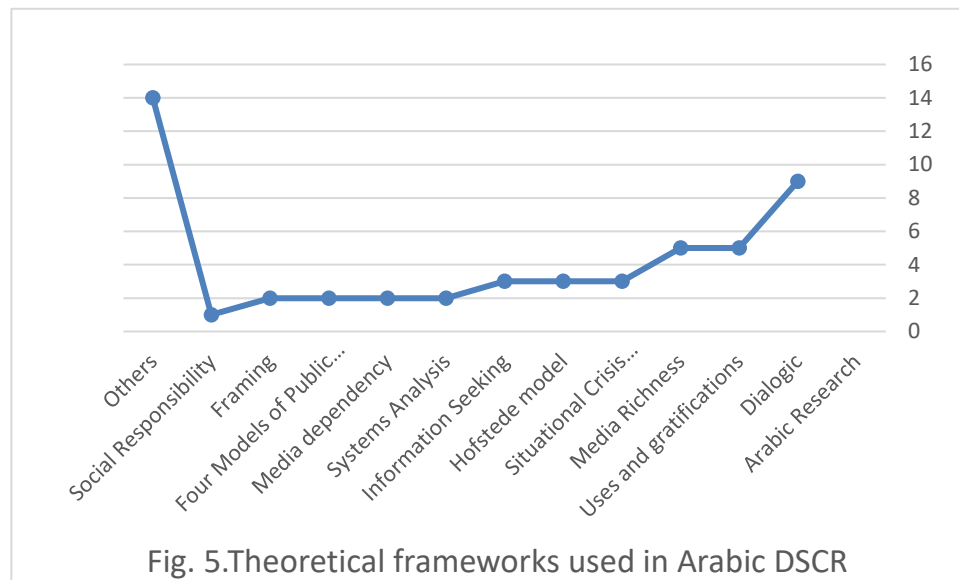
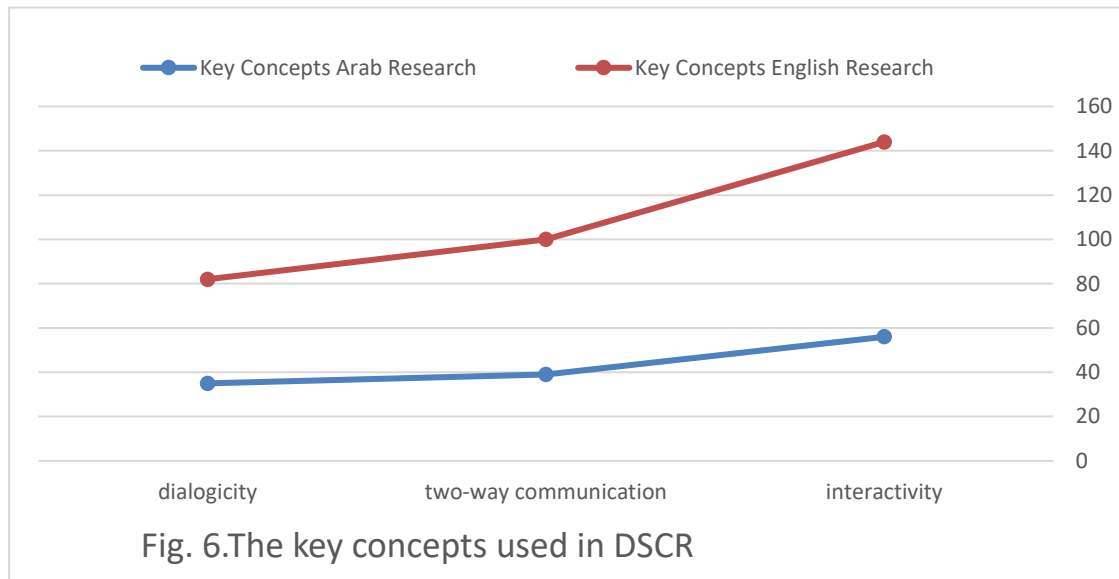


Fig. 5. Theoretical frameworks used in Arabic DSCR

4.4 Key concepts

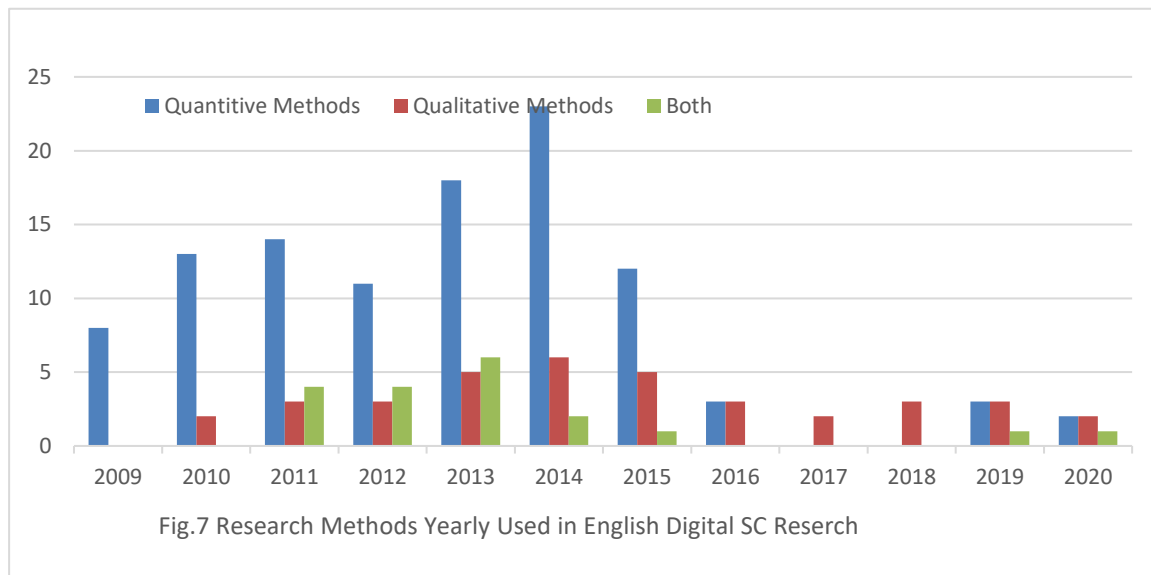
Digital Communication was characterized by specific properties that differ from offline interaction. Thus, this study identified a group of key concepts to describe digital Strategic Communication communication patterns. This stock has been determined and strengthened through studies focusing on new media. The results of the study showed a convergence between Arab and English studies in the use of concepts. The most frequently used concepts that characterize digital relations in Arab and English research are interactivity (44.1%) and two-way communication (30.7%), followed by dialogicity (25.2%). Similar vocabulary such as reciprocity and participation were used as concepts explaining the relationship between organizations and the public. The results indicate that social media is characterized by two-way communication, dialogicity, and interactivity, about web 1.0 applications. They also showed that two-way communication and dialogue were closely related to social networks in English research, but they did not link the interaction significantly to specific types of Internet apps. As for Arabic studies, the three concepts were used with all applications. Hence, dialogue theory is the prevalent theoretical framework in DSCR. Given the growing interest in social media, a group of terms has been proposed to specify communication patterns in digital public relations.

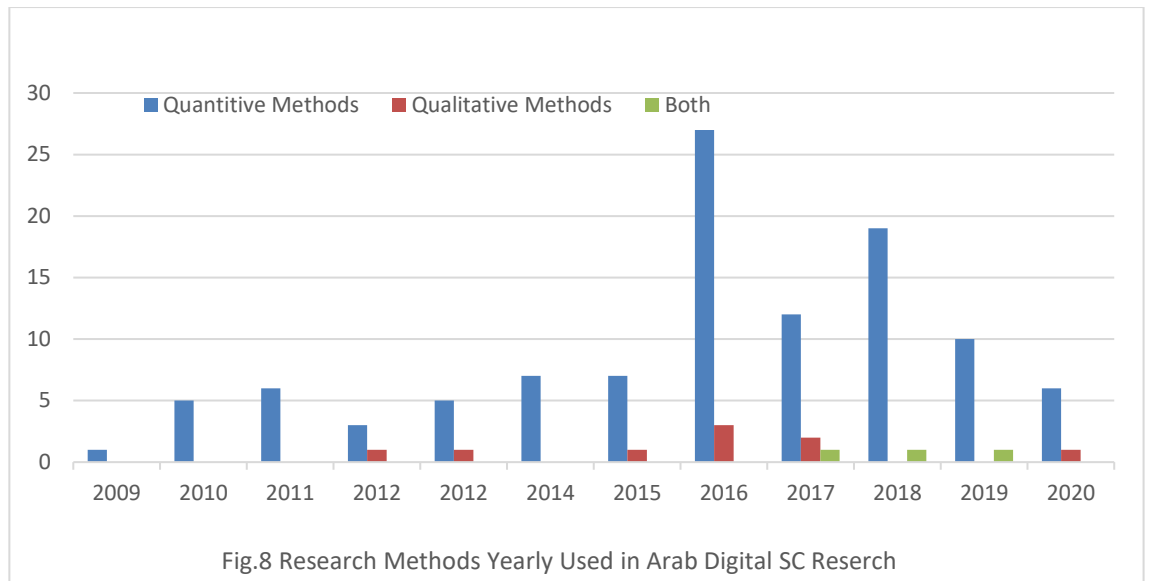
Thus, theoretical frameworks centering on the interaction between the public and the organizations have been adopted.



4.5 Research Methods

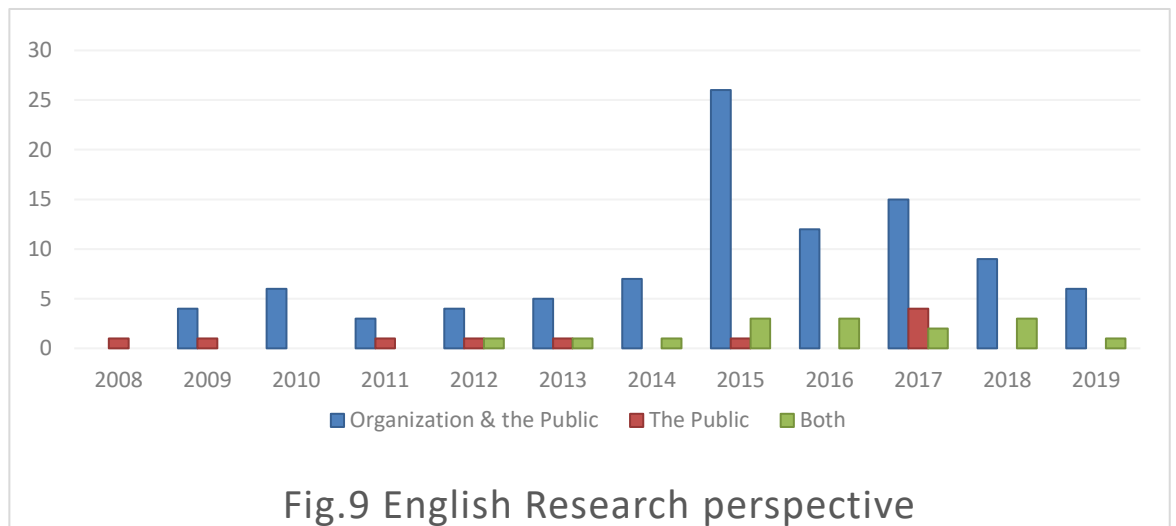
Quantitative research methods prevailed in DSCR, as Arab research relied on it by 88.5%, and its reliance on the questionnaire dominated by 60.4%. No Arab experimental study was reported, and among the few Arab studies that relied on quantitative and qualitative methods was Abdel-Ati's(2017) study. As for English research, it increasingly adopts quantitative (65.6%). Quantitative content analysis was the predominant data-collection methods, followed by surveys. Moreover, 20 experimental studies were monitored, and in-depth interviews were the most used qualitative method in English research.

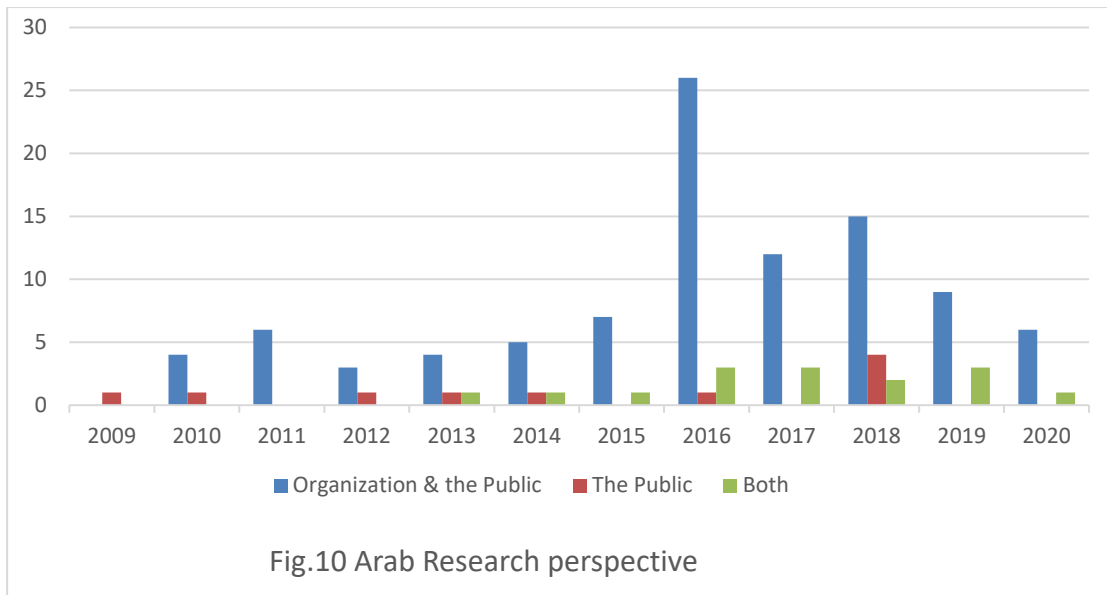




4.6 Research perspective

The study concluded that there is a convergence between Arab and English studies in the research perspective, as both were organization-oriented. However, it shows the scarcity of Arab studies focusing on the target audience of these organizations; this research area is not sufficiently studied. So Arab research has directed most of its research to the study of organizations (79.5%), and English studies (74.8%). The majority of Arab studies focused on the study of the communicator, while English research was interested in studying and analyzing the sites of organizations and the communicator. Only 7.2% of the Arab studies focused on the audience, whether the customers or the internet users, while English studies' interest in the public increased by 24.5%. Few English studies focused on the public and the organization together as they select one topic or issue and directly analyze them. In contrast, Arab studies (12.3%) sought to study the organization and the public were mostly dissertations.





Perhaps Arab research has failed to study the digital phenomena associated with its environment. Although the Arab Spring has torn multiple Arab countries, little research examined this issue from a Strategic Communication perspective. Likewise, the spread of online terrorism; a phenomenon that plagued Arab countries in the second decade of the third millennium, has not been studied from a Strategic Communication perspective. The number of English organization-oriented studies increased significantly during 2013 and 2014 before the decline in 2016. These studies began to approach the organization's studies, unlike Arab studies that continued to focus on the organizations without the public. This is because the development of digital Arab relations is still in its budding stage. This is consistent with what Huang (2012) stated that DSCR has an organization-focused perspective. The quick Internet development has not caused a major change in research perspectives.

5. Discussion

English studies have demonstrated a greater interest in social media compared to Arab studies. The rise of Web 2 apps and social media has had a more significant impact on the English research agenda, making it a preferred research subject for Strategic Communication researchers. Technical advancements, coupled with the widespread use of social media platforms, have contributed to the development of a new PR research model that aligns with Ao and Huang's work (2019). In contrast, Arab digital research is still in its early stages and has not yet given adequate attention to social networks.

While the role of augmented reality has been studied in various fields, including the development of cultural heritage archives, it has not been extensively explored in the context of Strategic Communication. Therefore, future researchers may be interested in studying its impact on SC practice, potentially providing new insights that challenge existing SC models.

In recent years, English DSCR has transitioned from descriptive studies to theorizing, whereas Arab research remains primarily at the descriptive stage, lacking theoretical frameworks and relying on traditional mass communication theories, with the exception of the theory of dialogue. Concepts associated with the Internet, such as dialogue, two-way communication, e-participation, and interaction, have gained increasing research interest in English studies. The theory of dialogue has gained prominence in English research, surpassing the theory of excellence. However, the theory of excellence has not been observed in Arab studies. Additionally, English DSCR has employed other theories,

including the Situation and stakeholder theories, which are relevant to a shared view of creativity. In contrast, Arab studies still predominantly rely on traditional mass communication theories that are not directly related to SC. Both Arab and English DSCR have explored the theory of dialogue, providing a fundamental framework for analyzing the influence of the Internet on SC practice.

Quantitative research methods, particularly in Arab DSCR, have remained prevalent, as they are perceived as easier to employ. Experimental research has been scarce, potentially due to the availability of alternative, yet unknown, technical methods. This aligns with previous studies on the dominance of quantitative statistical analysis in Arab research and the shortage of qualitative research. In contrast, English studies have seen a decline in the use of quantitative research methods since 2015, indicating a shift in research methods.

While quantitative methods have dominated DSCR, there has been variation in research methods over the past 11 years, with studies incorporating qualitative research and mixed methods. It is expected that modern methods will be increasingly utilized in future research. The results suggest that the rise of Internet apps has influenced some aspects of English research methods, while Arab research has not witnessed similar diversity, with no experimental studies identified.

Both Arab and English perspectives converge on the focus of studying organizations in DSCR. However, due to the nature of Internet applications, the current research agenda in Arabic and English is limited, with an imbalance in research perspectives. The Internet has facilitated dialogue and elevated the public as equal partners in the communication process with organizations. Therefore, organizations should involve the public in their Strategic Communication efforts. Additionally, digital Strategic Communication research should adopt a more comprehensive perspective that encompasses the public's viewpoint. However, a significant portion of DSCR studies remain organization-oriented rather than public-oriented or adopting a shared perspective (Holtzhausen, 2000).

5.1 Prominent Findings and Suggestions

DSCR, which stands for Digital Strategic Communication, is a scientific field that encompasses a distinct body of research topics and a set of theoretical principles. Over time, there has been a shift in DSCR from implicit assumptions to more diversified methodologies. The development of DSCR can be observed through three stages, starting in 1992, although Arab DSCR did not emerge until 2007. This delay can be attributed to various factors, including the state of scientific research in the Arab world, a decline in its position, the slower adoption of the Internet in PR practices, and a lack of qualified individuals to engage in digital relations. As a result, Arab digital Strategic Communication has only recently emerged, while English studies have progressed further, aligning with the current global development stage of DSCR. This disparity explains the existing gap when comparing Arab and English DSCR research.

With the advent of digital transformation, the dynamics of relationships between organizations and stakeholders have changed. The "big data era" has begun, necessitating the appropriate theoretical employment, new approaches, and research methods to study digital relationships within large or small datasets.

Findings indicate that the development of Internet apps has influenced the prevailing patterns of English SC research. Web 2 apps have become crucial research topics, unlike Arab research that still primarily focuses on studying organizations, particularly Strategic Communication practitioners within those organizations. Arab research has yet to shift its focus towards studying the audience that interacts with these organizations through social networks. Additionally, while English research has employed the perspective of co-creativity to analyze the impact of the Internet on SC practice in foreign contexts, Arab research remains confined to traditional communication theories, attempting to adapt them to the new medium.

English research has shown a trend towards utilizing multiple research methods since 2009. Despite this increasing methodological diversity in English studies, there is still a need for further development and utilization of diverse research methods to describe, anticipate, and explain how Strategic Communication is organized, structured, and practiced. In the Arab world, the majority of studies continue to rely on quantitative survey methods, with limited presence of experimental and qualitative studies. Modern methods and approaches have not been extensively employed in both Arab and English research.

The focus of both Arab and English research on studying organizations suggests that the old model of Strategic Communication research has not undergone significant changes. The dialogic nature of the Internet has facilitated greater public participation in the communication process. Consequently, the traditional functional perspective that solely focuses on the organization is outdated, as it fails to consider the audience associated with social media platforms.

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