

THE 6TH INTERNATIONAL SEARCH CONFERENCE 2019 PROCEEDINGS

NEW MEDIA AND DIGITAL INCLUSION:

EMBRACING THE 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

27 - 28 JUNE 2019

TAYLOR'S UNIVERSITY LAKESIDE CAMPUS
KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Edited by

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DIFFERENCES IN VISUAL-TEXTUAL PLATFORMS, TECHNICAL-STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION & PROFESSIONALISM VS ENCROACHMENT BETWEEN MALAYSIAN & AMERICAN PR PRACTITIONERS' SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES

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Abstract

Social media platforms and their affordances were found by researchers to affect the public relations industry and its practitioners' tasks. Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2016, 2017) longitudinal studies showed digital media including online social network sites drastically changed how PR is practised in the United States. This current localized research adapted and modified Wright and Hinson's (2016) survey instrument to compare Malaysian and American PR professionals' social media practices. Its Internet-based survey (N=95; reliability $\alpha=0.782$) found differences between Malaysian and US PR practitioners in terms of average time spent on social-media based tasks (above—below 50% majority respectively); types of social-media platforms preferred for PR work with notably Pinterest and Snapchat (Malaysian) versus Twitter and LinkedIn (American); the department mainly in charge of social-media communication with digital/social media and marketing in Malaysia while communication/PR in the US. These provide comparative insights into preference for visual versus textual-based platforms, technical versus strategic perspectives of social media, and professional PR versus encroachment by marketing in social media practices. Keywords: social media, public relations, Malaysia, comparative study, survey

Introduction

Due to the advances of technological innovations, public relations practitioners have embraced social and other emerging media technologies in their practices. The increasing use of social networking sites, microblogging, podcast, VODcasting, vlogs and video sharing services, for example, has changed and shaped the practice of public relations by creating opportunities for communication between organizations and its publics. Prior research shows that social and emerging media technologies have dramatically changed how public relations is practiced (Wright & Hinson, 2015; 2016; 2017). In particular, the pervasive use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has enabled public relations practitioners to create more avenues of interaction with their stakeholders. Wright and Hinson in their study (2017) also revealed that social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been frequently used in public relations practice

in the United States of America especially for external communication, and the percentage of time spent using social and other digital media for work is levelling off.

Prior research have shown that social media have been adopted as formal channels of communication in the Malaysian public relations industry (Lee & Low, 2013; Kalthom et al., 2014; Farzana et al., 2015; Gabriel & Koh, 2016; Tang & Chan, 2016). Lee and Low (2013) reported Malaysian public relations practitioners agreed that social media provide them prompt interactions and direct two-way communication to engage with organizational publics. While in Singapore, Sriramesh, Sanchez and Soriano (2013) found that an increasing number of organizations enhanced their external interactions by engaging in e-surveys and e-polls to gather feedback from a myriad of stakeholders; as for Thailand, Puksawadde, Rerkkang and Jirasophon (2015) mentioned that majority of public relation practitioners claimed they utilize social media to exchange news and information with consumers through which their opinions, attitudes and behaviours are collected.

In Malaysia, there was an estimated 24.5 million Internet users in 2016 (76.9% of population), and of those who visited social networking sites, 97.3% of them owned a Facebook account, followed by Instagram (56.1%) as reported by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2017). Although there is an increase in research investigating the use of social and emerging media in public relations practices, research to understand the patterns of social media usage in Malaysia is still inadequate, therefore this research paper seeks to examine whether or not there are differences in the usage of social and emerging media in public relations practices in America and Malaysia, as well as investigating the impact of social and emerging media technologies on their respective PR industry practices.

Literature Review

Social media technologies, also known as Web 2.0, are new electronic and web-based communication channels such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, chat rooms, discussion forums, RSS feeds, websites, as well as social networking sites such as MySpace, Second Life and other dialogue-creating media (Moyer, 2011). Social media was defined as a term that is broadly used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Tess, 2013). Due to its ability to connect with people, social media have become essential to public relations as a tool for communicating with strategic publics because social media enables real-time, two-way communication (Lewis & Nichols, 2016). Literature shows that public relations practitioners and organizations have increasingly used social media for various purposes. For example, organizations have used social media for their communication with customers, competitors and employees to create dynamic, synchronized, and multidirectional dialogue (Reitz, 2012). In another study, social media are considered cost-effective tools for timely targeted dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011).

From the perspectives of Asian public relations industry, Corduan (2017) brought up the situation where Asian PR practitioners tend to post more on social networks and communicate frequently with publics via Internet. Asian PR practitioners usually write longer posts on social network sites in which they tend to describe and elaborate the information with more details, thus a more stable interpersonal relationship could be built as the Asian PR practitioners use friendlier

and more convincing tone in communicating with publics on social networks. Sriramesh, Rivera-Sanchez and Soriano (2013) stated Singaporean corporate websites were used to disseminate online videos of previously held publicity events or upcoming promotions, and practitioners use their Twitter and Facebook accounts to facilitate consumers' access to information on various activities and materials. Similarly, Puksawadde, Rerkkang and Jirasophon (2015) stated that PR practitioners from private sectors in Thailand utilize social media as a platform to disseminate news releases for campaigns and announcements of future special events.

According to Lee and Low (2013), the explosion in social media especially social networking sites such as Facebook with increased connectivity and interactivity, has caused many Malaysian public relations practitioners to recognize the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with internal and external audiences, in addition to new media enabling PR practitioners to keep in touch with their target audience through various ways such as contests or giveaways, uploading photos and videos, to create long-term interactive relationships. Farzana, Nor Ismawati and Sulaiman (2015) stated that social media are used to gather updates, feedbacks and opinions from organizational customers in Malaysia in order to fulfil their needs. Gabriel and Koh (2016) conducted a study with Malaysian public relations practitioners and found that they were actively using social media to communicate directly with various constituents and further produce the desired results.

Kalthom, Aida, Mastura, Mohd Fauzi, Anidah, Mohaida and Syed Najmuddin (2014) pointed out that social media has become a powerful tool for crisis communicators as they can convey messages at spontaneous speed, thus the immediacy, ubiquity, and availability of social media are changing the way how PR practitioners manage their communication while dealing with crisis issues, besides serving as platforms to maintain an organization's reputation by countering mainstream media's alleged indiscriminate reporting before an organization has presented its official responses. Tang and Chan (2016) also discussed social media allowing PR practitioners to make instant responses about serious issues threatening an organization's reputation, where they are often utilized to respond immediately toward external criticisms as the fastest way to face an arising matter.

A concern raised by researchers was on the measurement of public relations practices including work utilizing social media platforms. In Leong, Krishnan and Lee's (2012) study, public relations practitioners in Malaysia acknowledged the importance of evaluation research, yet the lack of budget and support from the top management have hampered the measurement of public relations practices. Noteworthy too is Macnamara, Lwin, Adi and Zerfass's (2016) allegations that some organizations and individuals used anonymous accounts to comment on their own posts to boost their organization's products or services. These tactics known as "ghost commenting" or "ghost blogging" lead to lack of transparency and involve promotion presented in a deceptive way that could influence the accuracy and effectiveness of online evaluations for clients, the market and general public.

Research Objectives

The two research objectives guiding this study are:

- RO1:** To examine how public relations practitioners in Malaysia and America use social and other emerging media in public relations practices.
- RO2:** To investigate the impacts of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia as compared to America.

Research Methodology

A web-based survey through Qualtrics.com was used to answer the two research questions of this study which asked about how public relations practitioners in Malaysia have used social and other emerging media in their practices and the impact of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia – for internal and external communications.

The public relations practitioners in this sample are those in the public relations agencies (external public relations) as well as in corporations and organizations (internal public relations) in Malaysia. The survey link from Qualtrics.com was distributed to public relations practitioners in Malaysia via email, as well as through postings on Facebook and LinkedIn. The respondents were selected via random sampling of members of Public Relations Consultants' Association (PRCA) Malaysia who received email invitations to participate in the survey.

A total of 95 public relations practitioners in Malaysia completed the survey and the data was transferred from Qualtrics.com to IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25 and was further analyzed using descriptive statistics. Although the number of respondents is not enough to generalize to the public relations population in Malaysia, yet, it does provide useful insight and aid in understanding the pattern of usage of social and emerging media by public relations professionals in Malaysia.

Research Findings

Demographics

Firstly, Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents worked as internal public relations (n=67, 70.5%), while the remaining 27 respondents (28.4%) worked as consultants in public relations agencies. Next, of those who reported their gender, 72.6% of them were male (n = 69) and 24.2% of them were female (n = 23). In terms of race, 75.8% of the respondents were Chinese, followed by Malay (9.5%), Indian (6.5%) and others (6.5%). Majority of those surveyed were younger than 30 years old (n=59, 62.1%) and the respondents' working experience in public relations ranging from two months to 30 years with an average of 5.45 years.

Findings 1: **Malaysian** Respondents' demographic profiles

		Respondents (N=95) <i>* few did <u>Not</u> answer</i>	Percentage (%)	Mean/Average
Organizational settings	In-house public relations	67	70.5	
	External public relations	27	28.4	
Gender	Male	69	72.6	
	Female	23	24.2	
Age	Younger than 30	59	62.1	
	30 - 39	21	22.1	
	40 - 49	10	10.5	
	50 - 59	2	2.1	
Race	Malay	9	9.5	
	Chinese	72	75.8	
	Indian	6	6.5	
	Others	6	6.5	
Years of experience in public relations				5.45 years

Findings 2: **Average Time** spent for PR practices on social and emerging media

Note: All **American** respondents' data are from Wright & Hinson (2017)

Time spent on social and emerging media	American PRPs (%)	Malaysian PRPs (%) (N=95)
None	2	1
1% - 10% of time	20	12
11% - 25% of time	38	20
26% - 50% of time	26	37
51% - 75% of time	10	25
More than 75% of time	4	5

Average Time Spent

Results in Table 2 show there is difference between Malaysian and American PR practitioners surveyed. A majority of 37% respondents in Malaysia spent 26% to 50% of their time on average

with social and emerging media for PR purposes, and 30% of them spent 51% to 75% of their time on it, while 33% of respondents spent a quarter or less of their time on these tasks. For Americans, based on Wright & Hinson's (2017) findings, a vast majority of 60% among respondents spent 25% or less of their time on social and emerging media, with 26% indicated 26% to 50% time spent, and 14% stated 51% to 75% time utilized.

Findings 3: Frequency of usage on social and emerging media (Platform)

	American PRPs (Mean)	Malaysian PRPs (Mean) (N=95)
Facebook	4.36	4.52
Instagram	3.39	4.27
LinkedIn	3.60	4.26
Snapchat	2.25	4.22
Pinterest	2.17	4.21
Flickr	2.05	4.09
Tumblr	1.70	4.09
YouTube	3.25	3.95
Google+	2.30	3.95
Twitter	4.29	3.84

Frequency of Platform Usage

In another question on frequency of usage shown in Table 3, the authors queried respondents on the frequency of using 10 social and emerging media technologies as part of PR work. Among Malaysian PR practitioners, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest were the top-five most used media for PR practices with respective mean score of 4.52, 4.27, 4.26, 4.22 and 4.21. The other media which were frequently used by PR practitioners for work purposes which have mean score above 4.00 were Flickr and Tumblr (both M=4.09).

The results above contrasted with those found by Wright & Hinson (2017) among PR practitioners in the United States. The top-two ticks by Americans were Facebook (M=4.36) and Twitter (M=4.29), followed by the next three tops of LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube with respective mean score of 3.60, 3.39 and 3.25.

Findings 4: Departments primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication

Departments/Organizational Functions	American PRPs (%)	Malaysian PRPs (%) (N=95)
Digital or Social Media	12	31
Communications or Public Relations	63	27
Marketing	15	23
Technology (IT)	0	4
Others	7	7
Don't know	1	3
This responsibility hasn't been assigned	1	4

Department Primarily Responsible

Next, the respondents were also asked about the department or organizational function which is primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in their organization as well as another question about the department or organizational function which should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in their organization.

The results in Table 4 show that there were differences between PR practitioners from Malaysia and the United States. The majority of Malaysian respondents (31%) claimed that Digital/Social Media personnel are primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication, followed by Communications/PR (27%) and Marketing (23%). In contrast, based on Wright & Hinson's (2017) data, American respondents noted overwhelmingly that 63% of social and digital media communication are primarily monitored and managed by Communication/PR staff, with 15% by Marketing, and 12% by Digital/Social Media.

Findings 5: **Measuring** communication via social and emerging media

	American PRPs (%)	Malaysian PRPs (%) (N=95)
Yes	48	38
No	37	36
Uncertain/Don't know	15	26

Research and Measurement

In terms of research and measurement on the communication by public relations practitioners via social and other emerging media, the results comparing this study's Malaysian respondents with those in the United States based on Wright & Hinson's (2017) data in Table 5 reveal that Malaysian respondents reported nearly the same percentage of 38% who measured versus 36% who did not conduct such research, while 26% of them were uncertain or did not know. To the contrary, 48% of American respondents conducted measurement as oppose to 37% who did not, with 15% uncertain or unknowing (Wright & Hinson, 2017).

Discussions

Referring to this study's **RO1**: *To examine how public relations practitioners in Malaysia and America use social and other emerging media in public relations practices*, the average time spent by PR practitioners as shown in Table 2 indicated that the majority of 37% respondents in Malaysia spent 26% to 50% of their time, plus another 30% spent 51% to 75% of their time on average, with social and emerging media for PR purposes. Comparatively, a vast majority of 60% among American respondents spent 25% or less of their time on social and emerging media.

This could be a reflection of the newness of social media-based PR in Malaysia as compared with the more matured social media milieu in the United States, seeing that emergent media had quite a head start in America than in Malaysia. Although this current study's findings mirror those of prior Malaysian new-media PR research such as by Lee and Low (2013), Gabriel and Koh (2016), Tang and Chan (2016), yet it might also reflect the findings of Fitch (2009), in which entailed Malaysian PR practitioners being hesitant to use new media because experienced

practitioners were seemingly fearful of the changing communication environment and they expressed concerns about the loss of interpersonal contact.

In addition for **RO1**, the frequency of social media platform usage shown in Table 3 indicated that among Malaysian PR practitioners, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest were the top-five most used platforms for PR practices, which contrasts with that of PR practitioners in the United States whose top-five were Facebook and Twitter followed by LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube.

Noteworthy for Malaysian respondents were their preference for Snapchat and Pinterest, two social media platforms missing from American respondents' main usages; while on the other hand, Twitter and YouTube were absent among Malaysian practitioners' main platforms. This finding raises the query of whether Malaysian PR practitioners and their targeted public alike, much prefer visual-based media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest) as compared with those that are comparatively more text-based for Americans (Twitter, LinkedIn). Subsequent studies could look into the possibility of country and cultural differences in pictures telling thousands of words versus that of words being mightier in detail and sharper in descriptions.

Onto **RO2**: *To investigate the impacts of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia as compared to America*, the results in Table 4 showed that the majority of Malaysian respondents (31%) claimed that Digital/Social Media personnel are primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication, followed by Communications/PR (27%) and Marketing (15%), while American respondents noted overwhelmingly that 63% of social and digital media communication are primarily monitored and managed by Communication/PR staff.

Thus, it is interesting to explore further the reasons for Malaysian PR practitioners having placed social media communication in a department supposedly in-charge of digital technology, rather than one that is primarily conducting communication tasks. While the former are experts in innovative platforms that disseminate information and evaluate data, but the latter being specialists in communication are directly involved in the essentials of publicity and promotion work relevant to the roles of PR practitioners. Also observed is Malaysian PR's social media roles being placed under marketing departments that raises concerns of overall encroachments of expertise, one by the technical domain of digital media and the other by marketing specialists over that of public relations experts.

Also for **RO2**, the results comparing this study's Malaysian respondents with those in the United States based on Wright & Hinson's (2017) data in Table 5 revealed that Malaysian respondents reported nearly the same percentage of 38% who measured communication effectiveness versus 36% who did not conduct such research, while nearly half (48%) of American respondents conducted measurement as oppose to 37% who did not.

This possibly does not bear well for the local PR scene and industry as research is vital to accurately determine a PR task's aims, as well as measurement being essential to gauge the effectiveness of PR work. DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) previously concluded that organizations should conduct trainings on how to determine what tools to use and how to

effectively measure their use, because social media measurement was a topic that many of the practitioners felt they had more questions than answers. Therefore, strategic and professional public relations face an uphill barrier in their achievements if scientific empirical based measurement and research are not the norm of Malaysian PR practices.

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Biography

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