



World Scientific News

An International Scientific Journal

WSN 195 (2024) 66-82

EISSN 2392-2192

The Utilization of Social Media for Professional Practice among PR Practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the utilization of social media for professional practice among PR practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State. The study was premised on the Technological Determinism Theory. This study population consists of PR practitioners involved in public relations operations in Jalingo. Qualitative research approach was carried out, using in-depth interviews to collect data from a sample of 9 respondents, selected through the snowball sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed thematically, and four themes emerged: familiarity with social media platforms in the public relations industry, social media's impact on public relations duties, essential skills and knowledge for effective social media utilization in PR, and challenges associated with using social media for professional public relations practice. Findings revealed that public relations practitioners in Jalingo are aware of the benefits of social media in transforming public relations practice in crisis management, online reputation, and brand visibility. To efficiently utilize social media in PR, practitioners need to know how to create good content, engage their public, and understand the platform. Concerns about data privacy, limited resources, difficulty in keeping up with algorithms, and vulnerability to negative reactions undermine social media's effectiveness. The findings of the study infer that social media if carefully utilized, have an effective role to play in PR, and recommend that PR experts continue to use the platforms to develop their practice and make a real impact online.

Keywords: Social Media, Professional Practice, Public Relations, Practitioners, Jalingo, Taraba State.

(Received 26 June 2024; Accepted 15 July 2024; Date of Publication 18 July 2024)

1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations is a dynamic discipline that fosters symbiotic relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, cultivating reciprocity and understanding. As an important function within the organization, public relations experts navigate complex communication environments, addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of various stakeholders. With their strategic communication expertise, public relations professionals shape organizational narratives, cultivate stakeholder trust, and drive business growth, solidifying their role as indispensable strategic advisors.

In today's competitive business landscape, clients have heightened expectations for public relations practitioners to establish and sustain strong connections with their community. They demand creativity, innovation, speed, and efficiency in service delivery, making it challenging for public relations practitioners to succeed without a solid understanding of digital media (Nyitse&Agbele, 2023). Gulerman and Apaydin (2017) observe that the widespread adoption of online communication has led organizations to focus their efforts on online engagement, seizing the opportunities of social media to improve public relations functions efficiently and effectively. With just a click, organizations can reach millions of people in real-time, making social media a vital communication channel.

The growth of the internet and the swift proliferation of new technologies in our daily communication have enabled social media to develop into a vital part of daily routines (Djabanor, 2019). Rasmussen and Ihlen (2017) describe social media as web-based platforms that provide a chance for people to engage in conversations and foster relationships with multiple individuals. Indeed, this new pattern of communication is evolving at a remarkable and unprecedented rate.

Nejo and Amodu (2021) assert that the public relations profession has undergone significant evolution. The development of technological devices, designed to facilitate work and foster social connections, has expanded the scope of expertise focused on creating and nurturing relationships with various stakeholders. The digital media shift in engagement strategies has prompted PR practitioners to prioritize electronic audiences and content, thereby enhancing their services (Nytse&Agbele, 2023). Social media has reached an unprecedented level of proliferation, leading to widespread adoption in various public relations practices (Olayinka &Ewuola, 2019). Many companies are dedicating substantial financial resources to implement advanced technologies and strategic approaches that guide their social media engagement. This investment is aimed at enhancing relationships, bolstering reputation, and achieving various objectives. As a result, public relations is now closely linked with the public (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014).

According to Inya (2017), social media has transformed the landscape of communication, significantly impacting the development, implementation, and evaluation of public relations campaigns. This is not different from Djabanor (2019) who opines that social media has a notable influence on the public relations industry, bringing about numerous changes and providing unprecedented opportunities for practitioners to interact with their desired audiences. Rather than diminishing the importance of public relations in managing corporate profile and credibility, social media has expanded its capabilities, enabling the profession to effectively fulfill its core responsibilities (Ogbu, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study sought to provide a meaningful advancement by exploring the potential of social media platforms as effective tools for public relations practice in Jalingo, Taraba State.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the level of understanding of social media platforms for professional practice among PR practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State.
2. To identify the aspects of public relations practice that have been transformed by social media in Jalingo, Taraba State.
3. To determine the knowledge that PR practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State consider necessary to effectively utilize social media for professional practice.
4. To find out the challenges associated with the use of social media for professional practice among practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded on the theoretical framework of Technological Determinism. The term Technological Determinism was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), an American- Norwegian sociologist and economist. Veblen researched how the economics, culture, and society are intertwined. Veblen states that the interaction between society and culture is the main goal of technological determinism. Technological determinism is a theory that points to technology as the primary mover of societal advancement. Marshall (1964) advanced the theory further. Technological Determinism, as proposed by Marshall (1964), holds that as we transition from one technological period to the next, media technology will continue to impact the way that individuals within a community think, feel, act, and function.

Furthermore, Marshall (1964) opines that we are living in an unprecedented era of technological advancement. As he explored media and culture in England, Marshall sought to understand the complex media landscapes surrounding him. He observes that the inventions of the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph had revolutionized communication, leading to profound improvements in human connection.

Dubbed the “Oracle of the Electronic Age,” Marshall asserts that electronic media was transforming the way people think, act, and feel. He predicted that this technological shift would be remembered as a pivotal moment in the history of communication. Asogwa and Esimokha (2015) also assert that technological determinism suggests media technology plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and societal thoughts, feelings, actions, and overall operations, as we transition from one technological era to another. This theory suggests that technological advancements have a profound impact on behaviors, interactions, and societal structures.

The Technological Determinism Theory is relevant to this study, as Marshall’s work highlights the significant impact of technology on human behavior and communication. He believed that the way people process information shapes their lifestyles, and this idea applies to PR practitioners. The advent of social media has revolutionized the way PR practitioners conduct their work, form relationships, acquire knowledge, and develop attitudes. Social media has transformed the way PR practitioners perceive themselves and their profession, and they are increasingly adopting these technologies in their practice. Recognizing the influence of technology on PR practice, this study aims to explore the impact of social media on the profession.

Literature Review

Social Media

The Internet and the World Wide Web have long facilitated virtual connections, but the fast evolution of Web 2.0 technologies during the first decade of the contemporary era symbolized a significant milestone in the development of online social capabilities (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social media is a collection of online applications that utilize the principles of Web 2.0 to facilitate the sharing of User Generated Content. Furthermore, this platform enables business owners to interact with customers instantly and cost-effectively, surpassing the capabilities of traditional communication methods (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Ultimately, social media allows for direct engagement with consumers in real-time, providing a more efficient and affordable means of communication.

Asio and Khorasani (2015) submit that social media incorporates various platforms, such as social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn, media sharing networks like YouTube and Flickr, and microblogging networks like Twitter. Additionally, social media encompasses blogging sites and forums like WordPress, Myspace, and Wikis; bookmarking sites like Delicious and Stumble Upon; social news sites like Reddit and Digg; and web-based or cloud-computing sites like Google Drive and Dropbox. Social media provides a channel on the internet that is accessible, easy to use, and encourages collaboration in creating content, connecting with others, sharing information, staying relevant, and gathering collective knowledge. Social media provides an open platform for building friendly relationships, sharing information, and achieving consensus on public issues (Verdegem, 2011 cited in Alfakoro, Ismaila, & Ayodeji, 2021). Miller, Costa, Haynes, McDonald, Nicolescu, Sinanan, Spyer, Venkatraman, and Wang (2016) note that the content shared on these platforms is the key driver of social media's impact, rather than the platforms themselves.

Public Relations

Public relations is a field that has been shaped by different perspectives. One notable definition, provided by Mckie and Sriramesh (2017), defines Public relations as a strategic practice that shapes and maintains reputation by engaging with diverse stakeholders and people. This involves managing concerns, resolving disasters and communicating efficiently. According to Chmielecki and Lisowski (2013), the general and most used definition of public relations is “a planned communication workflow that develop favorable connection between organizations and their clients.” This arose from the acknowledgment of public relations as a dynamic, organic and relationship-driven process of communication.

According to Nefedov(2023) as cited in Ramadan (2024), the information age has notably expanded the scope of PR, incorporating the strategic use of social media and online platforms. PR professionals utilize these channels to engage with their audiences, disseminate information, address concerns, and manage the organization's online reputation. Social media platforms serves as a medium for organizations to directly

connect with their stakeholders, receive feedback, and respond to inquiries or complaints in real-time, leading to increased transparency and credibility.

Empirical Review

Existing research has investigated the connection between public relations and organizational reputation, centered on the role of social media. For example, Alhadid and Qaddomi (2016) researched this issue among middle management staff at Applied Science Private University. They explored the impact of public relations on organizational image and examined the functions of social media on public relations and organizational reputation. The study revealed that public relations influences a company's reputation, and social media also has an impact on organizational image.

Achor, Nwachukwu, and Nkwocha (2015) investigated social media's impact on information management in public relations in Nigeria. The sample for the study consisted of 225 PR practitioners. The result revealed that almost all respondents incorporate social media in their professional pursuits, and it has improved the gate-keeping role of PR practitioners. Additionally, the research identified Facebook, Twitter, and Blogs as the most popular social media channels used by Nigerian PR practitioners.

In addition, Inya (2017) studied how social media impact Public Relations practices in Universities in South-East, Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative approach. The sample consisted of eight purposefully selected PR practitioners from eight universities in the South-East zone. Data were gathered through personal interviews. The study revealed that social media has transformed the conventional methods of information dissemination in universities, offering new opportunities for practitioners. However, the findings also found that PR practitioners' social media usage frequency was insufficient. This insufficient usage failed to generate the necessary backlinks for improving the global rankings of the universities in the South-East zone.

The reviewed empirical studies imply a paradigm shift in public relations practice resulting from new media technologies. The reviewed studies provide insights into social media's role in public relations; however,

the researcher's observations indicate a need to explore specific challenges, opportunities, and best practices in social media utilization. This study sought to fill this knowledge gap and contribute to literature by investigating the use of social media in public relations practices in Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative approach to gain an understanding of respondents' perspectives. Daymon and Holloway (2010) note that the goal of qualitative research is to understand participants' perspectives and meanings by exploring their viewpoints. This approach allows researchers to consider the diverse and evolving perspectives of stakeholders and practitioners. Data were collected through an interview process, addressing variables aligned with the research objectives. This method enabled the collection of rich, in-depth insights into respondents' thoughts and opinions, and facilitated a thorough understanding of their perspectives. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated, interview studies offer a valuable method for gathering detailed information, adding substantial depth to our understanding of a particular phenomenon.

Snowball sampling technique was employed to select 9 PR practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State. Parker, Scott, and Geddes (2019) state that snowball sampling is a widely used method in qualitative research, leveraging networking and referral qualities. The approach begins with a small number of initial encounters with those who meet the study parameters and are asked to be involved. The initial group is then solicited to recommend other qualified individuals who fit the research requirements and are willing to take part. This procedure continues, with new participants suggesting others who meet the criteria until the desired sample size is achieved. The reason behind adopting this sampling technique is that Taraba State does not have an organized public relations practitioner's guild hence the researcher had to rely on referrals to have access to other public relations practitioners.

The organizations whose public relations practitioners were selected for the study are:

1. Taraba State University Information Unit
2. Taraba State House of Assembly
3. Ministry of Information, Taraba State
4. Public Complaints Commission, Taraba State
5. Access Bank Plc, Jalingo Branch
6. Nigerian Union of Journalists, Taraba State Chapter
7. Community and Social Development Project (CSDP), Taraba State
8. Taraba State Broadcasting Service (TSBS)
9. National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Taraba State Office.

Data collected from the field was analyzed qualitatively employing thematic analysis to examine the interview responses. This approach was chosen for its alignment with the study's objectives, enabling a detailed exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences. The thematic analysis allowed the categorization of themes in the data, providing insights into the practices of public relations in Jalingo, Taraba State.

3. RESULTS

Theme 1: Familiarity with Social Media Platforms in Public Relations Practice

All respondents agreed that the integration of social media in contemporary public relations practice has made the profession powerful. Respondent 4 said "Social media has made the PR job easy and simple because before now, public relations departments were doing most of their work through writing press releases. But today, through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, you can send out an eye-catching message with pictures that will communicate to your public what you want them to know about the organization you represent. Before now, it wasn't like that, you will do a lot of writing, and some of this writing don't go

along with pictures. Now, the advent of social media has made it possible to write a small caption that can be attached with pictures and videos to represent your organization. So it is the best way now to reach your public. A public that you might not necessarily meet face-to-face but through your Facebook page, Twitter handle, and Instagram page, a lot of people can reach you. Some people are not directly your friends but because you are a friend to their friend on social media, they get to see your post even when it was not targeted at them. They comprehend the message when they see your post and it becomes beneficial to them.”

Nonetheless, Respondent 1 held a contrasting view and was adamant in his opposition, showing resistance to the above claim. He said that the incorporation of social media into public relations practice has led to increased laziness among employees, who spend their free time on social media for personal reasons instead of utilizing it for the development of the institution.

Theme 2: Social Media’s Impact on Public Relations Practice

This theme revealed three sub-themes from the interview analysis:

- I. Crisis Management:** According to respondents 3, 4, 8, and 9 the use of social media in public relations has helped their organizations greatly in crisis management due to its real-time nature in swiftly responding to crises to mitigate reputational damage.
- II. Online Reputation:** Respondents 2, 1, 5, and 6 indicate that social media helps their organizations monitor what people are saying, and this helps them respond to negative comments and maintain a positive online reputation.
- III. Brand Visibility:** All respondents also agreed that social media enhances their brand’s visibility to the public. They said that before the advent of social media, a lot of people did not know what they do as a brand. The advent of social media has helped in disseminating messages to the public about their brand.

Theme 3: Essential Skills and Knowledge for Effective Utilization of Social Media in PR

This theme revealed four sub-themes from the interview analysis, highlighting the necessary knowledge and skills for effectively utilizing social media in professional practice:

- I. Platform-Specific Skills:** Respondents 2, 6, 9, and 4 state that it is important to understand each social media platform such as its features, audience, and limitations.
- II. Content Creation Skills:** Respondents 1, 4, and 8 emphasized the importance of content creation skills. They said that knowing how to create engaging content with quality is very important for your audience. Respondent 3 also said that writing, graphics, video, and photography are important skills in content creation.
- III. Engagement Skills:** Respondent 5 said “The ability to respond to comments, messages, and reviews in a timely and professional manner is very important.” Respondents 6 and 3 also talked about hosting webinars to engage with the audience and Twitter space to address issues is also important.
- IV. Strategic Campaign Skills:** Respondents 7 and 5 said the ability to develop social media strategic campaigns such as events, product launches, and awareness campaigns are vital.

Theme 4: Challenges Associated with Using Social Media for Professional PR Practice

This theme revealed four sub-themes related to the challenges of using social media for professional public relations practice:

- I. Concerns about Data Privacy and Security:** All respondents expressed concerns about the privacy and security of their online data. They worry about misuse of personal information, attacks, and lack of confidentiality online which has made them notfully embrace the platforms.
- II. Limited Resources and Budget for Social Media Management.** Respondents 8, 1, 2, and 6 complained that limited resources and budget allocation for social media management is a big challenge.

- III. This challenge restricts their ability to invest in social media content creation and advertising, making it hard to achieve their goals.
- IV. **Difficulty in keeping up with the Latest Social Media Algorithm Changes.** Respondents 6 and 2 said that social media is evolving with new trends, and they sometimes struggle to keep up with the changes.
- V. **Social Media Being Open to Negative Reactions and Responses.** All respondents commented that social media enables people to share their emotions, anger, outrage, and frustration online, making it easy for negative information to spread quickly and affect their online reputation.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data from the interviews revealed that public relations practitioners in Jalingo utilize social media in their practice to streamline and enhance their work. In the past, public relations department relied heavily on writing press releases. However, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram now enable the circulation of visually appealing messages, which effectively communicate organizational information to the public. This significant influence of social media on the public relations industry is supported by Wright and Hinson (2009), who note that social media has exerted a profound influence on public relations since the emergence of weblogs over a decade ago. As social media continues to evolve into various forms, including text, images, audio, and video, its impact on the industry continues to grow. These are showcased through platforms like forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS, search engine marketing, video sharing, wikis, social networks, professional networks, and micro-blogging sites.

This study also revealed that public relations practice in Jalingo, Taraba State, has undergone a significant transformation due to social media. As noted by Allagui and Breslow (2016), there is a consensus among public relations experts and professionals that social media is revolutionizing the PR industry, playing an essential role in business growth.

This study's findings showed that public relations practitioners in Jalingo, Taraba State, greatly benefit from social media's real-time nature, enabling them to effectively manage crises by swiftly responding to mitigate reputational damage. They also monitor online public sentiment and respond promptly to negative comments. Furthermore, social media enhances brand visibility, increases public awareness and recognition.

The study also discovered that certain knowledge and skills are essential to effectively utilize social media for professional practice. Specifically, the importance of content creation skills, engagement skills and strategic campaign skills were highlighted in the study. This suggests that practitioners need to possess these skills to effectively leverage social media in their practice. Permatasari, Soelistiyowati, Suastami, and Johan (2021) note that the public relations field has evolved to meet the needs of its audience, with technology significantly influencing how PR functions and connects with people. As a result, many institutions are transitioning to digital public relations, relying heavily on digital platforms, and requiring practitioners to develop a new set of skills to remain effective.

The study also revealed challenges related to the utilization of social media for public relations purposes. The study discovered several concerns, including data privacy and security issues, limited resources and budget for social media management, difficulty keeping up with the latest social media algorithm changes, and social media being open to negative reactions and responses. These concerns are traits that these platforms have in the practice of public relations. These challenges align with the concerns raised by Kvalnes (2020), who notes that social media's ability to enable individuals to be their own publishers creates new and unfamiliar dilemmas for practitioners in the field.

5. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social media plays an important role in public relations industry, enhancing the profession's potential for success. Social media enhances brand visibility and increases public awareness and recognition. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable the dissemination of engaging, visually appealing messages, and effectively relay information to the public. However, a significant gap exists in the skills and knowledge that are required to utilize these platforms effectively. Some practitioners effectively utilize social media for professional purposes, while others face challenges. Therefore, the study concludes that regular training and workshops should be organized to educate PR practitioners.

Recommendations

1. The proliferation of social media has made a lot of opportunities available for assessing campaigns that are beneficial to organizations. Public relations practitioners should continue to use these to develop their practice and make a real impact in the online sphere.
2. The study's findings showed that the utilization of social media in public relations practice, has led to increased employee complacency leading staff to allocate their time to social media for personal activities instead of using it for the organization's growth. To minimize this, it is recommended that practitioners develop a working framework that promotes responsible social media behavior. This framework should incorporate the organization's objectives and motivate staff to use social media to foster its growth.
3. The Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should consistently organize seminars and workshops that would educate public relations practitioners on how to effectively utilize social media in today's practice, fostering a platform for knowledge sharing, inquiry, and collaborative learning.

Public relations practitioners need to be vigilant of reputational threats that can undermine their organization's image. To stay current with industry developments, they should seek out affordable training and focus on enhancing their social media expertise. This will, therefore, help them to handle most situations independently, with reduced reliance on external resources.

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