

Understanding Digital Public Relations Practices among Exemplar School Principals in Malaysian Schools

Emelia Fantoza Saraih, Su Luan Wong*, Soaib Asimiran and Mas Nida Md Khambari

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor 43400, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In recent years, Digital Leadership (DL) has been recognised as an important practice for school principals. DL focuses on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in support of school principals' leadership practice. This qualitative study was undertaken with the aim of understanding DL among principals from four High Performing Schools (HPS) in Malaysia, particularly from the perspective of public relations. Semi-structured interviews were employed involving four exemplar school principals as the main respondents and 12 school staff as the secondary respondents of the study. The findings indicate that social media has become the contemporary public relations conduit among exemplar Malaysian school principals. The findings also suggest that third parties, such as students, parents, and alumni, enhance school principals' public relations practices via their social media accounts. The aforesaid findings have meaningful implications for other school principals in similar school settings and contexts to better integrate social media in their public relations practice, especially by leveraging third-party social media accounts.

Keywords: Digital leadership, leadership, public relations, social media

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E-mail addresses:

emefoza@gmail.com (Emelia Fantoza Saraih)

suluan@upm.edu.my (Su Luan Wong)

soaib@upm.edu.my (Soaib Asimiran)

khamasnida@upm.edu.my (Mas Nida Md. Khambari)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

School principals play a crucial role in setting the collective vision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration in schools and promoting technology integration. With the current development of innovation and new technologies in education, there is evidence that a technology-related leadership style

fosters ICT use in schools (Brown et al., 2016). Effective leadership, therefore, must now include leadership in technology (Brown et al., 2016). Inevitably, ICT should be reflected in the study of contemporary leadership practice in schools. In line with this, Digital Leadership (DL) is a relatively new leadership practice that connects leaders with technology (Sheninger, 2014).

In this digital age, the news is no longer restricted to traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. The current media represents digital platforms that equal traditional media by containing the same information. In the school context, school principals, teachers, students, parents, and alumni are direct sources of news about school progress. Effective relationships with parents, alumni, and the community are crucial for school success (Wiyono et al., 2019). There is no doubt that schools can use communication technology to create and develop relationships with these parties (Wiyono et al., 2019). As such, websites, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are public relations conduits for school principals to develop, engage, and strengthen their school's positive image among stakeholders and the community. This is true given that social media "allows public relations practitioners additional opportunities to establish and cultivate relationships and engage their public" (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012, p. 1). Understandably, schools need to be in close relations with their stakeholders; thus, practicing good public relations is important to gain their support for school

progress (Çoruk, 2018). As such, school leaders must be able to leverage ICT and technology to support their leadership practice, particularly their public relations practice (Sheninger, 2014).

However, little is known on the use of websites, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as conduits for public relations practice among exemplar school principals in Malaysian schools, despite the fact that these social media apps are widely used among both principals and school stakeholders. The overarching question that remains is "What can be learnt from exemplar school principals about the use of websites and social media in public relations in the context of schools in Malaysia?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital leadership (DL) is relatively new in the field of educational leadership. Sheninger (2014) introduced the Seven Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education, which are: i) Communication; ii) Public relations; iii) Branding; iv) Professional growth and development; v) Student engagement and learning; vi) Learning environment and spaces; and vii) Opportunity. This framework aims to initiate sustainable change to transform school culture through technology. As society becomes more reliant on technology, it is almost mandatory for school principals to leverage the power of digital technologies in support of school progress. That is, as schools change, leadership must change as well. Sheninger (2014) therefore proposed the aforesaid pillars to create school cultures that are

transparent, relevant, meaningful, engaging, and inspiring.

Public relations as a marketing tool has been a common practice for businesses (Curtis et al., 2010). With technological advancement and the Internet's proliferation in recent years, social media tools have become beneficial methods of communication for public relations practitioners, even in the nonprofit sector (Curtis et al., 2010). Demands and expectations are different between private and public entities, and so are the functions of their public relations (Johansson & Larsson, 2015). Although the literature shows a lack of attention to nonprofits' social media strategy (Effing & Spil, 2016), the fast dissemination of social media applications has encouraged nonprofit organisations such as Greenpeace, Salvation Army, and YMCA to communicate with and engage the public to fulfill their social mission (Nah & Saxton, 2013).

Organisations use social media to communicate and interactively collaborate (Go & You, 2016). The most significant consequence of modern communication technology is that information is easily available to anyone at any place and any time (Outvorst et al., 2017). Information on schools can now be shared easily by any individual, organisation, or association. Since information is freely available (Outvorst et al., 2017), students, teachers, school principals, parents, alumni, and the Education Ministry are free to share, promote, and critique any programmes or events conducted by schools. By doing so,

interest and participation in school events may increase among stakeholders (Outvorst et al., 2017).

Social media is about getting people connected and building relations (Outvorst et al., 2017). With respect to this, Sheninger (2014) opined that the time has come for school principals to initiate school public relations in order to better engage with their stakeholders. According to him, school principals must embrace social media as their public relations conduit to engage with stakeholders. Furthermore, a few studies have found that individuals perceive social media as a credible source of information (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Hence, school principals should consider social media as their public relations conduit in this digital age to garner support from stakeholders.

Leveraging technology is very much what DL is about, whereby school principals following this practice would be able to promote education by sharing positive information associated with their schools (Sheninger, 2014). According to Smith (2010), the public has unparalleled reach and access to social media information. As such, when school principals leverage the power of social media, they would be able to control and showcase the type of information that benefits their schools. Strong relationships between schools and their stakeholders are important to support student success (Moore et al., 2016).

Sheninger (2014) believed that school principals should leverage social media such as Facebook and Twitter in support of their

public relations practice. It has also made jobs easier by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences (Eyrich et al., 2008). As such, adopting social media as a conduit for public relations practice is a clever approach because it enables schools to capitalise on their virtual presence to enhance public relations via school success stories.

Curtis et al. (2010) supported the call for social media because it is essential for public relations practitioners to recognise the resourcefulness of these tools and take advantage of every available opportunity to effectively reach their audience. School principals should take advantage of this prospect and leverage social media to reach and engage teachers, students, parents, alumni, the education ministry, and the community at large. Peruta and Shields (2016), therefore, stressed that learning institutions must develop a social media strategy to provide relevant information to potential students while at the same time striking a balance between the needs of incoming students and the expectations of parents, alumni, prospective donors, potential fans, and community members. It is indeed not uncommon for schools to update and maintain their social media channels with the aim of building an identity to connect with students and alumni (Peruta & Shield, 2018). Furthermore, social media allows organisations to create dialogues with audiences to foster strong and lasting relationships (Briones et al., 2011). The interactive digital platform of Facebook, for instance, allows audiences to give feedback

to organisational messages in three different levels of engagement: Like, Share, and Comment (Cho et al., 2014). As such, school principals should be wielding social media as a public relations platform to promote school success.

Recent developments have shown that public relations and communication in public schools are becoming an integral part of public school management in the 21st century (Lopez, 2017). Social media use is an expectation; it is no longer optional (Cox & McLeod, 2014). Houten (2014) and Lopez (2017) did not only call for school principals to start focusing on public relations practice but also agreed that social media is important to enhance public relations strategies. Facebook and Twitter are utilised in schools to promote a greater understanding of topics related to school progress (Carpenter et al., 2014). Social media tools allow for greater interactions between school principals and their stakeholders, wherein such tools provide stronger connections with local stakeholders, fellow educators, and the world (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

In essence, it would be remiss of school principals not to take advantage of the abundance of social media to establish and further enhance public relations with students, parents, alumni, ministries, and the public at large. As school principals begin to integrate social media tools into their public relations practice, they will be seen as being more transparent in giving stakeholders a clearer picture of what is happening in their respective schools. In line with this idea, DL oversees interactions between technology

and institutions to enable the optimal use of modern technology in public relations practice.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Given the aforesaid significance of DL, this study was conducted to understand public relations practices concerning DL among exemplar school principals from High Performing Schools (HPS) in Malaysia. The objective of the study was to discover and describe the public relations practices among these school principals. The study offers an in-depth understanding of school principals and their use of ICT as a conduit in their leadership practices, namely for public relations. In particular, the focus of this paper was on how school principals practice public relations with stakeholders through websites, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study approach. A case study design was appropriate for this research given that the aim of the study was to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a particular event, programme, or activity (Creswell, 2018), in this case, the DL of exemplar school principals.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilised for this qualitative study to select participants with the most knowledge on the research topic (Patton, 2002). This sampling technique

gave importance to the participants' availability and willingness to be involved in the study. This study thus applied the aforesaid sampling method to gain an in-depth understanding from participants who were willing to share their experiences.

In Selangor, there are a total of 17 HPSs, namely nine secondary schools and eight primary schools. This study targeted secondary schools because it explored the use of ICT and social media as a communication medium between school principals and students. Hence, some level of communication skill and maturity was required from the students.

Of the nine secondary HPSs in Selangor, only four were selected for this study. One school (BB) was rejected because its website and Facebook account were inaccessible at the time of the study. The KU school principal neither replied to emails nor returned any calls from the researchers. Therefore, it was understood that the KU school principal was not interested to participate in the study. Next, the PP school principal was selected as the pilot study respondent because she was available at the time. Since she took part in assessing the interview protocol, she was not selected to participate in the main case study. Two more school principals (JE and RG) were considered for the study after the first meeting. The JE school principal pointed out that she had not been ICT savvy and had used ICT only when necessary. The RG school principal agreed to be interviewed; unfortunately, he did not have time for a follow-up interview after the first one.

Though the primary unit of analysis in this study was the school principals, i.e., the main respondents, 12 more individuals were selected as secondary respondents (assistant school principals, teachers, and staff). The secondary respondents were critical for the study as they provided further descriptions and clarifications with regard to how school principals practice public relations. Prior to the interview process, this study sought and received the approval of the Ethics Committee for Research involving human subjects from Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Profile of Schools

The four HPSs chosen for this study comprised three Full Boarding Schools and one Non- Boarding School. Table 1 shows the schools' profiles. It is important to point out that although there is variation in the schools' years of establishment, they were quite similar in terms of years of being an HPS.

Profile of Participants

Table 2 shows the participants' demographic backgrounds. The four school principals had

Table 1
Schools' profile

#	School	School type	Years of establishment	HPS status
1	KS		65	10
2	SM	Full Boarding school	31	9
3	SG		18	8
4	SA	Non-Boarding school	49	10

Table 2
Participants' profile

#	School	Participant	Job Position	Gender	Age
1		A	School Principal	Female	59
2	SA	B	Assistant School Principal	Female	54
3		C	Teacher	Female	42
4		D	School Staff	Male	38
5		E	School Principal	Male	55
6	SM	F	Assistant School Principal	Female	53
7		G	Teacher	Female	30
8		H	School Staff	Male	58
9		J	School Principal	Male	50
10	KS	K	Assistant School Principal	Female	52
11		L	Teacher	Female	47
12		M	School Staff	Male	29
13		N	School Principal	Female	50
14	SG	P	Assistant School Principal	Female	56
15		Q	Teacher	Female	31
16		R	School Staff	Male	38

more than 20 years of working experience either in schools or in other education departments. All four teachers had used ICT in the classroom via Frog VLE. The Frog VLE Project is a cloud-based virtual learning environment that was introduced in schools by the Ministry of Education in 2011. During the study period, all the HPSs in this study used Frog VLE to support teaching and learning. Subjects that were taught in the Frog VLE classrooms were Arabic Language, English Language, and Basic Computer Science. The four remaining participants were a Lab Assistant, a Chief Clerk, and two ICT Technicians. The secondary participants were selected by the school principals from their respective schools.

Data Collection

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews to elicit in-depth information on the principals' daily DL practices. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a virtual document examination was undertaken involving the use of social media by the schools.

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed the data from the interview sessions using the Write and Listen software. To make the data more manageable, the data was reduced by applying codes and categories. MAXQDA version 18.1 was used to organise and assign codes to the large data. Once the initial set of codes was generated, each transcript was analysed using the codes. New codes were

added whenever new concepts emerged. The codes/categories were later collapsed into themes manually by the first author. Member check was employed in this study, wherein participants' feedback and consent of the coding was solicited to ensure it represented their meaning. In addition, interview sessions were audio-taped with participants' permission to minimise errors and mistakes during the transcribing process.

Data analysis was guided by participants' leadership practices based on the 'Seven Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education' model (Sheninger, 2014) with respect to public relations. Apart from Sheninger's (2014) model, the researchers also looked into new, emergent ideas from the participants' context, comments, and perspectives on using ICT in their leadership practices.

Apart from the interview transcripts, virtual document examination was performed on the schools' websites, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as the Facebook pages of the school principals, the parent-teacher association (PIBG), alumni, and students, when available. These virtual documents gave insights into the use of ICT by the schools and their principals.

FINDINGS

Sheninger's (2014) framework was used to underpin this study in describing and understanding DL among exemplar school principals in Malaysia. All four school principals revealed that they leveraged technology such as social media via Facebook, websites, Twitter, and Instagram

to showcase their schools' success. Showcasing schools' success is meant to disseminate information to people outside the school, such as parents, alumni, the education ministry, and the public, including potential new students.

Social Media as a Conduit in Public Relations Practice

Generally, the virtual document examination found that the contents of the schools' Facebook pages and websites were inclusive of basic information about the school, such as its address, telephone number, school mission and vision, and school history. Besides that, there were pictures and videos of school programmes, activities, and achievements as well.

Apart from the school, PIBG and alumni ran their own Facebook pages and websites too. Notably, these platforms contained relatively less information about the school but more information, pictures, and videos about their programmes, activities, sponsorships, and charitable work within and outside the school. Information about the association's membership, committees, address, contact number, and email address were provided on their Facebook and websites too. These results corroborate the findings of Waters et al. (2009) that Facebook includes information on the involvement of an organisation, such as its calendar of events (donation and volunteer works). In addition to the school, PIBG, and alumni social media, some school principals had their own personal Facebook as well.

This study further found that apart from using Facebook and websites to promote school success stories, schools employ Twitter and Instagram as well. However, not every school appeared to be as actively engaged in Twitter and Instagram as in Facebook and websites. As for the contents of their Twitter and Instagram pages, they had more pictures and videos of school programmes, activities, and achievements instead of descriptions about the school.

These results suggest that school principals use social media for public relations to disseminate information and engage with various people from within and outside the school. The main purpose of having a Facebook or website for the school is to disseminate information, as Participant P remarked: "*The purpose (school Facebook and website) is to inform the outsiders about the (school) programme, about (school) activities, about the (school) success and plans that the school will initiate for public knowledge.*" Further, according to participant N, social media plays a major role as an effective tool in informing people about the success of the school, as shown in the following interview excerpt:

That's what we use (to promote school success) in our website, through the website that we have, blogs, Facebook, and so on. Apart from sending information to parents through their children, social media plays a major role in informing people about the success of the school, what the school is doing. It is a great platform...Indeed it

(Facebook and website) is very effective. It is very effective.

N (School Principal, SG School Interview)

Information about school programmes, activities, and success is not just aimed at parents but also at potential new students. Participant B described how Facebook is able to effectively influence students' perception and decision about the school in this interview excerpt:

In addition, we also want to reach out to students who may not have been here. For example, a primary school student, when they go through (the school Facebook or website), they may decide to come to this school. Usually, when we had an interview with the new intakes, Form one students, we ask them how they get to know about this school. They told us that they read about us in the school website and Facebook. From there (based on the information they found in the school Facebook or website), they develop the interest to enter this school. So, for me, this is (Facebook and website) very effective. Not only to the school community, parents but also other individuals.

B (Assistant School Principal, SA School Interview)

The study revealed that one of the benefits of social media is that information about the school could be disseminated

quickly and to a larger audience, especially via Facebook. Facebook has a unique feature called 'sharing', which enables information to be shared among one's circle of 'friends'. This feature has a snowball effect as the number of people reading information on the school will increase exponentially in a very short time. Participants C and M elucidated the 'sharing' snowball effect in the following interview excerpts:

Take Facebook for an example, we can promote any school events via Facebook. So parents can have a look at the school Facebook, the PIBG, the students, other teachers, they all can share [the school Facebook post in their own Facebook]. In this way, information about the school event can be shared with many others (via Facebook) and it can be done very fast.

C (School Teacher, SA School Interview)

So if we have Facebook, when we like or share [certain post] with our friends on Facebook, their friend will also get the post. Although initially, they are not our Facebook friend, they have the access to KS's activities too. So more people will know about KS school.

M (School Staff, KS School Interview)

Additionally, Facebook provides a platform for users to leave 'comments' and 'likes' on posts. Schools can gain feedback

through ‘comments’ and gratification through ‘likes’. Indirectly, these ‘comments’ and ‘likes’ on Facebook posts further establish and strengthen relationships between schools and stakeholders. The closeness in relationship is healthy and encouraging because when parents, alumni, and schools engage with one another, they promote the advancement of the students, teachers, and schools alike. These results are consistent with that of Smith (2010), who found that social media is suitable for social connection and news promotion.

In this regard, respondents P and M deliberated on what is meant by engaging and promoting relationships via post sharing, comments, and gratification on Facebook in these excerpts:

I think it (Facebook) is really effective. Right now, in the present time, it is [effective]. Indeed, people seldom calls nowadays. They will look at Facebook, right? To find out what the group (Facebook group) is up to. That's more fun actually and we can directly ask [in the Facebook] if we are not satisfied. Or even put down a comment. We can give comments in the Facebook. It is easier to congratulate someone [on their success]. Because, sometimes we just do not have the time [to congratulate them personally].

P (Assistant School Principal, SG School Interview)

It (Facebook) is effective because, while the (school) activity is being

carried out, parents can post comment, words of encouragement or things to do to improve our programme... we are closer, meaning the relationship is closer [among parents, students and teachers]. It is direct because through Facebook, all correspondence are direct between them.

M (School Staff, KS School Interview)

Taken together, these results show that social media is beneficial to school principals because it is effective in disseminating information and success stories about the school quickly and to a larger audience.

Facebook: Primary Conduit for Public Relations Practice

Although all schools were found to possess an official Facebook account, SA School had three Facebook accounts carrying the school's name. Similarly, in KS School, the school principal preferred using Facebook, given that KS's official Facebook contained 876 pictures and numerous videos on its activities and programmes while its website was temporarily closed down at the time of the study. According to the KS School principal, he prefers Facebook to websites because Facebook is the latest trend, as depicted in the following interview excerpt:

Every programme (will be posted in Facebook). Now the most active is Facebook, compared to the website. Because website has been around for quite some time so people have

less interest in website. We are more on to Facebook...If we do not upload in Facebook, people do not know [about us]. Parents do not know [what are we doing]. Finally, they will complain [that we are not doing anything]. So, in order to avoid them from complaining, look at our Facebook. If you do not upload (to the Facebook), people cannot see you.

J (School Principal, KS School Interview)

The aforementioned interview excerpt highlights the school principal's strategy in establishing a positive image of the school by posting information on school programmes, activities, and success stories on Facebook. It is important for the school principal to foster a positive image of the school; to this end, social media is utilised to enhance school public relations. The school principal is able to promote school progress by sharing relevant information about their schools and at the same time, they are able to control the content shared.

Besides KS School that preferred Facebook to websites, SM School had more recent postings in their Facebook account than their website page. The virtual document examination showed that their school website was last updated in 2015 but their Facebook had recent postings dated June 2019. The findings suggest that some schools are more active in updating their school success stories on Facebook.

In addition to the school Facebook, the study found that a majority of the school principals possess their own personal Facebook accounts. Their personal Facebook contained news about their respective schools, pictures, and videos of school programmes and activities, as well as updates on school achievements. Although some of the school principals' Facebook contained personal postings, most of the content was about school success. KS, SG, and SA Schools principals each had personal Facebook accounts. In this instance, by having a personal Facebook, school principals are connecting directly with the community by adopting social media as a conduit in their public relations practice.

The SM school principal was the only one in this study who did not have a personal Facebook account. He explained that he preferred to promote his school success stories via the school PIBG and alumni Facebook pages. As shown in the following excerpt, he stated that success stories about the school carry more weight when told through a third party:

As for this school, I'm a little bit different than others. I do not want to tell much on my school success but I let others do it for me...We feed school information to PIBG and alumni. We leverage PIBG and alumni groups to promote us through their Facebook and website.

E (School Principal, SM School Interview)

The virtual document examination further revealed that the SM School's PIBG Facebook contained 1,864 pictures and countless videos on school activities and programmes, while the SM alumni Facebook had 843 pictures and a lot of videos. On the other hand, SM School's official Facebook had far fewer artifacts — only 133 pictures and four videos. These findings confirm that school principal E preferred to showcase his school success stories indirectly via the PIBG and alumni Facebook pages.

Interestingly, SM School was not the only one with PIBG and alumni Facebook pages as an additional channel to showcase school success stories. This study found that KS and SG Schools also had PIBG and alumni Facebook accounts as well. However, this study discovered that the trend of having a PIBG and alumni Facebook was only present at boarding schools — KS, SM, and SG.

The need to have a PIBG Facebook is more apparent in full boarding schools since the students are away from home during the school term. For this reason, parents are concerned about their children's well-being. In boarding schools such as KS, SM, and SA, parents rely heavily on schools' Facebook and websites to obtain information about their children's activities at school. Participants L and Q shared similar views on the advantage of having school Facebook pages and websites as a medium to provide parents with vital and up-to-date information, as in the following interview excerpts:

Yes, (Facebook and website are efficient) because anyone who wants to know about us can just google it and it's there. And the info is quite up-to-date. And, we also post pictures and what's going on in our school. And for parents it might be very useful because they can actually see what is going on, because they are, well based on residency school, they are not near us. Yeah, they sort of they know about their kid.

L (School Teacher, KS School Interview)

(Facebook and website) Effective. Because Full Residence School students rarely return home and parents rarely meet their children. Through the school website, parents can get information on their children's where about and activities. There are pictures of their children (posted in the website). Parents get to see their children.

Q (School Teacher, SG School Interview)

Even though SA School did not have a PIBG or alumni Facebook, the school's PIBG and alumni were found to actively participate in the school's programmes and activities, albeit not prominently visible via Facebook. Participants A and C acknowledged that their school PIBG and alumni were indeed involved in school programmes in the following interview excerpts:

Take for instance, the school alumni. They will always contact us when they need to propose a certain programme which they intend to do for the school. I have a meeting with the Alumni Chairman this afternoon. We are going to discuss 'A Night with The Stars' Programme'.

A (School Principal, SA School Interview)

Our PIBG and alumni are active. This coming programme, PELEDAK, PIBG will attend, alumni will attend too. PIBG always join our Entrepreneurship Days. They are very supportive [of our programmes].

C (School Teacher, SA School Interview)

Aside from the PIBG and alumni Facebook, it is worth mentioning that both SM and SG Schools had an additional Facebook page, as shown in Table 3. The study discovered that SM school had a Facebook account run by a students' association that contained information on

their activities, which centred on upholding students' morality and integrity as prescribed by Islamic teaching. SG School, meanwhile, had a Facebook page run by parents, which specifically focused on the Taekwondo tournaments and activities held in the school. Both Facebook pages were active with recent postings.

As shown in the aforementioned findings, school principals' public relations is evident via the sharing of schools' success stories on their Facebook. It is interesting to note that schools have many Facebook platforms and use all of them to their advantage. Besides the schools' official Facebook and school principals' personal Facebook, the schools also had third-party Facebook pages by the PIBG, alumni, and individual students, parents, and alumni members. Thus, third-party-owned Facebook pages play a big role in promoting schools. Together, they provide extra platforms to promote school success as well as establish and strengthen relationships by engaging with each other and with the public at large.

Websites, Twitter, and Instagram: Secondary Conduit for Public Relations Practice

The study finds that besides Facebook, schools also have websites. As mentioned earlier, only KS School's website was closed down temporarily during the study period, while the other three schools, namely SM, SG, and SA, had active school websites. Among them, SG School had the most updated and comprehensive website.

Table 3
Facebook matrix

Facebook	KS	SM	SG	SA	Total
School	√	√	√	√	4
PIBG	√	√	√	√	4
Alumni	√	√	√	√	4
School principal	√	X	√	√	3
Others	X	√	√	X	2
Total					17

Similar to Facebook, apart from the schools' official websites, they had PIBG and alumni websites as well. However, not all schools had the advantage of such third-party websites. For example, KS School had both PIBG and alumni websites while SM School had only an alumni website.

For those with PIBG and alumni websites, the study discovered that some contained recent postings while some were not updated. The KS alumni website, for instance, was recently updated while the KS PIBG website was last updated in 2007. SM's alumni website was also not updated since 2012. Compared to Facebook, this study found that websites were generally less updated. Two schools had neither a PIBG nor an alumni website (SG and SA Schools). Regardless of their active participation in the school's activities and programmes, some PIBG or alumni were just not visible online via websites.

Table 5
Twitter matrix

Twitter	KS	SM	SG	SA	Total
School	√	√	X	√	3
PIBG	X	X	X	X	0
Alumni	X	√	√	X	2
Others	√	X	√	X	2
Total					7

Table 4
Website matrix

Website	KS	SM	SG	SA	Total
School	X	√	√	√	3
PIBG	√	X	X	X	1
Alumni	√	√	X	X	2
Others	√	X	X	X	1
Total					7

Again, similar to Facebook, aside from the PIBG and alumni websites, some schools had additional websites, as shown in Table 4. This study discovered that KS School had two extra websites. The first website was run by the KS students' association and contains information on their activities aimed to uphold students' morality and integrity as prescribed by Islamic teachings. The second website seemed to be run by the alumni. Both websites were active at the time of the study.

It is interesting to note that apart from having Facebook pages and websites, the majority of the schools in this study had Twitter accounts, as shown in Table 5. Schools with Twitter accounts were KS, SM, and SA. However, unlike Facebook and website platforms, schools appeared to have fewer third-party Twitter accounts, and none of the schools had a PIBG Twitter. In KS School for instance, the third-party Twitter account was managed by the students' association while in SG School, they were managed by individual students.

Additionally, the study found that except for SA School, the remaining schools did not have an Instagram account, as shown in Table 6. It is noteworthy that the three boarding schools were the ones without an

Table 6
Instagram matrix

Instagram	KS	SM	SG	SA	Total
School	X	X	X	√	1
PIBG	X	√	X	X	1
Alumni	X	√	X	X	1
Others	√	√	√	√	4
Total					7

Instagram account. SA School, on the other hand, had two Instagram active accounts with recent postings. As a non-boarding school, SA School students have greater access to technology when they are at home, so they can access Instagram more often. This could be one of the reasons for SA School's own Instagram accounts.

Three schools did not have alumni or PIBG Instagram account while SM school had both, including a third-party Instagram. As mentioned earlier, School Principal E preferred promoting his school's success via third-party social media. The study also uncovered that all schools had additional Instagram accounts. These additional Instagram accounts belonged to the school students. Some were active with recent postings while others were not.

It was found that website, Twitter, and Instagram platforms were overall less visible than the Facebook platform, as shown in Table 7. There were 17 Facebook accounts but only seven websites, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. The findings showed that websites, Twitter, and Instagram were secondary conduits that school principals leverage to showcase their school success stories as a part of their public relations practice. Not every school had an official website, Twitter, or Instagram. Interestingly, whenever a school did not have them, it leveraged a third-party account instead, such as the PIBG, alumni, or individual student account, to showcase their school success stories as a part of their public relation practice.

Overall, the findings of this study provided evidence that public relations are an important element of DL as postulated in the Seven Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education (Sheninger, 2014). School principals are now empowered to form the foundation of a positive public relations platform through free social media tools that afford them better control of shared content.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that social media is beneficial to school principals in effectively disseminating information about their school and its achievements at a fast speed and to a larger audience. As such, social media is a public relations conduit for principals to establish, engage, and

Table 7
Facebook, Website, Twitter, and Instagram matrix

Items		Total number of accounts	
Facebook	School	4	17
	PIBG	4	
	Alumni	4	
	School principal	3	
	Others	2	
Website	School	3	7
	PIBG	1	
	Alumni	2	
	Others	1	
Twitter	School	3	7
	PIBG	0	
	Alumni	2	
	Others	2	
Instagram	School	1	7
	PIBG	1	
	Alumni	1	
	Others	4	

strengthen the relationship between schools and stakeholders for school progress. The findings of this study are consistent with Smith's (2010) findings, which suggested that school principals should highlight the success of their schools through social media to foster positive public relations both within schools and among students, parents, the ministry, and the community. This is consistent with Sheninger's (2014) *Seven Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education* that emphasise the importance of promoting social media as a conduit in enhancing public relations of the school.

Facebook is the primary conduit in school principals' public relations practice, given that it has a vast amount of information with more updated postings, pictures, and videos of school activities and programmes compared to other online platforms (i.e., websites, Twitter, and Instagram). Thus, stakeholders gain a better understanding of the schools as more detailed information can be easily accessed in the form of mission statements, history, news, photos, and videos (Waters et al., 2009). In addition, most school principals have personal Facebook accounts, which can be advantageous to the schools to further showcase their success stories. Through their personal Facebook page, school principals are able to connect directly and more efficiently with the community to improve their public relations practice. Clearly, social media expedites the circulation of information to broader audiences (Eyrich et al., 2008). Besides sharing information on school events and activities, social media is beneficial in

establishing and strengthening relationships by engaging external parties (Eyrich et al., 2008). The nature of social media as a helpful tool for public relations practitioners allows organisations, including non-profit ones, to create dialogues with audiences to build strong and lasting relationships (Briones et al., 2011).

This study shows that schools, PIBG, and alumni are less visible on websites, Twitter, and Instagram compared to Facebook. These platforms are considered secondary conduits in school principals' public relations practice. Interestingly, school principals leverage third-party social media accounts, such as PIBG websites, alumni Facebook pages, and students' Instagram pages, to spread their schools' success stories. These third-party social media platforms serve as additional channels to further showcase school success. It can be surmised that school principals are making full use of the social media available today to promote school success and strengthen their public relations practice. These schools have certainly increased their presence in the virtual world to showcase their achievements and forge positive public relations, either through their official school accounts or third-party PIBG, alumni, and student accounts.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings signify that the school principals in this study are indeed making full use of the availability of social media to help promote their school success and strengthen their public relation

practice. These schools have been successful in increasing their presence in the virtual world by showcasing their school success stories and thus strengthening their public relation practice. Overall, school principals use Facebook as their main social media tool while websites, Twitter, and Instagram are used as secondary tools for their public relations. The narration of school success by students, parents, and alumni through social media enhances the school principals' efforts to improve their public relations with stakeholders, given that such information may be seen as more acceptable and trustworthy. In other words, these narratives validate the information from school principals and further supports their public relation practices. The aforementioned findings indicate that public relations are an important and relevant element of the DL of exemplar Malaysian School principals, whereby the contemporary public relations conduit best suited in this digital age is definitely social media. Good public relations practice benefits not only the school but also the society at large. Given its ubiquitous nature, school principals should continue to engage with social media for the benefit of their stakeholders.

Future research could explore DL among school principals from the 'digital native' generation, as the current research investigated how technology is leveraged as a conduit in the leadership of school principals from the 'digital immigrant' generation. It would be interesting to examine how 'digital

native' school principals differ from 'digital immigrant' school principals.

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