



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 are found by researchers to affect the public relations (PR) industry and its practitioners' tasks. Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2016, 2017) longitudinal studies showed digital media including online social network sites drastically changing the way PR is practised in the United States. This current localised research adapted and modified Wright and Hinson's quantitative survey instrument to compare Malaysian and American PR professionals' social media practices. This exploratory study provides comparative insights into the two countries' PR practitioners' preference for visual versus textual-based platforms, technical versus strategic perspectives of social media, and professional PR versus encroachment by marketing. The Internet-based survey (N=95; reliability $\alpha=0.782$) found differences between Malaysian and American 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— notably Pinterest and Snapchat (Malaysian) versus Twitter and LinkedIn (American); and the department in charge of social media communication— digital/social media and marketing in Malaysia versus communication/PR in the US.

Keywords: ***social media, public relations, Malaysia, comparative study, survey***

INTRODUCTION

Due to the advances of technological innovations, public relations (PR) practitioners have embraced social and other emerging media technologies in their practices. The increasing use of social networking sites, microblogging, podcasts, VODcasting, vlogs and video-sharing services, for example, has changed and shaped the practice of public relations by creating opportunities for communication between organisations and its publics. Prior research showed that social and emerging media technologies have dramatically changed how public relations is practised (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. Equally notable, since the “one size fits all” style cannot fulfil varied audiences’ interests, needs and concerns, public relations practitioners are compelled to design and spread messages according to different cultures, backgrounds and social media platforms.

Wright and Hinson (2017) also revealed that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are frequently used in public relations practice in the United States of America especially for external communication; however, the percentage of time spent using social and other digital media for work is levelling off. In Malaysia, there was an estimated 24.5 million Internet users in 2016 (76.9% of the population), and of those who visited social networking sites, 97.3% of them owned a Facebook account followed by Instagram (56.1%) (MCMC, 2017).

Although more studies are investigating the use of social and emerging media in public relations practices, the patterns of social media usage in Malaysia are still not well-understood. Therefore this exploratory research seeks to examine the differences in the usage of social media for public relations practices between American PR practitioners and Malaysian PR practitioners in terms of time spent, platform preferences as well as the departments primarily responsible. The study also intends to determine the assessments conducted and explore possible reasons for these differences between both countries.

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). Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) described social media as internet data 2.0 that allows people to exchange user-generated contents while enabling public relations practitioners to access vast channels through which they could collect data and information, monitor public opinions and consumer voices as well as engage directly with audiences. Social media is also a broad term used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Tess, 2013). Additionally, Macnamara, Lwin, Adi and Zerfass (2016) articulated social media as shared media because they allow followers, subscribers and friends to post, comment and share on Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and others. Due to their ability to connect with others, social media have become essential to public relations as a tool for communicating with strategic publics because they enable real-time, two-way communication (Lewis & Nichols, 2016).

Literature shows that public relations practitioners and organisations increasingly use social media for various purposes. Social media are considered cost-effective tools for timely targeted dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders (DiStaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011). Further, organisations also use social media for their communication with employees, clients and customers to create dynamic, synchronised, and multidirectional dialogue (Reitz, 2012). In this regard, Taylor and Kent (2014) stated that social media are the new tools for public relations practitioners, enabling a variety of new communication channels, strategies and tactics to reach external audiences. They elaborated that as public relations firms utilise social media to inform and publicise as well as attract media and consumers' attention, practitioners nowadays no longer have to depend solely on traditional media platforms.

In this digital age, technological developments have and continue to profoundly affect the practices of different industries, and the public relations field bears no exception. Corduan (2017) noted that in examining the best option to interact with consumers, studies have shown that creating personalised and dialogic communication with them is very much preferred. The social and emerging media provide interactive and proactive platforms that could build relationships between organisations and stakeholders via dialogues that are considerably in-depth, personal and conversational. This corroborates with Macnamara, Zerfass, Lwin and Adi's (2018) who argued that the excellence theory is the most practical as it upholds two-way communication and symmetry while maintaining relationships between the corporation, its stakeholders and their internal and external environments. Further, according to Wolf and Archer (2018), the sustained effort to build relationships with various stakeholders of the organisation is the main practice of public relations and most contemporary research is based on the assumption that social media are tools for building relationships. Therefore the emergence of these social media platforms has enabled immediate and direct communication with various publics and vice-versa through to-and-fro feedback that culminates in mutual evaluations.

According to Lee and Low (2013), Malaysian PR practitioners agreed that social media provide them prompt interactions and direct two-way communications to engage with organisational publics. Additionally, Farzana, Nor Ismawati and Sulaiman (2015) stated that social media are used to gather updates, feedbacks and opinions from organisational customers in order to fulfil their needs. According to Gabriel and Koh (2016), Malaysia's PR practitioners use social media as tools to reach the public directly and constantly to identify their basic needs, desires and current trends, in order to create mutually beneficial relationships. Zeti Azreen (2019) also acknowledged that Malaysian organisations perceive that social media are able to create two-way communication between the organisation and its stakeholders, through which all parties can share and discuss opinions via effective and inexpensive ways. She added that corporations are able to establish direct communication with stakeholders easily in the digital age via their websites, digital apps and social media platforms.

In the context of Singapore, Sriramesh, Sanchez and Soriano (2013) found that an increasing number of organisations 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) contended that a majority of PR practitioners utilise social media to exchange news and information with consumers whilst collecting data about their opinions, attitudes and behaviours. They elaborated that PR practitioners from the private sector utilise social media as platforms to disseminate news releases for campaigns and announcements of special events. Sataporn, Achmad, Almarez and Anwar (2017) reported that in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, social media are platforms that ease government departments' two-way

communication with citizens as they enable the former to spread policy information to the public while the latter could leave comments and feedback about governmental initiatives. According to Sutherland (2017), in Vietnam, with the rapid utilisation of social media, incorporating them in campaigns has become necessary to reach online users who are increasingly becoming less inclined towards traditional mass media channels.

Macnamara et al. (2016) found that social media usage is almost on par with traditional media, with 75% of their sample PR practitioners agreeing that social media are more important while 76.5% still think that traditional media are more vital. They reported that social media have higher ranking of importance in the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and China, while countries like Japan, India and Hong Kong prefer traditional media. In Gabriel and Koh's (2016) research, 18 out of 22 interviewees agreed that social media are efficient interactional tools, having used social media to spread information about their organisation and release updates, notices, related product and service information. Macnamara et al. (2018) revealed that the usage of social media by PR practitioners was highest for "delivering messages" (66.7%). However, only 39.0% used it for "initiating web-based dialogues with stakeholders". Zeti Azreen's (2019) study reported that most PR practitioners (91%) believe and claim that social media are effective tools for interacting with stakeholders.

According to Macnamara et al. (2018), this contemporaneous model of new media is entering the commercialised communication landscape due to the emergence of social media and the shrinking of traditional media and advertising. Further, Wolf and Archer (2018) highlighted that the general consensus is that new communication platforms and tools offer new opportunities for communicators. Due to the rapid innovation of technology, communicators can produce content internally without outsourcing to external experts. Sutherland (2017) posited that people are reluctant to use mainstream media channels for communication due to high costs and decreasing audiences; one interviewee in the study shared that many brands are diverting budgets originally allocated for traditional marketing to social media activities. In the same way, PR practitioners' use of social media as their key channels for communication mirrors big changes in the relationship dynamics as the focus shifts away from traditional media.

However, there are markets that still prefer traditional media even though social media are ideal platforms for communication due to particular audience segments who can only be reached by traditional media. Moreover, even though there might be a decline in traditional advertising and shift to social media, the innovative functions provided by social media might not be fully maximised. Wolf and Archer (2018) mentioned that digital media tend to be linked with entertainment which is a less formal type of engagement, and added that they are particularly associated with the younger audience. According to Gabriel and Koh (2016), the effectiveness of social media depends on the type of information being transmitted, for example, serious content such as news is more suitable for the mainstream media. Thus they opined that new media cannot be an independent media by itself but should instead be, utilised together with mainstream media. This denotes that social media are beneficial in providing rapid informativeness while traditional media provide the required trustworthiness. Therefore, although some researchers think that traditional media's importance might be usurped by new media, there still exist an interdependent relationship between these two forms.

Sataporn et al. (2017) described social media as user-generated-content platforms as they afford not just interactions but self-creations between users and other users. However, Sutherland (2017) cautioned that the two-way conversational feature of social media is somewhat problematic due to the inability of predicting the online behaviours of the publics and stakeholders. These

uncertainties will increase the likelihood of reputation damage through negative comments or customer complaints. Based on Corduan's work (2017), brands and personalities need to be careful of these comments and respond promptly because of consequential negative cycles. According to Tang and Chan (2016), social media have no filter in the content of messages shared or published on sites and platforms. Therefore, to adapt to new media, PR practitioners need to grasp and overcome the challenges they will face in the anonymous space of the Internet. Digital and social media empower stakeholders such as employees, bloggers, customers and communities to produce content for public consumption, including detrimental information and negative news about specific organisations, their products and people.

Noteworthy too is Macnamara et al.'s (2016) claims that some organisations and individuals used anonymous accounts to comment on their own posts to boost their organisation's products or services. These tactics known as "ghost commenting" or "ghost blogging" can lead to lack of transparency and involves promotion presented in a deceptive way that could influence the accuracy and effectiveness of online evaluations for clients, the market and the general public. According to Wolf and Archer (2018), regardless of the level of online engagement with targeted publics, online monitoring and social listening are vital to public relations professionals. Zeti Azreen (2019) echoed this by adding that social media monitoring should be made mandatory as organisations have to respond immediately to any negative comments, accusations or complaints. Such is the importance of social media monitoring to PR practitioners as it helps them identify contents, visuals and personalities who could increase engagement rates, as well as zero in on issues that can potentially create negative perceptions about their organisations. Therefore it is helpful for PR practitioners to be prepared for responses and online negotiations. PR practitioners should know how to handle online speculations and allegations to protect their company's image.

Thus taking into consideration the free-for-all nature of social media that affords vast and rapid dissemination of user-generated content, opportunities for the possible onslaught of consumer complaints, negative comments and damaging accusations are rife. Kalthom et al. (2014) pointed out that social media have become powerful tools for crisis communicators as they can convey messages spontaneously. Thus the availability and immediacy of social media is also changing the way PR practitioners manage crises as they use the platforms to uphold their organisation's reputation and counter indiscriminate allegations or reporting before official responses are formulated and announced. Indeed, Lahav (2014) argued that social media can be a tool for crisis management whereby organisations can upload videos and post immediate responses instead of conducting press conferences, as the former is much more convenient and fast in countering any negative feedback and reporters' queries. Tang and Chan (2016) also agreed that social media allow PR practitioners to formulate instant responses to serious issues or criticisms that threaten an organisation's reputation.

Macnamara et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of social media to an organisation in communication because this phenomenon has created a new position called social-media influencers (SMIs). SMIs are seen as opinion leaders in social media because their followers tend to emulate SMIs—the products/services they use, their behaviours, lifestyle and worldviews. Most PR practitioners in Asia-Pacific are convinced that SMIs play an increasingly important role in the communication process, publicity and promotion of goods, services and brands. Thus, as Lahav (2014) pointed out, public relations practitioners recruit SMIs and develop a give-and-take relationship with popular influencers and bloggers, because they seemingly play the same role as reporters. Identifying the right SMI who could engage with a particular target group and inviting them to branding events or sending them products to review and endorse is way more effective

than using reporters to influence the target audience. Sutherland (2017) noted that in the Vietnamese PR industry, while positive media coverage in traditional media is still sought after by paying journalists, SMIs are now part of the mix too. According to Wolf and Acher (2018), due to the rapid rise of individual influencers or at times, a collaborative grouping of like-minded ones, the business of promoting, marketing and selling continues to undergo tremendous transformation and the dynamics of influencer engagement pose significant challenges for even the most experienced public relations professionals today.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The two research objectives (RO) guiding this exploratory study are:

RO1: *To examine differences in the usage of social media between Malaysian and American public relations practitioners, in terms of their time spent and platform preferences, the departments primarily responsible, and whether research and measurement are conducted.*

RO2: *To suggest possible reasons for these differences between Malaysian and American public relations practitioners' usage of social media technologies in their respective public relations industry practices.*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was utilised for this exploratory study, where an online-based survey through Qualtrics.com was used to query Malaysian PR practitioners about their time spent working via social media networks and their platform preferences, the department in their organisation primarily responsible for social media communication, and whether assessments or measurement were conducted on the effectiveness of their social media PR.

The sample consisted of those employed in public relations agencies (external public relations) and also within corporations and organisations (internal public relations) in Malaysia. These practitioners were selected via random sampling among members of the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) Malaysia who received email invitations to participate in the survey. The survey link from Qualtrics.com was distributed to respondents via email as well as through postings on Facebook and LinkedIn.

A total of 95 public relations practitioners in Malaysia completed the survey. Respondents' data was transferred from Qualtrics.com to IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25 and analysed. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken to obtain the frequency counts, percentages and mean values. Although the number of respondents is not enough to generalise for the PR practitioners' population in Malaysia, the findings provide useful insights and aid in understanding the pattern of their social media usage.

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 1. Respondents' demographic profiles

	Respondents (N=95) <i>* few did not answer</i>	Percentage (%)
Inhouse PR practitioner	67	70.5
External PR practitioner	27	28.4
Male	69	72.6
Female	23	24.2
Younger than 30	59	62.1
30–39 years old	21	22.1
40–49 years old	10	10.5
50–59 years old	2	2.1
Malay	9	9.5
Chinese	72	75.8
Indian	6	6.5
Others	6	6.5

Table 1 shows that majority of the Malaysian public relations practitioners who responded to this study's survey questionnaire worked in internal public relations (n=67, 70.5%), while the remaining 27 respondents (28.4%) worked in public relations agencies. Next, in terms of gender, 72.6% were male (n=69) and 24.2% were female (n=23). In terms of ethnic groups, 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%). Note that the respondents' working experience in public relations ranged from two months to 30 years, with an average of 5.45 years.

Average time spent

Table 2. Average time spent for PR practices on social media

Average time spent on Social Media	American PR practitioners (%)	Malaysian PR practitioners (%)
None	2	1
1–10% of time	20	12
11–25%	38	20
26–50%	26	37
51–75%	10	25
More than 75%	4	5

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

Results in Table 2 compare the average time spent in social media between Malaysian and American PR practitioners. A majority (37%) of Malaysian respondents spent 26% to 50% of their time on average with social and emerging media for public relations purposes, while 30% spent more than 50%, and 33% spent a quarter or less of their time on these tasks. For Americans, based on Wright and Hinson's (2017) findings, a vast majority (60%) spent 25% or less of their time on social and emerging media, while 26% spent 26% to 50% and 14% spent more than 50%.

Frequency of platform usage

Table 3. Frequency of social media platform usage

Social Media Platform	American PR practitioners (Mean)	Malaysian PR practitioners (Mean)
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

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

Respondents were asked the frequency of using 10 social and emerging media technologies as part of their public relations work using a 5-point Likert scale. Among Malaysian PR practitioners, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest were the top-five most used media for public relations practices with respective mean scores of 4.52, 4.27, 4.26, 4.22 and 4.21. The other media that were frequently used which received mean scores above 4.00 were Flickr and Tumblr (both M=4.09).

The results above contrasted with those found by Wright and Hinson (2017) among PR practitioners in the United States. The top-two most used platforms were Facebook (M=4.36) and Twitter (M=4.29), followed by LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube with respective mean scores of 3.60, 3.39 and 3.25.

Department primarily responsible

Table 4. Department primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social media communication

Department/ Organisational Function	American PR practitioners (%)	Malaysian PR practitioners (%)
Digital or Social Media	12	31
Communication or PR	63	27
Marketing	15	23
Technology (IT)	0	4
Others	7	7
Do not know	1	3
Has not been assigned	1	4

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

Next, the respondents were asked about the department or organisational function which was primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in their organisation.

The majority of Malaysian respondents (31%) claimed that Digital/Social Media personnel were primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication, followed by Communications/PR (27%) and Marketing (23%). In contrast, based on Wright and Hinson's (2017) data, their American counterparts overwhelmingly agreed (63%) that social and

digital media communication was primarily monitored and managed by Communication/PR staff, followed by Marketing (15%), and Digital/Social Media (12%).

Research and measurement

Table 5. Measurement of communication effectiveness via social media

	American PR practitioners (%)	Malaysian PR practitioners (%)
Yes	48	38
No	37	36
Uncertain/Do not know	15	26

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

The number of Malaysian respondents (38%) who agreed that the effectiveness of communication via social and emerging media was measured was almost similar with those who did not agree (36%). However, 26% admitted that they were uncertain. On the contrary, 48% of American respondents believed measurement was done as opposed to 37% who did not, while 15% were uncertain.

DISCUSSIONS

Public relations practitioners from different countries have different perceptions towards the utilisation of social media in their practices. Some see and use new media as mere informational tools for data gathering and mining, while others view and utilise them as communication tools for organisational publicity and product/service promotion. In this regard, prior research has shown that social media have been adopted as formal channels of communication in the Malaysian public relations industry.

With increasing number of people embracing technological and Internet-enabled tools for communication, audiences who adopt them for personal and work-related consumption and content have also increased in tandem. Mass communication with customers, clients and journalists are now conducted online via mobile text, electronic mails, video calls, websites, digital apps and social media platforms. Therefore, public relations practitioners have come to recognise social media as desirable channels of mass communication and consumption. Not surprisingly, the rise of social media has led to less reliance on traditional media, such as television, newspapers, and radio. Organisations can now easily manage direct communication with their stakeholders through their own websites and other social media platforms or applications.

Next, the results are discussed in relation to the study's two research objectives. The average time spent by public relations practitioners indicated that 63% of respondents in Malaysia spent 26% to 75% or more of their time on average, with social and emerging media for public relations purposes. Comparatively, based on Wright and Hinson's (2017) findings, 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 public relations 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 compared to Malaysia. This current study's findings mirror those of prior Malaysian new-media public relations research such as by Lee and Low (2013), Gabriel and Koh (2016), Zeti Azreen (2019), while contradict that of Fitch (2009), in which entailed Malaysian public relations practitioners being hesitant to use new media because experienced practitioners were seemingly fearful of the changing environment and they expressed concerns about the loss of interpersonal contact.

Macnamara et al. (2016) found that there are more public relations practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region who felt that social media are significant in strategic communications, with 92.2% rating social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Sina Weibo as contributing strategically, while 86.5% favoured websites, intranet and e-mails. In Sataporn et al.'s work (2017) on public relations practitioners in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, the authors reported that social media are mainly used to disseminate information and collect feedback and opinions, as exemplified in Iligan where authorities post important information on their website and collect feedback and opinions through their Facebook account. According to Sutherland (2017), Facebook is commonly used by Vietnamese PR practitioners for communication as strong audience engagement via social media has shifted preference from mainstream media to social media channels. In the same way, Sriramesh et al. (2013) stated that in Singapore, it is common practice for corporations to host videos of their publicity events or upcoming promotions on their websites, and for PR practitioners to use their Twitter and Facebook accounts to help customers access information on various activities and materials.

While in Malaysia, Lee and Low (2013) noted the explosion in social media especially social networking sites such as Facebook with increased connectivity and interactivity, has compelled many Malaysian public relations practitioners to recognise the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with internal and external audiences. In addition to keeping in touch with their target audience through various ways such as contests or giveaways, the posting of news, photos and videos, helps to create long-term interactive relationships. Based on Gabriel and Koh's (2016) findings, PR practitioners use social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn to communicate most often (100%), followed by microblogging sites Twitter and Tumblr (68.2%). In the same way, Zeti Azreen (2019) revealed that Facebook and Whatsapp are the most frequently used by Malaysian PR practitioners, compared to LinkedIn, adding that the interactive functions of social media are utilised to establish win-win relationships by offering stakeholders suitable contents that meet their needs.

With regard to the social media platforms most used, two top social media platforms as voted by Malaysian respondents were missing from the list of the American PR practitioners. On the other hand, Twitter and YouTube which were amongst the most used by American PR practitioners were absent from the list of Malaysian's main platforms. This finding raises the query of whether Malaysian public relations practitioners and their targeted audience alike, much prefer visual-based media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest) as opposed to those that are comparatively more text-based as preferred by Americans (Twitter, LinkedIn). Future studies could look into the influence of cultural differences in preference for pictures that "speak a thousand words" versus words that may be mightier in detail and sharper in descriptions.

This finding, however, is in contrast to Corduan (2017) who highlighted that Asian PR practitioners tend to post more on social networks and communicate frequently with their publics via the Internet. Asian practitioners usually write longer posts on social network sites in which they tend to describe and elaborate; thus a more stable interpersonal relationship could be built with the public as these practitioners use a friendlier and more convincing tone in communicating on social networks.

It would be interesting to explore the reasons why the majority of the Malaysian respondents placed social media communication under the charge of a department that handles digital technology, rather than one that is primarily formed for communication tasks, as chosen by their American counterparts. While the former are experts in innovative platforms that disseminate information and evaluate data, the latter specialise in communication and are directly involved in the essentials of publicity and promotion work relevant to the role of public relations practitioners. Another interesting observation is some Malaysian PR social media functions being placed under marketing departments. This raises concerns on the overall encroachment of expertise, one by the technical domain of digital media and the other by marketing specialists over that of public relations experts.

While a significant majority of American PR practitioners reported that the effectiveness of communication is measured, there was no clear-cut perception of such amongst the Malaysian sample. The percentage of those who believed measurements do take place is almost the same with those who did not. This does not possibly bode well for the local public relations scene and industry as research is vital in accurately determining public relations goals, as well as the effectiveness of work done. Therefore, concerns raised by researchers on the lack of measurement of public relations practices including work utilising social media platforms are indeed relevant.

Previously, DiStaso et al. (2011) contended that organisations should conduct trainings on PR tools as well as the assessment of their effectiveness because social media measurement remains a field that continues to yield more questions than answers. In Leong, Krishnan and Lee's (2012) study, PR practitioners in Malaysia acknowledged the importance of evaluation research, yet the lack of budget and support from the top management have hampered this endeavour time and time again. Therefore, strategic and professional public relations face an uphill barrier in their growth and development if scientific empirical-based measurement and research are not made the norm of Malaysian public relations practices.

With the above understanding of the prominent roles played by new and social media in Malaysian PR practices and their significant impacts on the daily tasks of PR practitioners, the next step in research would be to conduct a qualitative study to gather and gauge the insights and experiences of Malaysian practitioners on whether visually inclined social media platforms suit the needs of their target audience and potential market. Additionally, practitioners could offer in-depth responses on the challenges faced in their day-to-day work in terms of both grasping the practical communication and mastering the digital-technical know-how required of those in the field of social-media PR. In addition, further intrinsic study could unravel the thoughts and perceptions among Malaysian PR practitioners on how they could reduce expertise encroachment and hence uphold their professionalism in the face of the often commercialised and community-centric platforms of social media.

CONCLUSION

Subsequent research should take care to gather a fairly dispersed sample of respondents, unlike the current sample which was overwhelmingly male, Chinese, younger than 30 years and with only a few years of working experience.

PR practitioners often commend social media for enabling them to frequently share information about products/services, activities and campaigns affording them the advantages of direct communication and closer relationships with publics. Without a doubt, social media help PR practitioners spread information about their clients and organisation as well as communicate regularly with the public. According to a myriad of authors, as discussed earlier, the emergence of new media especially social media can help organisations engage directly with the public. The platforms facilitate an open environment that allows for one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many communication, hence revolutionising the practice of public relations. New and social media have actually eroded people's preference for traditional media because traditional media are slower operationally compared to new media, especially when the timeliness of news is of vital concern both informatively and commercially.

In other words, social media have changed the way corporations, governmental institutions, non-profit and non-governmental organisations engage with their target audiences due to the latter now preferring dialogic types of communication. This brings about immense challenges for all sorts of organisations, as the public, consumers, citizens and clients now prefer to be listened to, to be engaged in participatory interactions, to give responses, rather than be merely talked at. In addition, two-way communication, whether between companies and customers or authorities and citizenry, can be enhanced and improved through social media, which afford interactive features and are assumed to be ideal channels for constructive dialogue. Traditional PR practitioners could feel challenged as audiences' preferences are altered by the growth of social and other media that are emerging. While the true potential of social media should be optimised and considered as standard practices by public relations practitioners, it is essential and timely for practitioners to polish their online know-how and social-media skills, not just in their functional applications but also in the measurement and evaluation of their strategic effectiveness.

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