

## Incorporating Social Media in Public Relations: A Synthesis of Social Media-Related Public Relations Research

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### ABSTRACT

The development of social media has drawn growing attention from public relations scholars. The current study examined the status, critical issues, and needed directions of social media-related public relations research through a critical review and synthesis of the research topics, theoretical applications, research methods, and samples of previous studies. Findings suggested an increasing trend in research topics, a lack of theoretical frameworks, and a dominance of quantitative method in this field. This study could advance scholars' understanding about the research trend of social media-related public relations research and provide insights for prospective directions of future research.

**Keywords:** public relations, social media, research trend, synthesis

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### INTRODUCTION

Social media have influenced both individuals' lives and our society as a whole (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). According to Pew Internet Project (2014), 74% of online adults use social networking sites by January 2014. For example, as of July 2014, Facebook has owned 1.31 billion monthly active users (Statistic Brain, 2014). Twitter has had 284 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2014 and 500 million tweets have been sent per day (Twitter Inc., 2014).

The popularity of social media has drawn growing attention from public relations scholars and practitioners. Some studies examined the role of social media in an organization's public relations strategy (e.g., Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012) looked into how 73 nonprofit organizations use Twitter to engage stakeholders and found that Twitter's potentially contingent interactive messages can assist organizations in communicating with other users.

Scholars specializing in public relations have explored macro aspects of new communication technologies through examining patterns and trends in the development of public relations research (Cho & Khang, 2006). For example, Ki and Shin (2006) analyzed trends and patterns of academic articles on organization-public relationships (OPR) from 1985 to 2004. They indicated an increasing trend in OPR research, frequent use of surveys, and the lack of a consistent OPR definition in this area. An and Cheng (2007) examined crisis communication research articles published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review*

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from 1975 to 2006. Their study indicated a quantitative growth in crisis communication publications as well as a potential lack of development in theoretical research and methodological application. More recently, Kim, Avery, and Lariscy (2009) evaluated crisis response strategies in articles published between 1991 and 2009. This study indicated a lack of diversity among cases applied in the articles reviewed and notable gaps between theory and practice. Although the current trend studies of public relations have addressed various research areas such as online public relations (Ye & Ki, 2012), OPR (Ki & Shin, 2006), and crisis communication (An & Cheng, 2007), researchers have paid little attention to the research trend on social media-related public relations research, let alone the synthesis of previous literature.

Social media have been exerting a substantial impact on many disciplines and practices such as mass communication and public relations. In particular, social media have spurred many research topics and opportunities in public relations fields. Thus it's important to synthesize the state of this research area in order to make implications and explore directions for future research.

The significance of social media-related public relations suggests the need for an examination of the state of this research area to date. The purpose of this current study is to help scholars understand future research directions and to improve their knowledge about social media in public relations. This study evaluates the status, critical issues, and needed directions of social media-related public relations research through a critical review and synthesis of the research topics and subjects, theoretical frameworks, and research method of previous literature. This study can advance the literature on research trend by reviewing previous studies on social media incorporated in public relations. It may inform scholars and imply prospective directions for future research on this field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Media and Public Relations

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 61). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites (SNS) as web-based services that allow individuals to establish a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to display a list of other users with whom they can connect, and to view and traverse their lists of connections and those made by others within the system.

Public relations can be defined as the “management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985, p. 4). The term *relationship* in public relations scholarship is defined as “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity.” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62) There are five major public relations disciplines: financial PR, consumer PR, crisis communication, government PR, and internal PR (IPR, 2012).

Social media have been incorporated in public relations research since their inception. For example, Saxton and Waters (2014) focused on the Facebook updates of nonprofit organizations and found that individual stakeholders prefer dialogic and mobilizational messages. Furthermore, social media have been applied in many public relations disciplines. For example, Schultz, Utz, and Göritz (2011) examined the effects of social media strategies on the recipients' secondary crisis communications (e.g., sharing information and leaving a message) and reactions (e.g., willingness to boycott) and they found that the medium matters more than the message.

### **Social Media Type**

Public relations practitioners have worked on persuading publics through mass media campaigns for a long time (McCombs, 1978). The media types studied in public relations research have evolved along with the media evolution. Due to the fragmentation of the mass media precipitated by an increase in media outlets, public relations have shifted to interpersonal channels of communication (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). In the past, public relations research was often associated with newspaper and television, which were dominant media outlets at that time. For instance, McCombs (1978) argued that the role of media (television and newspaper) agenda in the formation of public opinion can provide opportunities for effective public relations when issues are first emerging on the public agenda. Since the public access to the World Wide Web in 1992 (Greenlaw & Hepp, 1999), public relations research has focused on the role of Internet in public relations (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Ki & Hon, 2006). The Internet tends to strengthen stakeholders' power and enhance organizations' ability to collect information, monitor public opinion, increase corporate identity, and engage in dialogues with their key publics (Hill & White, 2000, McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Van der Merwe, Pitt, & Abratt, 2005). For example, Coombs (1998) examined how the Internet can enable activist groups to be more powerful and to command the attention of organizations when used reasonably.

More recently, public relations research has shifted to social media since their inception. There exists various types of social media such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), content community (e.g., YouTube and Instagram), and virtual social world (e.g., Second Life), etc. These social media forms have been examined by tons of public relations studies. For example, Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) investigated public relations practitioners on their adoption of 18 social media tools and their perception on the growth of social media trends in public relations practice. They found that PR practitioners used six different social media tools professionally and were more likely to adopt the more established and institutional tools.

### **RESEARCH TOPIC**

Existing scholarship in public relations covers a wide range of research topics on social media. These topics involve different disciplines or research areas beyond public relations such as mass communication, media studies, social and political issues, and cultural issues.

One important research topic may be social media usage and attitudes towards social media. Studies covering this topic examine how and why individuals or organizations use social media and evaluate users' perceptions or attitudes toward social media (Khang et al., 2012). These studies often focus on the social media pages of individual or organizational users through content analyses of their posts or profiles in order to examine how they used social media to build relationships (i.e., Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Wang & Zhou, 2015). For example, Wang and Zhou (2015) examined how sports organizations used social media as a communication tool to build relationships with fans. The other kinds of studies often conduct surveys or experiments to examine the perceptions or attitudes towards social media (i.e., Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011), which may employ a uses and gratifications approach. Researchers have identified users' motivations such as information, entertainment, and empowerment to interact with organizations on social media (e.g., Men & Tsai, 2012; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

Many studies have explored the role of social media in public relations. Some of them consider social media as a platform to conduct public communication campaigns. A practical case is computer manufacturer Dell and its "Digital Nomads" campaign. Dell uses a combination of social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn), blogs, and content communities (YouTube videos) to display how its range of laptop computers can make individuals become a nomadic mobile workforce (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Other studies consider social media as a vehicle for strategic communication. They analyze the social media profiles and updates of organizations in order to understand how they strategically cultivate and manage diversified relationships with their key publics (e.g., Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In those studies, social media can serve as the information source and the channel for interaction between organizations and the public.

Another research topic has focused on the effects of social media on public relations. The outcome variables include public engagement (Men & Tsai, 2014), public behaviors (Bruning, 2002), and relationship perception (Sashi, 2012), etc. For instance, public engagement via social media can lead to the formation and maintenance of relationships with an organization. By joining in the conversations embedded in a company's SNS pages (e.g., commenting on the organization and its products or services, expressing support, making suggestions, and sharing the organizations' posts), online stakeholders can directly engage the organizations and each other on a more personal and social level (Men & Tsai, 2014).

Other popular research topics include social media as communication tools, and social issues (i.e., race, gender, etc.) or political issues (i.e., political candidates, campaigns, etc.) regarding social media (Khang et al., 2012). For example, Trammell (2006) examined political public relations message strategy on campaign blogs during the 2004 election and found frequent discussion of the opponent, reliance on attacks, and the dominance of logical appeals.

## **THEORETICAL APPLICATION**

Some specific theories or approaches have been applied in social media-related public relations research such as dialogic theory, organization-public relationship,

and online relationship cultivation strategies.

**Dialogic Theory.** Dialogic theory argues that organizations should be willing to interact with publics in honest and ethical ways in order to create effective organization-public communication channels (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed five dialogic principles that could guide organizations to establish mediated, two-way, and dialogic relationships with publics. These principles involved (1) dialogic loops, (2) ease of interface, (3) conservation of visitors, (4) generation of return visits, and (5) providing information relevant to a variety of publics.

A handful of public relations studies have examined how various organizations build dialogic relationships with publics through weblogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Traynor et al., 2008) and social networking sites including Facebook (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009) and Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). These studies often examine how organizations employ dialogic principles on their social media. For instance, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) examined whether dialogic strategies used by environmental advocacy groups on their Facebook profiles led to greater dialogic engagement between organizations and visitors. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) studied how *Fortune* 500 companies used Twitter to facilitate dialogic communication with stakeholders and found that organizations with a dialogic orientation to Twitter use were more likely to employ the dialogic principle of conservation of visitors than organizations with a non-dialogic orientation to Twitter.

**Organization-Public Relationship.** Over the past two decades, the OPR management model has become one of the most dominant models in public relations research (Lee & Park, 2013). OPR can be defined as “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18). L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) claimed that relationship state could be determined by the dimensions of reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding. The relational perspective can identify the organizational function of public relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), clarify the role of communication within that function (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), and provide an approach to determine the impact of public relations on the attainment of organizational goals (Ledingham & Bruning, 1997).

**Online Relationship Cultivation Strategies.** Researchers have identified three essential strategies for relationship cultivation on the Internet: disclosure or openness, information dissemination, and interactivity and involvement (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Existing literature has also studied a variety of strategies for relationship cultivation in offline settings such as positivity, disclosure, assurances of legitimacy, networking, visible leadership, responsiveness, educational communication, and respect (i.e., Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hung, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2006).

Several public relations studies have examined how organizations employ relationship cultivation strategies. For instance, Kelleher and Miller (2006) developed relational maintenance strategies appropriate to online public relations and evaluated the potential advantages of organizational blogs over traditional Web sites. They

found that perceived relational strategies (conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment) were associated with relational outcomes (trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment).

Recent studies have adopted some other theoretical frameworks to understand the role of social media in public relations, which include uses and gratifications (U&G) approach (Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008; Kim, Kim, Wang, & Lee, 2016, in press), excellence theory (Wright & Hinson, 2008), and stakeholder theory (Sweeney & Coughlan, 2008), etc. For instance, from the U&G perspective, Sweetser et al. (2008) indicated that professional journalists and public relations practitioners who are labeled “high users” assign more credibility to blogs. Lee, H. Kim, and J. Kim (2011) examined the roles of social identification and intrinsic motives of altruism in driving consumers’ engagement with consumer-initiated brand communities on social media. In addition, para-social interaction, social media dependency, and community identification have also been studied (Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013).

## RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE

In terms of the research method used in social media-related public relations research, quantitative research has been conducted much more frequently than qualitative research (Ye & Ki, 2012). In particular, according to Ye and Ki (2012), content analysis has been demonstrated to be the predominant method in Internet-related public relations research (i.e., Saxton & Waters, 2014; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Wang & Zhou, 2015). As social media are open to the public, content analysis could generate a broad picture of social media use in public relations practice (Ye & Ki, 2012). Earlier social media studies examined the common communication strategies employed by corporate communicators via content analyses (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Smith, 2010). Men and Tsai (2012) examined how companies employ Facebook to facilitate dialogues with publics in China and the United States through a content analysis of 50 corporate pages with 500 corporate posts and 500 user posts from each country.

Some other methods in public relations research include case study (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014), survey (Diga & Kelleher, 2009), experiment (Schultz et al., 2011), and interview (Briones et al., 2011). Earlier public relations scholarship preferred to employ case study (An & Cheng, 2007; Broom, Cox, Krueger, & Leibler, 1989). For example, Biswas (2013) studied social media use of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization in the context of the H1N1 flu outbreak. They were found to use social media tools for interventions during outbreak communication. Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) conducted a survey on public relations practitioners to investigate the relationship between motivation, leadership and social media use. Briones et al. (2011) showed support for the relationship-building potential of Facebook and Twitter via interviewing 40 employees from the American Red Cross.

The public relations research involving social media has examined various research samples such as organizations (Lo & Walters, 2012), public relations practitioners

(Avery et al., 2010), students (Gower & Reber, 2006), employees (Briones et al., 2011), organizational members (Diga & Kelleher, 2009), journalists (Kim et al., 2014), and general social media users (Men & Tsai, 2014), etc.

## **SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION**

This study examines the status of social media-related public relations through a critical review and synthesis of the research topics and subjects, theoretical frameworks, and research method of previous literature. Furthermore, it attempts to offer valuable insights for future research directions, which will contribute to this promising research area.

Social media have been increasingly examined in public relations research with their growing popularity. According to Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro (2010), new technologies was one of the two most researched areas in public relations between 2000 and 2005. Khang et al. (2012) predict that social media research will continue to grow and keep pace with the evolution of social media usage, continuing to document resultant impacts and applications. As media continues to evolve, more public relations studies are expected to keep pace with technological advancements (Ye & Ki, 2012). In the future, some other new communication technologies (e.g., mobile communication technology) are expected to be increasingly incorporated into various public relations studies.

This synthesis reveals that scholars' interests cover a wide range of research topics across various disciplines beyond public relations. The area of social media-related public relations is interdisciplinary in nature, which integrates new media into traditional public relations research. Social media may play an important role in public relations. They can serve as a vehicle for strategic communication and as a platform to conduct public communication campaigns. In contrast to the one-way communication of traditional media, social media communication is not only interactive, but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, thus allowing organizations to engage publics in constant conversations, supportive behaviors, and meaningful relationships (Men & Tsai, 2014). Future studies can expand the boundaries of research topics in this area through the combination of different disciplines. For instance, researchers can compare the social media usage for public relations of various organizations in distinctive countries or cultural contexts, which may be integrated with intercultural communication. Additionally, future researchers can examine the impact of social media in public relations through the media effects perspective such as uses and gratifications approach and media system dependency theory. They can also conduct longitudinal studies on the effects of social media on public relations practice in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of this area.

In terms of theoretical applications in this research area, limited theories and models have been examined exhaustively in many studies such as dialogic theory and relationship cultivation strategies. One possible reason is that public relations is relatively young as an academic discipline, which has developed identifiable theory in only about the last 50 years (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Also, large amounts of public relations theories and models have rarely been applied in the social media context

such as grounded theory and stakeholder theory. Moreover, most studies utilize or replicate existing theoretical frameworks, rather than applying alternative frameworks that can entail better solutions for understanding social media and public relations issues (Khang et al., 2012). Future scholars are encouraged to explore new concepts and theories for understanding novel aspects of social media which can hardly be explained by the established knowledge structure (Khang et al., 2012).

In terms of the methods used in social media and public relations research, quantitative research is more prevalent than qualitative research. In particular, content analysis is the predominant method used in social media and public relations research (Ye & Ki, 2012). One possible explanation is that researchers can get access to social media easily and collect huge amounts of data to conduct content analysis. As a media form, social media provide much content created by organizational users or stakeholder users, from which researchers can examine their online behaviors for strategic communication through analyzing their profiles and messages. However, both quantitative and qualitative methods are considered complementary for understanding a phenomenon (Firestone, 1987). Thus a balance of these different methods is expected for researchers in order to provide greater insight into the emerging area of social media and public relations (Khang et al., 2012). Furthermore, some emerging approaches can be applied in this area such as social network analysis (SNA) (Zhang & Leung, 2014)

In practice, various organizations including government agencies, nonprofits, and corporations are striving to adopt social media as a strategic communication channel to engage digital-savvy publics (Rooksby & Sommerville, 2012; Waters et al., 2009). Yet, scholars have pointed out that the open and user-centric environment of social media also constitutes a critical challenge for communication management and control (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Unlike the traditional corporate-controlled media, user-centered social media platforms allow individual users to become media gatekeepers and content-creators who collaboratively and proactively engage with companies through likes, posts, and shares within their personal social networks (Muntinga et al., 2011). Social media has thus changed how organization-related content is created, distributed, and used, transferring the power to define corporate images from corporate communicators to stakeholders' online networks (Muntinga et al., 2011).

In conclusion, this synthesis examines the status of social media-related public relations through a critical review and synthesis of previous literature. Furthermore, it attempts to offer theoretical and practical implications for future research directions. Future studies should continue to provide further insights for this emerging and promising research area by integrating various perspectives, theories, and approaches.

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