

Embracing Social Media: The Change and Disruption to Public Relations Practices in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This research is not intended to examine on the advantages of using social media at work but to explore the constraint and challenges imposed by social media to PR practitioners at work. The study argues that beside positive effects, social media could also bring great challenge to PR practices that are often taken for granted. At present, there is a dearth of research conducted to examine the usage of social media among PR practitioners in developing nations, the challenges and possible disruptions they imposed on PR practices. In view of this gap, this study aims to address the following objectives: (i) to examine the social media usage among PR practitioners at work; (ii) to identify PR practitioners' perception on the effectiveness of social media as a tool to engage with stakeholders and (iii) to explore plausible risks imposed by social media on PR roles and practices. This study was part of PR profile research project conducted in 2018. More than 300 PR practitioners working in various organizations in Malaysia took part in the survey. The findings among others affirmed that despite a moderate use of social media, PR practitioners continue to perceive social media as effective tools to engage with stakeholders. Ironically, social media were also seen as imposing threats to organizations' reputation. This study is significant as it contributes to existing literature on the implications of social media use in PR roles and practice in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Social media, technology, PR in Malaysia, PR practice, PR roles.*

INTRODUCTION

The Internet technology and the proliferation of social media have transformed communication practices at numerous levels. Contemporary organizations are actively using the social media to communicate their stories to the publics at large. At the same time, the interactive feature of social media permits organizations' stakeholders to provide feedback or comment instantaneously. Social media have made timely and interactive communication possible thus often perceived as ideal tools to manage organizations and stakeholders' relationships; the essence of public relations (PR) function. In the third Grunig's lecture series, Grunig and Grunig (2010) have been optimistic of the potential of social media in making two-way symmetrical communication possible rather than an ideal normative concept. The Excellence study touted on the value of the two-way symmetrical model that represents as an excellent model for public relations (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 2001; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006; Grunig, 2008). The functionalists asserted that the two-way symmetrical approach should bring mutual benefits to all parties involved and social media could be utilized to achieve this goal. This functionalist approach has a considerable bearing in this study. However, the study was not intended to examine how social media used to promote a balanced communication between organizations-publics but to identify the usage of social media among PR practitioners and their implications to PR practices.

Over the years, scholars have overstated on the benefits of digital media in public relations such as enhancing practitioners' personal prestige power (Diga & Kelleher, 2009), getting people connected (Baruah, 2012), promoting activist campaign (Kaur, 2015) and a significant influence in shaping relationship between organizations and their strategic constituents (El-Kassim & Iddid, 2017). The dominant PR discourse seems to be overly positive about social media despite lack of empirical evidence to support it (Valentini, 2015). James (2007) argues that it is imperative to analyse how new technology offer support or impede traditional PR roles i.e., media relations, reputation management, issues and crisis management to name a few. Similarly, this study acknowledged that the usage of social media in PR is not without unintended implications. This study among others argue that social media could appear as a challenge that impede PR's goal. At present, there is a dearth of research initiated to examine the usage of social media among PR practitioners in developing societies and how they affect PR practices. In view of this gap, this study has been conducted to address the following objectives: (i) to identify social media usage among PR practitioners at work; (ii) to examine PR practitioners' perception on the effectiveness of social media as a tool to engage with stakeholders and (iii) to discover plausible implications imposed by social media on PR roles and practices. The study also offers insight on the challenges that PR practitioners endure in dealing with social media. The present study serves as a significant attempt to understand the implications of social media use on PR roles and practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Media Landscape in Malaysia

Information technology and communication (ICT) in Malaysia has experienced an exponential growth. Internet penetration in the country has reached up to 85.7 percent in 2017 from only 70 percent in 2015 (Alzahrin Alias, 19 March 2018). A survey conducted in 2016 by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission reported that there were 24.5 million Internet users in the country (MCMC, 2017). The Internet users in Malaysia involved in multiple activities online particularly participating in social networking sites and that include social media. The Department of Statistics in 2017 found five main activities on the Net (refer to Table 1). Participating in social network (86.3 percent) was a dominant activity of the Internet users in the country.

Table 1: Main activities of Internet use in Malaysia.

No.	Activities on The Net	Percentage
1	Participating in social network	86.3%
2	Downloading images, movies, videos, music or downloading games	81.2%
3	Finding information about goods and services	80.4%
4	Downloading software applications	74.5%
5	Sending or receiving emails	70.4%

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 19 March 2018.

The advancement of the Internet technology particularly Web 2.0 has led the development of social media. A widely accepted definition of social media was coined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as referring to 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (p.61). Manning (2014) asserted that the core characteristics of social media include their ability to offer some form of participation

among users and interactivity. According to Statcounter Global Stats as of November 2018, Facebook (FB) is leading other social networking sites among Malaysian social media users followed by Twitter and YouTube (see Table 2).

Table 2: Social Media in Malaysia.

No.	Social Media	Percentage
1	FB	82.75%
2	Twitter	5.14%
3	YouTube	4.68%
4	Pinterest	3.83%
5	Instagram	2.05%
6	Tumblr	1.09%

Source: Statcounter Global Stat, November 2018.

ComScore, a leading cross-platform measurement company reported that the total digital audience in Malaysia has reached to 18.8 million in April 2017 (ComScore, 4 July 2017). Out of this number, Google Sites ranked top with 15.5 million unique visitors followed by FB with 13.9 million visitors. ComScore also reported that there was 13.8 million mobile app audience in Malaysia with WhatsApp ranked first with 9.8mil unique visitors and followed by YouTube with 8.3 mil visitors. In view of the encouraging growth of social networking sites users in Malaysia, LinkedIn has decided to form an office in the country (Bernama, 18 December 2018). At present, there are four million Linked members nationwide. The presence of social media has enabled organizations to be less dependent on the traditional media, i.e. television, newspaper, radio. In this digital era, organizations can easily manage a direct communication with their stakeholders via their corporate website and many other social media platforms and apps. This has changed the communication and business strategies as a whole.

A qualitative study conducted among social media managers in Malaysia found that social media usage has greater impact on organizations' performance especially in terms of customer relations, customer service and access to information (Farzana Parveen, Noor Ismawati Jaafar & Sulaiman Ainin, 2015, p. 67). In the realm of business, social media content was perceived to significantly influence purchase decision (Shahizan Hassan, Othman Yeop Abdullah, Norshuhada Shiratuddin & Sohibatun Nur Ab. Salam, 2015). Strategic usage of social media requires communicator to think beyond the type of medium used but to seriously consider the content or substance to engage with intended stakeholders. DiStaso and McCorkindale (2012) argued that oftentimes companies posted meaningless information that are not helpful or bring mutual satisfaction to stakeholders (p.77). Worst when social media was used as channels to post announcement rather than engaging dialogue with stakeholders. In their article Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) proposed ten major points for companies to consider prior using the social media that include their readiness to interact and engage with stakeholders. In this context, social media is not a platform to sell companies ideas and products per say but it should be used to promote conversation, elicit feedback and offer information that stakeholders find worth and suit their needs.

Social Media and PR Practices

Social media have largely influenced the practice of PR. Wright and Hinson (2008) have initiated a longitudinal study on how new technologies have impacted PR practices since 2005. Their studies consistently found social media have transformed the way organizations communicate particularly with external stakeholders (Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2009, 2015). More than a decade ago, Fitch (2009) found that experienced PR practitioners' in Malaysia acknowledged of the profound effect of the new media on their profession. Most practitioners were fearful of the changing media landscape particularly due to lack of technological know-how in using the digital media platform (Fitch, 2009). A more recent finding by Gabriel and Koh (2016) found that PR practitioners in Malaysia have been actively using social media to communicate with various organizations' stakeholders.

Social media facilitate a continuous communication leading to a meaningful relationship between organizations and stakeholders. Unlike traditional media, social media empower both organizations and stakeholders to create, response and share information 24/7 thus perceived to be an ideal platform for dialogue and to sustain a long term relationship. However, Robson and James (2013) lamented that in many situations practitioners were mainly using social media for one-way communication instead of two-way dialogic communication. A study on CSR in the digital age among award winning companies in Malaysia also found social media were not used to foster a two-way communication between organizations-stakeholders (Ahmad, 2016). In this case, social media capability in promoting relationship and dialogue was often found underutilized. Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as any negotiated exchange of ideas (p.325). Both scholars also viewed online technology as 'convivial tools' (p.324) that promotes a cordial communication and mutual relationships. They proposed five strategies to create dialogue with online publics and that include organizations' initiative to encourage stakeholders' feedback and participation through online media. However, in their recent work, Kent and Taylor (2014) argued that social media have the potential not only to extent but to narrow relationship. They asserted that social media were not used to facilitate the essence of dialogue or interactivity but more likely to meet the interest of organizations. They emphasized that,

.... social media are not designed to offer more interactivity or the ability to customize content. Sites like Facebook and Twitter have evolved to follow a broadcast model of information and entertainment that relies on meeting the needs of advertisers and corporate interests, rather than the needs of the user (2014, p.16).

In this context, social media function was only to promote or advertise persuasive messages to the masses instead of targeted stakeholders. The goal of communication is to achieve organizational bottom line rather than strategically engage and build relationships with stakeholders. This implies that the function of social media was only to the advantage of the organizations and mainly use to convey information that organizations' feel useful. PR practitioners should reflect on this common practice and ought to find ways to optimize the true potential of social media that would bring value to both organizations and stakeholders. As the communication guardian, PR practitioners should provide appropriate content that suits the needs of their respective stakeholders and leverage on the interactive feature of social media to sustain a mutually beneficial relationship.

Social Media Challenges

The proliferation of social media and their user-generated content attribute at times impose great challenge to PR practitioners. Organizations are no longer in control of their information as other media users are now capable to respond to the information online. Literature affirmed that among PR practitioner's main challenged was not having the sole control over the information posted on social media (Wright & Hinson, 2008; Macnamara, 2010; McLennan & Howell, 2011; DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright 2011). In other words, organizations' stakeholders could actively communicate about the organizations on their social media account or by making comments on organizations' official social media. At the same time, stakeholders could extend organizations' information by sharing or forwarding it to others. Social media have empowered other stakeholders e.g. employees, bloggers, customers, community to generate content for publics' consumption and this include undesirable information or news about a specific organization. Stakeholders' participation online particularly on social media 'exposes companies to internal and external crises' (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011, p.326). A recent research found that stakeholders' negative comments online could ruin a company reputation (Ji, Li, North & Liu, 2017). Coombs and Holladay (2012) coined the risks that emerged online as 'paracrisis' (p.408) that mostly generated by stakeholders and that include when they expressed their dissatisfactions towards the organization or its services/product, expressing anger towards the company or merely making a false claim on social networking sites. Undesirable comments posted on social media could go viral and subsequently put the organizations in a negative light. At this juncture, social media monitoring should become mandatory as organizations need to respond to negative comments, complaints or accusation made immediately. Providing the right response at the right time would save companies' reputation.

The presence of social media has made PR task in managing crisis even more demanding than before. Stakeholders' negative comments, allegations and criticism towards a crisis could affect PR crisis management effort. Zheng, Liu and Davison (2018) explained that crisis information communicated among and by the public is coined as secondary crisis communication (SCC) (p.56). At times, stakeholders' comments and interpret organizations' crisis escalates the crisis in hand and subsequently prolonged PR's effort in solving the problem.

METHODOLOGY

This study was part of PR profile research conducted in 2018; the fifth longitudinal study conducted to update PR practitioners' profile in Malaysia. The project was pioneered by Syed Arabi Idid, a prolific PR researcher who had conducted the PR profile study since 1977. Syed Arabi conducted similar studies in 1992, 2003 and 2011. This study encompassed a nation-wide survey among PR practitioners working in various organizations in the country. Convenience sampling was utilized due to the absence of a comprehensive list of practitioners in Malaysia. Prospective respondents were identified from the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) membership's list, the Public Media directory 2017 beside personal contacts. The survey was mainly conducted in big towns and capital cities across the states, i.e., Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu, Kota Bharu, Johor Bharu, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching to name a few. However, the focus was in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur which is home to the majority of public relations offices.

Data collection took place at two phases. The first phase was mainly sending personalized email invitations with a survey link to respondents. Personalized email invitations were sent to respondents whom their contact details were found complete (e.g. email address, phone number were available). In the interim a follow up calls were made to increase response rate. However, the response was delayed and dismal. At the same time, WhatsApp was also used as a medium to reach respondents. WhatsApp's was mainly used to reach researcher's personal contacts who currently practicing PR in the country. The second phase of data collection started a month after the first phase was launched. New strategies were adopted in order to increase response. Research enumerators were employed to distribute and collect questionnaires nationwide. Local research enumerators from respective states were appointed to facilitate correspondence and survey form collections.

A total of 357 questionnaires were obtained from PR practitioners across the states but only 302 were found suitable for analysis. Among the reasons for the disqualifications were that the respondents did not practice public relations, or had not answered fully the questionnaire. There were more female respondents (60 percent) than males (40 percent). Respondents were relatively young as 76 percent were less than 40 years old and only 10 percent were aged 51 and above. In the area of education, majority (82 percent) of respondents have a degree. Practitioners' education also reflected on their high salary in which more than 50 percent are earning RM4, 000 and above.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study used 21 closed ended questions to measure the usage of social media among PR practitioners. Among others it seeks to explore PR practitioners' perception towards the effectiveness of social media and how practitioners use and manage social media at work. Respondents were also asked about their strategies in responding to complaints made on social media and how much time they took to respond to online enquiries.

Social Media Usage

In terms of social media usage, the study found that PR practitioners used multiple social media channels at work. However, these social media channels were used within varying degrees (Refer to Figure 1).

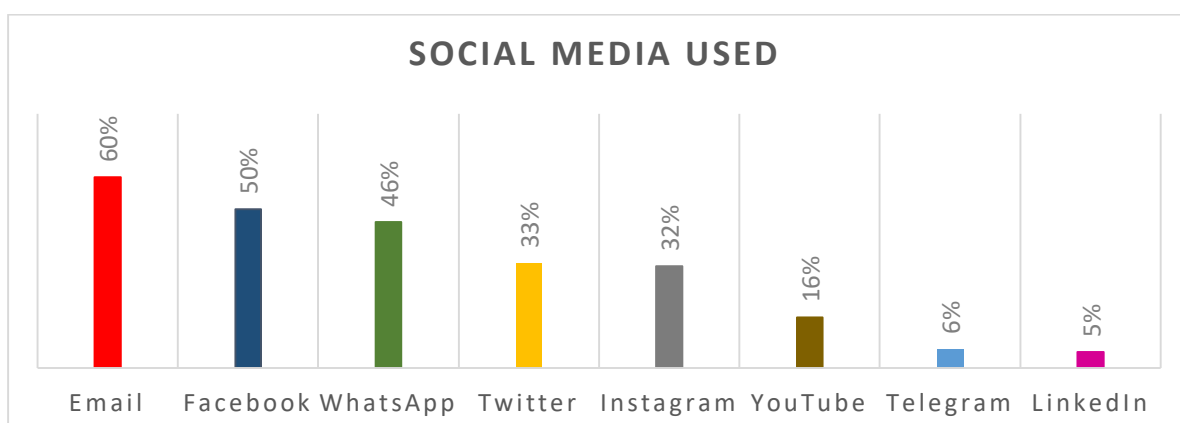


Figure 1: Frequency of Social Media Use (Seven Days a Week).

Email or electronic mail has been dominantly used (60 percent) by practitioners followed by other social networking sites. In terms of social networking sites, Facebook (50 percent) and WhatsApp (46 percent) were frequently used by practitioners. Whereas, Twitter (33 percent) and Instagram (32 percent) were relatively low in usage. The video sharing site, YouTube was not being used much as only 16 percent of PR practitioners claimed to use it. Similarly, Telegram; a free messaging app and LinkedIn; a social networking site that mainly used by professionals was rarely utilized by PR practitioners at work.

Literature affirmed that email has been recognized as a preferred channel of communication for most organizations in Malaysia (Hadina Habil, 2010). Besides participating in social networking sites, among popular activities on the Net include sending and receiving e-mails (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 29 July 2016). Email is a common and widely used communication channel to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. Similarly, Eyrich, Padman and Sweetser (2008) also found email as the most popular tool used by PR practitioners in the United States. Email facilitates business correspondence in an efficient and cost effective way.

The Internet World Statistics 2017 revealed that there are 22 million (68.5 percent) Facebook users in Malaysia (Chinnasamy, 28 February 2018). In addition, it is common for contemporary organizations to have official Facebook accounts beside corporates' website. The usage of Facebook was also found to be dominant in Wright and Hinson (2015) tenth longitudinal analysis of social media impact on PR practices. WhatsApp has becoming a popular text messaging app in Malaysia. The Digital News Report 2017 found that Malaysians are the world's largest users of WhatsApp (Bernama, 12 September 2017). WhatsApp has been widely used at numerous levels and that includes at the organizational setting.

The Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media

Despite a moderate use of social media, of PR practitioners continue to perceive that social media are effective tools to engage with stakeholders. The study found that most PR practitioners claimed social media as effective tool to engage with stakeholders (91 percent) (see Figure 2). Social media enabled organization to distribute information to their stakeholders at any time without going through the media gatekeepers' censorship. The interactive feature of social media facilitates a two way communications between organizations and stakeholders thus dubbed as an ideal channel for dialogue. Social media also permit PR practitioners to provide immediate response to stakeholders' inquiries.

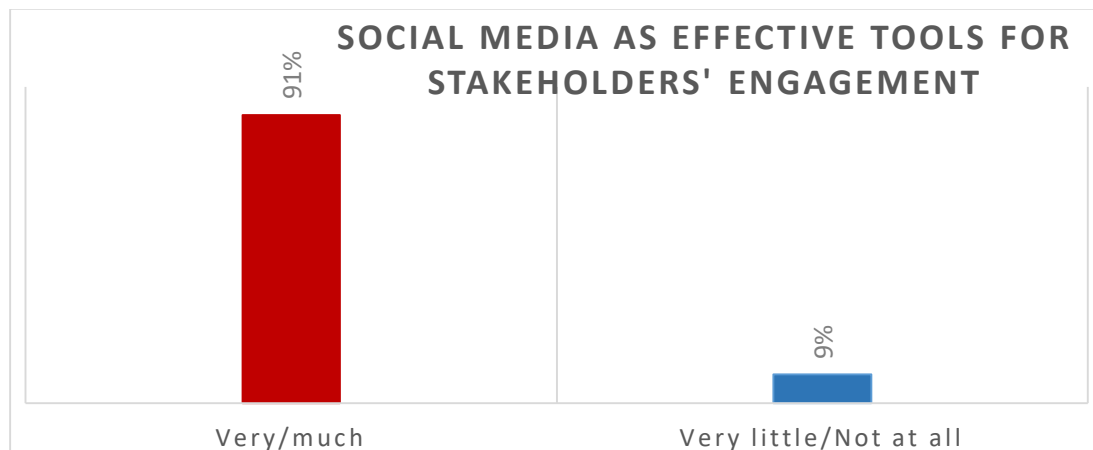


Figure 2: Social Media as Effective Tools for Stakeholders' Engagement.

Managing Social Media

This study found that managing organizations' social media was not an exclusive function of PR. In some organizations, PR has not been given a role to manage companies' social media. The data revealed that only 53 percent of PR practitioners claimed that their department was entirely in charged to manage organizations' social media accounts. While 21 percent stated that managing social media was under PR's purview most of the time. Whereas, 20 percent asserted that PR was only partly responsible and 6 percent stated PR has no responsibility at all in managing organizations' social media (Figure 3). Generally, managing social media was largely under the purview of PR. Thus, is important for PR practitioners to update their knowledge and skills, and overcome possible constraints that could restrict them for taking charge of social media. This is vital to lessen the likelihood of other departments to encroach or take control of social media.

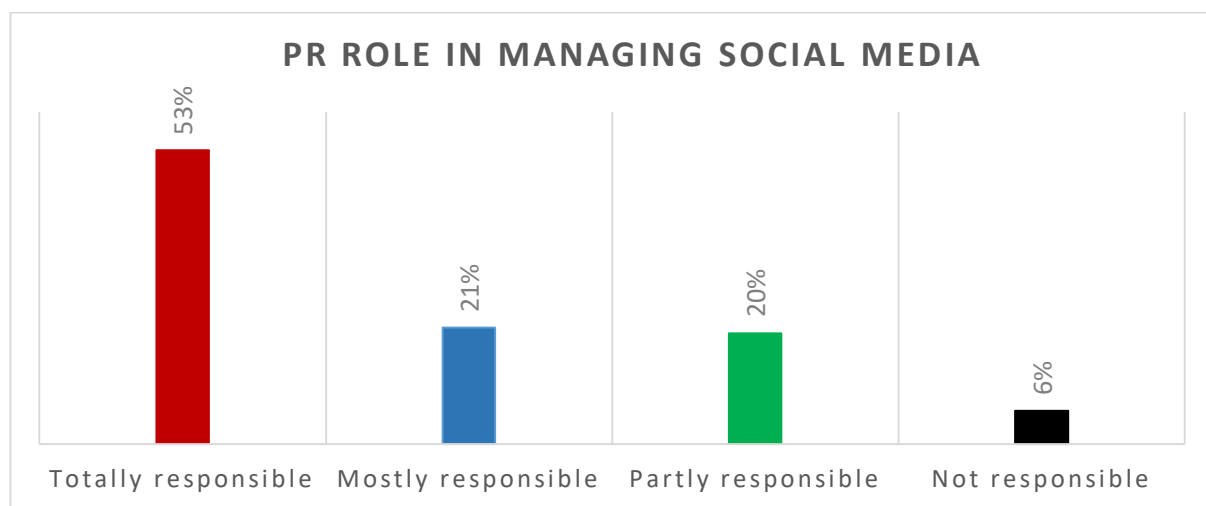


Figure 3: PR Role in Managing Social Media.

Social media management is becoming instrumental as it helps organizations to optimize their value via digital communication platform. Strategic social media management is not limited to production of social media contents but include monitoring information posted by social media users from time to time. Organizations' stakeholders actively used social media to make general inquiries, seek justifications and also as a platform to complaint. In addition, the presence of social media has created new expectations among

stakeholders, e.g. organizations' frequent updates, immediate response to inquiries that has made PR's role more demanding than before.

Social media management is beyond a simple content production and publishing it. Torning, Jaffari and Vatrapu (2015) found several challenges of social media management that include operational issues, content production that appeals to users, and its comparative advantage to organizations. Therefore, PR practitioners must ensure that social media are not merely used to promote organizations' stories but also useful for stakeholders' consumption. At the same time, demonstrating the value of social media in meeting organizational goal is also vital.

Monitoring comments posted on social media has become an important activity for most organizations. This study found more than 90 percent PR practitioners stated that their organizations have assigned a dedicated personnel to monitor and respond to social media inquiries (see Figure 4). Based on anecdotal observation, a specific position to manage organizations' social media accounts have been created in recent years in various type of organizations in Malaysia. Companies feel the need to hire some personnel to manage their official social media accounts thus have started recruiting social media executive, social media listening analyst, digital media strategist to name a few. This demonstrates that a strategic management of social media requires specific resources and systematic coordination that will bring a good return of investment to organizations.

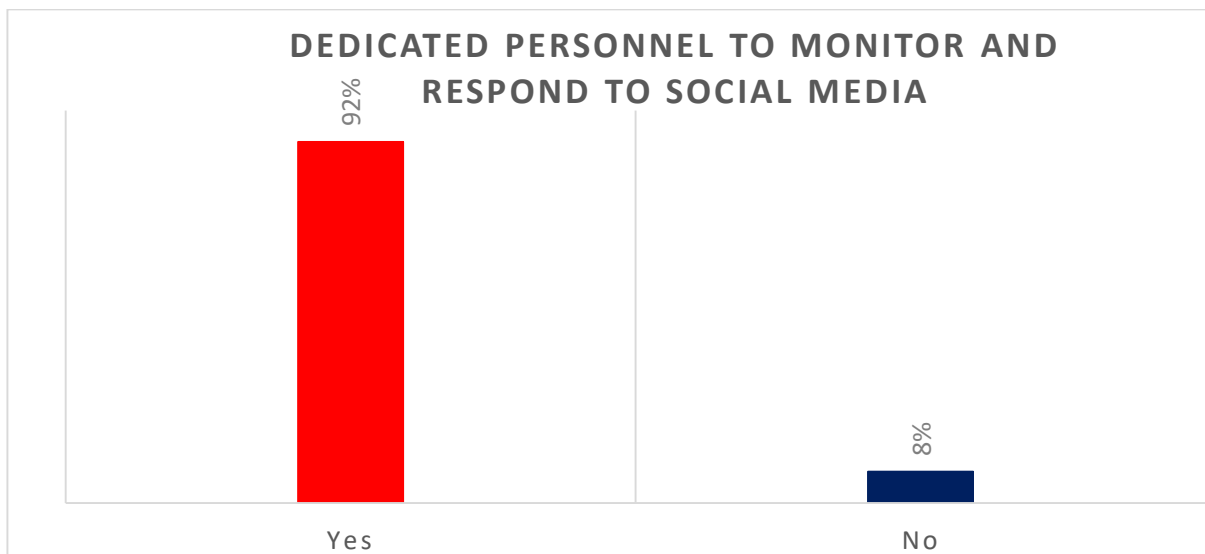


Figure 4: A Dedicated Personnel to Monitor and Respond to Social Media Inquiries.

Social media presence makes stakeholders accessible to the organizations around the clock. Comments on social media could be posted at time of a day. Therefore, keeping track of comments or issues raised by stakeholders on the social media cannot be taken for granted. Unattended inquiries or complaints could have severe consequences. In this case, having a dedicated personnel to monitor and respond to the social media inquiries is imperative. Social media monitoring could now be regarded as a proactive effort to scan issues and problems raised by online audience that should not be taken for granted.

Responding to Inquiry and Complaint on Social Media

Oftentimes inquiry was made out of an interest to know more about a product, issue or services. In this digital era, it is common to see inquiries made social networking sites. For example, a potential customer may inquire about a specific product promoted on Instagram prior making a purchase decision. An inquiry made on social networking sites such as FB, Instagram, Twitter will be seen by others. In other words, a personal inquiry has now become public. PR practitioners should take this opportunity to engage with the inquirer by responding to her question adequately. Responding to a question online is a form of service render by an organization to meet the need of customers or potential customers. A positive experience acquired online contributes to favourable perception towards the company and is likely to influence purchase decision. More importantly, a good treatment given online could be witnessed by many other media users and subsequently garner their interest.

This study has among others explore on PR practitioners' response time when they received an inquiry online. The study found that immediate response was not widely adopted. Only 52 percent of PR practitioners responded to social media enquiries immediately whereas 38 percent response within 24 hours. The rest took a longer time prior giving response that stretches more than 24 hours (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Time Taken to Respond Online.

Giving an immediate response to inquiry is commendable as it creates a good impression. However, this is not possible at all times. In certain situation PR practitioners may require more time prior responding. A delayed response given to an inquiry may result loss of interest and negative perception about the organizations as a whole. This study suggests PR practitioners to put more effort and not to take online inquiry for granted.

Beside general inquiry, social media users also post complaints online. Larivet and Brouard defined complaint as a form of protest to a firm with a goal to obtain an exchange, a refund or an apology (in Garding & Bruns, 2015, p.13). In this context, complaints normally arise from customers or stakeholders who are unsatisfied with an organization's product, services or programme. The publics use multiple platform to express their grievances. Social media have now become a channel used by customers to express their frustration and complaint. Bach and Kim (2012) found that high-performing business is more likely to adopt a proactive approach to complaint as compared to low performers.

Complaints made on social media are difficult to handle than general inquiry. Stritesky and Stranska (2015) asserted that publics lodged a complaint on social media to make organizations more responsive as the issue they raised has now become public. PR practitioners have adopted multiple approaches in responding to complaints online. The study found ignoring complaints and removing what the complainer's post on social media were the least popular ways adopted by PR practitioners. More than half (57 percent) of respondents prefer to respond to the complaint immediately by posting comments online. Texting a private message seems to be more popular than giving a call to complainers. The data revealed 41 percent would text a private message while only 18 percent prefer to make a call directly to the complainers. Only a small number claimed to remove (4 percent) or ignore the complaint (2 percent) they received online (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Response Strategies to Complaints.

It is worth to note that posting a reply online seems ideal as it promotes greater transparency and contributes to positive impression. However, it may not be the best approach and successful in all situations. A study on complaints and complaint responses on Facebook and Twitter pages of large US companies in the United States revealed that organizations response to complaint was just moderate and nearly half (47 percent) of complaints remained unanswered (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015).

This study showed that PR practitioners in Malaysia more inclined to handle complaints in private instead of public probably to lessen plausible risks. Texting to a complainant directly enabled PR practitioners to focus on his or her specific needs, and offers space to prepare an appropriate response (for example, texting allows practitioners to choose the right words in their response) instead of speaking directly with the complainer. Similarly, making a personal call allows practitioners to provide an exclusive attention to the complainant prior responding. PR practitioners will be able to listen and understand actual issues or need raised by the complainant. Bach and Kim (2012) affirmed that the core of strategic management of PR is its ability to address stakeholders' concern or problem leading to organizations' improvement and effectiveness. On the other hand, ignoring complaint is not without consequences. An attempt to remain silent may indicate that the organization do not bother about the issue raised thus creates negative impression

to the complainant and others. Finally, removing a complaint posted could be interpreted as a short cut to resolve issue. However, drawing from social media experts' experience, deleting a complaint post by complainant would escalate the issue (Stříteský & Stránská, 2015) thus not worth performed. This study shows that most practitioners were less likely to delete complainants' responses or ignore complaints they received online.

Social Media as a Challenge to PR Practices

The study also found that most PR practitioners perceived social media could inflict harm to organizations' reputation. More than 80 percent of PR practitioners viewed social media have the potential to destroy the organizations' reputation (see Figure 7). This could be attributed to user generated content of social media that allows stakeholders to provide comments or feedback including the negative ones that could tarnish the reputation of the organizations. In this case, organizations do not have full control of their information as stakeholders will continue to response, interpret, forward and shared organizations' issues via their social media to others. Negative remarks posted on social media is largely exposed for public consumption and will likely impose a negative consequence on companies' reputation. In this digital era, organizations are expected to provide continuous update, immediate response to inquiry and practice greater transparency. Failure to meet these expectations contribute to stakeholders' frustration leading to negative perception towards organizations' image. Thus, managing social media and responding to stakeholders' inquiries and complaints ought to be an integral part in organizations' daily operation.

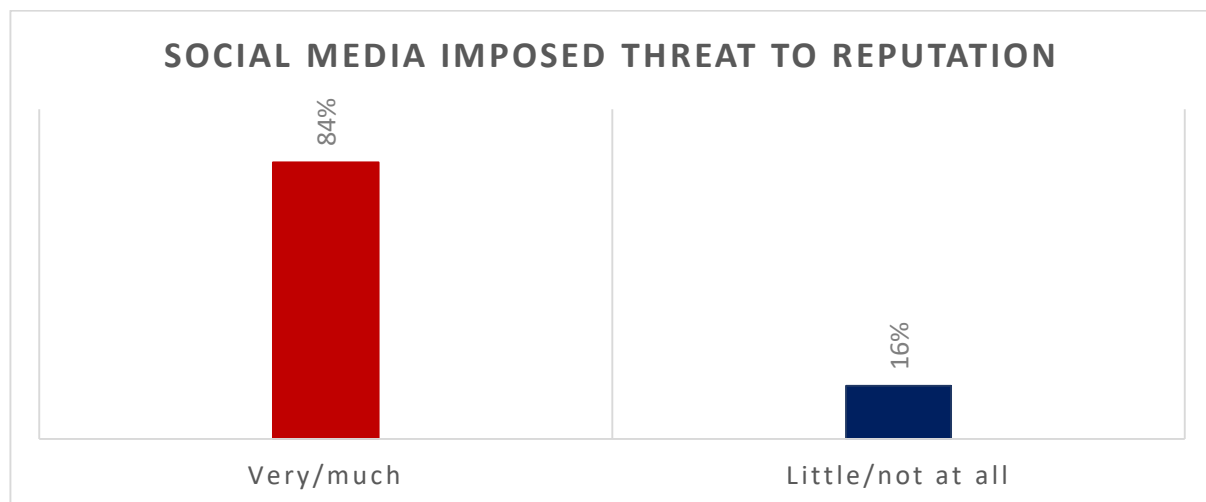


Figure 7: Social Media as a Threat to Reputation.

In the last section of the survey form, respondents were asked to comment on the challenge of PR in Malaysia. All comments received have been transferred to Words file. Later, a close reading has been carried out to identify frequent key words used. These key words were coded, and similar key words or sentence that have similar meaning were group into one category. Two dominant themes emerged from the analysis namely social media and PR practices. Social media were found to be one of the major challenge to contemporary PR practitioners. The findings among others showed that most PR practitioners perceived social media were capable to impose damaging outcome and threaten the reputation of organizations. Key words such as 'disruption, threat, harmful, challenges, damaging' were used to describe the effects coming from the social media. Two

respondents expressed their concern of the undesirable effects of social media when they wrote,

...social media do help in promoting and improving organization's corporate image, but still it become the No 1 most harmful threat to the management (Respondent A).

Social media is one of the challenges that cannot be taken lightly, it may bring down the reputation within minutes... (Respondent B).

The first respondent acknowledged social media as an ideal tool to promote organizations' image but continue to warn about their ability to impose risk at the same time. The second respondent emphasized on how social media could bring down a company's reputation within a short period of time.

Organizations can easily communicate their products, services and programmes through their own social media accounts. Oftentimes, social media are used to share persuasive messages that would further achieve organizational goals thus more likely to be self-serving. Nevertheless, organizations are not capable to stop what others share or comments on social media. Negative comments may go viral and subsequently tarnished organizations' image. It is worth to highlight that social media allow others to create content and share it publicly. A respondent highlighted that this user generated content could be problematic. He stated that,

Social media is a broad platform to express perceptions/feelings. Hence as practitioner we have to be more aware of PR issues... (Respondent C).

In this regard, organizations' stakeholders may use social media as an avenue to response to organizations' actions or products/services. Personal grievances written by one person is easily viewed and shared with the others across different social networking sites. In addition, negative reviews were made by disgruntled, irresponsible stakeholders. The undesirable remarks posted on social media could become viral or widespread in a matter of seconds.

Social media are at times abused by irresponsible parties to meet their personal goal. Thus, practitioners have to be wary of any untrue information distributed through the social media that could be damaging to companies' image. Respondent D and E cautioned that the publics may rely on rumours that spread by irresponsible social media users than official statement issued by organizations. He stated that,

...the misuse of media social may lead the irresponsible people to disseminate wrong information... (Respondent D).

...society depend on social media gossip more than the real statement from the organization (Respondent E).

In this case, PR practitioners would have a hard time to compete with invalidated claims that spread like wildfire on social media. It worth to highlight that at times, negative remark invites publicity as it attracts journalists from the mainstream media to cover it as news. At present it is common for journalists to publish post and comments that received

wide public attention in their news column. This study argues that social media functioned as a double-edged sword. Despite its ability to enhance the reputation of the organizations, they also have great potential to destroy it.

Therefore, despite being a strategic tool to promote organizations' goodness, PR practitioners should also anticipate the unintended consequences brought by social media. The impact of social media could be rewarding and challenging at the same time. Tench and Jones (2015) cautioned that the timely, interactive features of social media can destroy reputation, value and relationships; and ultimately bring down businesses (p. 294). Therefore, companies should anticipate undesired postings and comments from critical and irresponsible stakeholders. PR practitioners' readiness to respond and negotiate online is instrumental. In the digital era, PR practitioners should equip themselves on how to deal with speculation and accusation online in order to safeguard corporate's image.

CONCLUSION

This study has addressed the following objectives; i) to examine the social media usage among PR practitioners at work; (ii) to identify PR practitioners' perception on the effectiveness of social media as a tool to engage with stakeholders and (iii) to explore plausible risks imposed by social media on PR roles and practices. The findings showed that PR practitioners in Malaysia used multiple social media at work but their usage was just moderate. Email was dominantly used at work followed by Facebook. The usage of Email was also dominant among PR practitioners in the United States (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008). A longitudinal study conducted by Wright and Hinson (2015) also found Facebook was frequently used as compared to other social networking sites. In addition, text messaging app; WhatsApp has gained popularity as 46 percent of PR practitioners used it as a platform to communicate. Using several social media at work is not without a challenge. Making sure organizations' messages are constantly updated and consistent across these different channels of communication requires systematic coordination.

The usage of social media for communicating with internal and external stakeholders has grown rapidly in recent years. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become an integral part of organizations' operation. In view of this development, the study found that most organizations have assigned a dedicated personnel to manage their social media accounts. Drawing from PR perspective, social media should not only have used as a strategic tool to promote organizations' image but more importantly as a relational tool; to maintain a long term relationship between organizations-stakeholders online. However, social media capability in promoting relationship and dialogue is often underutilised. Thus, PR practitioners should take the initiative to increase a two-way communication between organizations and their stakeholders to sustain a long term relationship. At the same time, practitioners should take this opportunity to demonstrate their capability in optimizing the usage of social media that brings value to the organizations and the publics they served. A systematic social media management that is beyond posting organizations' information and responding to comments is required to achieve this purpose. This study suggests PR practitioners to undergo a continuous training to equip them with the technical know-how to manage social media effectively.

The presence of social media makes organizations operate 24/7. These online platforms never sleep thus allows organizations' stakeholders to make inquiry or post comments at any time. In this context, social media users expect organizations to give immediate response to their inquiries. Failure to provide a timely and the right response

may jeopardize organizations' image. Nonetheless, the study found that only 50 percent of PR practitioners provide immediate response to inquiry they received via social media. Another 50 percent of practitioners need at least 24 hours or more prior responding to inquiries online. In this case, giving an immediate reply may create a positive impression but, providing appropriate response is more paramount than speed. This study argues that responding to inquiry is an opportunity to engage with stakeholders in order to understand their need better. Practitioners may have their own reasons and constraints that inhibited them from responding to inquiry immediately. However, they ought to think of ways to overcome these constraints in order to meet the current expectation of the online media users.

PR practitioners also adopted multiple response strategies to complaints made through social media. Replying directly to complaint on social media may be ideal but not taken up by all PR practitioners. More than half of practitioners adopted to handle complaint in private, i.e. personally text to the complainants or give a personal call. Such response strategies provide space for PR practitioners to focus more on the complainers' need and minimise the involvement of other media users. Responding to complaint publicly is rather challenging as it is subject to many interpretations and allow others to involve in the issue thus make it even more complex. Effective handling of complaints may turn issues into opportunity and enhance public's confidence towards the organization. Interestingly, a small number of practitioners responded to complaint by removing it from the social media or ignoring it. Deleting complaints received on social media bear negative consequences if not being managed properly. Similarly, ignoring complaints by keeping silent reflects lack of responsibility or don't care attitude (Baer, 6 April 2017) that could easily morph into distrust and affects organizations' credibility. This study suggests a qualitative research to be carried out in order to explore plausible constraints experienced by practitioners in dealing with social media inquiries and complaints on social networking sites

The study also found social media are being regarded as one of a major challenge to the practice of PR. Most practitioners recognized social media potential in making and breaking organizations' reputation. What is spread on social networking sites is beyond organizations' control. Information travels very fast and reaching huge number of media users. Irresponsible acts of certain people who misused the social media by spreading untrue information, vent their frustration and anger on social media could also pose a threat to organizations' image. In this case, PR practitioners need to take a proactive action by scanning the social media environment for potential issues or crisis and take immediate action to mitigate undesirable effects. This study argues that social media functioned as a double-edge sword that could enhance organizations' performance and image if they are used strategically. Social media on the other hand, imposed negative effects if they are not being managed properly, or abused by irresponsible parties.

Communication technology will continue to evolve and transform over time. Similarly, new features will be added to social media to suit users demand. This innovation will continue to be a disruption to the practice of PR as it will affect their routine. PR practitioners ought to be ready to embrace these changes in order to stay competitive. As the communication guardian, PR practitioners must be able to optimize the usage of the latest communication technology in this case, the social media, to achieve organizational goals. At the same time, understanding the communication behaviour of the social media

users and their expectations, are prerequisite for an achieving a mutual and beneficial communication online.

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