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An Exploratory Study: Digital and Social Media Use by Zimbabwean Public Relations Practitioners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess how public relations practitioners in Zimbabwe are using social and other emerging technologies. Two hundred and forty-eight respondents took an online survey adapted from Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2017) 10 and 12-year longitudinal studies on the use of social and emerging media. Overall, there was a consensus that the emergence of social and other new media has changed the way Zimbabwean public relations professionals communicate and handle external and internal communication. All of the respondents spent some time working on blogs and other social media, and 52% of the practitioners reported spending more than half their time on digital media. Facebook emerged as the platform used most frequently, followed by YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. A first of its kind in Africa, this study adds to the global conversation on how digital and social media are changing and shaping the practice of public relations in Zimbabwe and worldwide.

Keywords: *social media, new media, international public relations*

Introduction

Social media have become an essential tool in the daily practice of public relations. They are used worldwide by practitioners and consumers alike. Almost 10 years ago, Argenti and Barnes (2009) noted how new media have disrupted the practice of strategic communication by shifting how consumers understand communication and businesses manage relationships. According to Smart Insights (2018) there are 4 billion Internet users and roughly 3 billion social media users worldwide. More specifically in developing African countries, 76% of Internet users are on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2016). Interestingly, the Pew Research Center also found that Internet users from developing nations are more likely to use social media compared to those living in the developed nations.

Public relations scholars continue to advocate for international research to augment the geographically limited body of knowledge (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012; Sriramesh, 2009). In response to this call, this exploratory study seeks to understand Zimbabwe's public relations practitioners' use of social and digital media while contributing to the growing body of international studies.

Researchers have noted the acute shortage of knowledge and understanding of public relations practice in Africa (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012; Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005; Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009), despite the continent exhibiting remarkable potential and growth of international public relations through increased global trade (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012). Africa's collective GDP is expected to reach \$2.6 trillion by 2020, while consumer spending is expected to be \$1.4 trillion by 2020 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2010). Additionally, Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005) noted that although the majority of literature and research comes from well-structured and established systems, this does not mean that public relations is not being practiced in developing nations. In fact, Zimbabwe has had an active International Public Relations Association (IPRA) since 1966, but of the 54 African countries, only a handful of nations have been studied in connection with public relations: Kenya (e.g. Kiambi & Nadler, 2012); South

Africa (e.g. Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003; Holtzhausen, 2005; Rensberg, 2014); Nigeria (e.g. Molleda & Alhassan, 2006; Ukono, Anyadike & Okoro, 2018); Ghana (e.g. Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009; 2014); and Uganda, Mauritius, Guinea, and Tanzania (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Thus, this gap limits the ability of “the continent to fulfill its responsibility towards the global public relations society as well as other developing countries” (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005, p. 69).

Public Relations Research in Africa

Arnould and Strazzari (2017) described Sub-Saharan Africa as “*transformative*”, based on recent economic, socio-political, and technological changes (p. 5). Additionally, the African continent is immensely diverse and it is important to note these transformations and challenges will vary by sub-region or country. As these changes and challenges are addressed, the need for a clear understanding of public relations practices in different African nations is of dire importance.

In 2014, CEO of Ketchum’s European operations and chairman of the London office, David Gallagher pointed out that the profession was primarily an American, British, and European concern, however there was a seismic shift occurring due to three main factors:

- An increasingly interconnected and global economy.
- The increasing prosperity of a ‘middle class’ in what were once called emerging economies.
- The disruptive expansion of social media and information technology. (p. 3)

As such, the face of public relations is poised to have diverse of viewpoints and evolve “as something more Indian, more Arab, and more African” (Gallagher, 2014, p. 3). Gallagher (2014) correctly projected exponential growth in South Africa and several other African markets. South Africa, Zimbabwe’s southern neighbor, is considered one of the biggest public relations markets on the continent (Rensburg, 2014).

Public relations in Africa has been studied in a few different countries. In South Africa, Holtzhausen (2005) found that since 1995, public relations has evolved into a management function and its public perception has shifted from it being seen as a social event to a respected professional career path. While in Nigeria, Modella and Alhassen (2006) explored the challenges and opportunities of professional licensing when the Nigerian government officially recognized the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and mandated a national registry for Nigerian practitioners. While some practitioners welcomed the change as it legitimized the public relations profession in Nigeria, others were frustrated with the unreliable registration process and lack of funding for NIPR to run efficiently (Modella & Alhassen, 2006). Overall the authors recognized that practitioners and the industry faced similar issues worldwide, for example, increasing memberships in professional associations and the limited availability of accredited programs.

In Ghana and Kenya, scholars examined Grunig’s 1984 four U.S.-based models (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical), and two international models---the personal influence model by Sriramesh (1992) and the cultural

interpreter model by Lyra (1991). The cultural interpreter model and the personal influence model emerged as the most frequently used among the six public relations models (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009; Kiambi & Nadler, 2012). These results accentuate the need for a global perspective of the profession in the African nations, and the need to understand how public relations is practiced in different contexts. Thus, it is imperative to study African countries so these similarities and differences can be highlighted to strengthen our understanding of international public relations, both in relation to Western perspectives as well as in a global context.

Furthermore, studying individual African countries is necessary as not all African countries have the same ecological, political, economic, or cultural structures. Kiambi and Nadler (2012) challenged scholars and professionals to “rethink often generalized propositions about the cultural values that are inherent in certain continents or regions of the world” (p. 507). For example, although Kenya and Ghana share similar political, social-economic progress, and colonial pasts, their workplace cultural values differed. Using Hofstede’s (1980) work-related cultural dimensions, scholars discovered that practitioners in Kenya identified with individualism, femininity, and masculinity (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012), while practitioners in Ghana identified with uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and power distance (Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009). For both countries, the researchers agreed that exploring the different cultural roles helps practitioners from multinational organizations understand local culture and discover the local publics’ interests.

Wu and Baah-Boakye (2014) continued this line of research to illustrate how globalization had a major impact on the development of Ghanaian public relations and professionalism, most notably helping international companies navigate language and cultural barriers. Years later, the cultural interpreter model continues to influence Ghanaian practitioners as they are hired by multinational organizations to conduct research, assist with media relations and serve as the intermediary between the international organizations and local publics.

Similar to other African nations, this current study aims to lay the groundwork for future research in Zimbabwe by understanding the current social media and digital climate.

Use of Social Media in Public Relations

The use of social media in public relations has grown exponentially. According to Wright and Hinson’s (2017) 12-year longitudinal study on the use of social and emerging media, 99% of the practitioners spent varying amounts of time on digital media as part of their public relations and communications work. The practitioners spent most of that time on Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, in 2017, while 63% of the practitioners agreed that public relations is responsible for monitoring and managing social and emerging media, an even higher percentage (75%) agreed that this should be the public relations department’s responsibility rather than the marketing (4%) or digital media (15%) departments. Over the past 12 years, practitioners agreed that social and digital media have impacted their daily activities, especially communication with external audiences. However, the authors determined that the industry as a whole was lagging behind in measurement. For example, since 2009, research efforts peaked at 49% in 2016 but dropped to 48% in 2017 (Wright & Hinson, 2017).

Macnamara, Zerfass, Adi, and Lwin (2018) surveyed communication professionals in 22 Asia-Pacific countries on their skills, knowledge, and abilities. Similar to Wright and Hinson (2017), over 90% of the respondents saw social media as an important communication tool with key publics. However, rather than fully utilizing the interactive capacity of these channels for two-way communication, practitioners continue to mostly use social media for one-way information transmission (Macnamara et al., 2018). Digital measurement efforts face a similar dilemma in Asia-Pacific as the communication professionals reported a lack of digital analytics skills, using algorithms, and understanding big data (Macnamara et al., 2018).

Similar to the U.S. and Asia-Pacific, research skills and efforts in the United Kingdom (UK) were lackluster. In a state-of-the-profession report the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR, 2017) revealed that qualitative and quantitative analysis were ranked as two of the top three weakest skills possessed by UK practitioners. Moreover, only 22% of the professionals considered a job applicant's research capabilities as a necessary competency. However, 78% reported that their organization looked for digital and social media writing skills when hiring entry-level practitioners. Although lower than other international regions, 66% of practitioners spent their time on digital and social media management.

As the management of social and emerging media continues to grow as a public relations responsibility, new roles within public relations are needed. Neill and Lee (2016) identified seven different social media roles that offer practitioners potential to grow and be influential within an organization. The roles include social media technician, social listening and analytics, online media relations, policy maker, employee recruiter, internal social media manager, and policing (Neill & Lee, 2016). In order to understand these roles, practitioners and researchers alike need to explore how new media is being used.

Wright and Hinson (2017) have been at the forefront of answering this question. Since 2009 these researchers extensively studied how digital media are being applied by public relations practitioners. Although their sample included practitioners from Africa, 90% of the respondents were based in North America. Therefore, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of how practitioners from Africa are using digital media in their daily routines. As previously discussed, it is inadequate to generalize based on continent, thus Zimbabwe was selected as the African country to examine.

Socio-Cultural and Media Landscape in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a landlocked Southern African country bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique. It has a population of a little over 14 million people, 16 official languages and Harare is the capital city. However, English, Shona and Ndebele are the most prevalent languages (Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, 2019). A former British colony, Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980. After 37 years at the helm, President Robert G. Mugabe was removed by military force in November, 2017, and former Vice President Emmerson D. Mnangagwa was officially sworn in as president to serve out the remainder of Mugabe's term. President Mnangagwa was re-elected after the controversial July 3, 2018, presidential elections (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

Zimbabwe's economy heavily relies on mining and agriculture. The new government is

expected to bring in new foreign investments and revitalize the economy, however progress has been slow or even stagnant. Similar to the U.S., Zimbabwe is a member of several international organizations such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Zimbabwe's government structure is considered a semi-presidential republic comprised of the judicial, executive and legislative branches, with a mixed legal system of English common law, Roman-Dutch civil law, and customary law (CIA, 2019).

The majority of Zimbabwean media is state run. Typically, the government-owned media are fully supportive of the ruling party, while independently owned media are partial to opposition political figures and issues (Mare, 2018). Despite the licensing of some newspapers and commercial radio stations, state-run Zimpapers and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) continue to dominate the media landscape. The two national commercial radio stations are effectively state-run since ZiFM Stereo is owned by a government official, while the radio station StarFM is a subsidiary of Zimpapers (Mare, 2018). For those who can afford antennas and receivers, foreign media is available via satellite TV and shortwave broadcasts (CIA, 2019).

In a *PR Week* article, Moore (2019) reiterated how in many Sub-Saharan African countries media are state-controlled, however, high mobile phone penetration has resulted in social media being the main source of media. This is especially true in Zimbabwe's urban areas (Mare, 2018). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram are accessible. Thus, social and digital media have given Zimbabwean citizens, organizations, and practitioners a platform to communicate with each other with minimal government intervention and gatekeeping (Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015).

Use of Social Media in Africa and Zimbabwe

In a 2018 study, The Pew Research Center reported that citizens from developing nations use social media to access news as much as their counterparts in developed nations. In Africa's emerging economies of Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Tunisia ranked Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as the top news sites (Pew Research Center, 2018). Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya included WhatsApp and LinkedIn, while Tanzania listed Pinterest as well. This is especially key for public relations, as it sometimes relies on earned media to broadcast information and engage with publics. More importantly, social media allow organizations to publish their own messages via the various platforms, whereas before they may have been restricted to state-run media as in Zimbabwe.

Social and digital media public relations have been embraced in various ways across the African continent, particularly in South Africa, where most research on public relations in Africa is centered. Oksitycz and Kunene (2018) revealed that millennials used digital media as a way to engage with and gather information about brands. Most notably, 69% of the participants stated that they used the organization's website for product pricing details and customer satisfaction reviews. Mambadja, Conradie, and Van der Waldt (2015) analyzed the online stakeholder relationship strategies used on Facebook by 24 South African universities and found that overall the universities were not fully utilizing the platform for communication. Of the three virtual communication strategies identified (disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement), the universities used information dissemination most often (Mambadja et al., 2015). The

researchers suggested the universities implement Facebook best practices of posting more frequently, posting relevant content that encourages engagement, and incorporate all three virtual communication strategies. After analyzing South African non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Naude, Froneman, and Atwood (2004) suggested the NGOs adopt the use of the two-way symmetrical model to maximize the communication function of an organizational website.

In the Eastern region of the continent, Cooley and Jones (2013) used Coombs' (2006) Situational Crisis Communication Theory Model (SCCT) to evaluate the crisis response message strategies sent out on Twitter by leading Somali-based government agency sources. In this context, the NGOs used Twitter to disseminate information regarding the needs of the Somali victims and refugees. The SCCT revealed that both entities felt responsible for the issues that addressed reducing the scope of the crisis. The study also underlined how even in times of crisis, relief organizations use social media to self-promote their organizations and agendas (Cooley & Jones, 2013).

The few studies on digital media use in Zimbabwe have been mainly analyzed from a political standpoint. Similar to other Sub-Saharan countries, social media is being used for political engagement in Zimbabwe. In certain cases, electoral commissions in some African countries have demanded service providers to block social media during elections and protests, so the state can control "fake news" (Moore, 2018, p.1). For example, the Zimbabwean government reserves the right to shutdown communication services at will as it did during the January 2019 protests, where the vast majority of the population was disconnected from the outside world for several days (Marima, 2019).

Mutsvairo and Sirks (2015) found that social media (Facebook) did not reinforce nor increase political participation among Zimbabwean citizens; conversely, Gukurume (2017) concluded that social media was instrumental in breaking down geographical barriers for disgruntled Zimbabweans worldwide, and gave activists a voice and a platform to mobilize online and offline activities protesting the Zimbabwean government, as exemplified in January 2019, where citizens took to social media and aired out their grievances over the fuel price hike and called for mass protests (Marima 2019). Additionally, Makombe and Agbede (2016) illustrated how Internet memes emboldened Zimbabwean citizens with another platform that differs from the official narrative promoted by the government. On the other hand, the 2013 presidential elections saw politicians increase their Facebook activity by targeting the urban youths and first-time voters, who were more likely to have access to social media compared to their rural counterparts (Mare, 2018). Although there are over 14 million cellular subscriptions in Zimbabwe (CIA, 2019), mobile phones, the internet and social media are mainly utilized in the urban areas, however, the situation is changing drastically (Mare, 2018).

Beyond politics, social and digital media are being used daily in other sectors such as public relations. Hence, this study is the first to look at how practitioners in Zimbabwe are navigating digital and social media in their roles as strategic communicators. As Mare (2018) noted, little is known about the use of social and digital media in Zimbabwean politics. This study argues that even less is known about social and digital media use and public relations in Zimbabwe and aims to rectify the situation.

Purpose

The public relations and communication academic fields are well developed in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, but issues and practices that affect developing nations still need to be addressed by future communication management and cross-cultural research (Rensburg, 2014), and there needs to be an increase in the documentation of public relations in underrepresented regions such as Africa (Molleda & Alhassen, 2006). Examining Zimbabwean public relations practices contributes to this limited body of knowledge.

As Ukono et al. (2018) lamented, although Nigeria is the second biggest public relations market in Africa, the lack of earlier documentation has led to an unclear history, an identity crisis, and ultimately a poor public relations ideology. To circumvent and rectify similar issues, this current study serves as a starting point for tracking Zimbabwean public relations.

Without a doubt, public relations is being practiced in Zimbabwe but not being studied. The current study examination seeks to understand how Zimbabwean practitioners are using new media. High penetration of mobile subscriptions and access to social and digital media means these new technologies are poised to be essential tools for practitioners in Zimbabwe and the region alike.

Wright and Hinson's (2017) 12-year longitudinal analysis has been instrumental in tracking social and digital media use in public relations. However, there's a dearth of knowledge and understanding of how social media is being used in Africa, specifically Zimbabwe. In accordance with Van Heerden and Rensburg's (2005) assertion, for Africa to contribute to the global body of knowledge, it is crucial to explore the views and roles of practitioners in Africa. The proposed study is an initial step to a larger cross-national comparison study between countries in North America, Europe, and Africa.

RQ1: How are public relations practitioners in Zimbabwe using social media and other emerging technologies?

Method

The current study is a replication of Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2017) 10 and 12-year longitudinal studies on the use of social and emerging media. While Wright and Hinson's studies were mainly based in the North America, this study focused on a different context and country, Zimbabwe. Focusing on an African nation was imperative as over 90% respondents from Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2017) studies were North American. Furthermore, studying social and digital media in a different context allows us to flesh out the differences and similarities of public relations practices.

Similar to previous research on practitioners' use of social media, this study used an online survey. All questionnaire items, except demographics, were adapted from Wright and Hinson's (2015, 2017) longitudinal studies.

Participants were public relations practitioners ($N = 248$) solicited to participate in the study via a snowball approach by the researcher and professionals known to the researcher. According to Kent, Taylor, and Turcilo (2006) international research often has a low response rate. To encourage participation and offset data usage costs, respondents were given

\$15 USD as an incentive. To maintain anonymity, upon completion of the questionnaire, respondents were redirected to a separate page, where they entered their information for compensation.

A screener question asking “In your current role, do you practice public relations (PR) or PR-related activities in Zimbabwe?” was asked. Respondents who answered “YES” were allowed to proceed the survey, while those who answered “NO” were thanked for their time and the questionnaire was terminated. The final sample was 248 respondents, which is similar to Holtzhausen’s (2005) South African sample of 208 participants.

The researcher consulted with three practitioners from various backgrounds in Zimbabwe to ensure that the response rate, job titles, professional organizations, industry fields, terminology and questions made sense in a Zimbabwean context. Additionally, as of 2018, all social and digital sites were checked to confirm active status before data collection began.

Results

To explore how Zimbabwean practitioners were using social media and other emerging technologies, a series of descriptive analyses were run similar to Wright and Hinson (2015, 2017). To understand the background of Zimbabwean practitioners, demographic information was collected and analyzed. The average age of respondents was 32 years old. There were more females (n = 125) than males (n = 112) and 11 respondents preferred not to answer. The majority of the respondents were Black (n = 236), followed by mixed race (n =5), White (n =1) and six preferred not to answer.

In terms of job level, there was senior level management (n =52), middle management (n =115), entry level (n = 71) and other/missing (n =10). The majority of participants were not part of a professional organization (59%). Of the organizations that exist in Zimbabwe, 12% of the respondents belonged to the Marketers Association of Zimbabwe (MAZ), 11% to Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations (ZIPR), 2% to The African Public Relations Association (APRA), 1% to International Public Relations Association (IPRA), while 11% stated other. Four percent declined to answer.

Of the 248 professionals, 48% had a Bachelor’s degree, 21% had a Master’s degree, 8% a high school diploma, 7% a trade and or associate’s degree, 1% a doctorate degree. Of the degrees earned, 22% majored in marketing, 14% in public relations, 13% in mass communication, 9% in journalism, 11% in business administration, and .4% in law. However, the largest percent was in “other” (27%), which included fields such as human resources, information technology, etc.

The majority of the respondents worked corporate in-house public relations (28%), followed closely by government agencies (25%) and non-profit organizations (23%). The rest reported working as freelancers (11%), in PR/Ad agencies (4%), education (3.2%), and other (5.6%). However, field of work varied from the healthcare industry (15%), media (19%), food and beverage (7%), tourism and hospitality (11%), politics (10%), transportation 4%, and other (21%).

To gain a clearer picture of the digital media landscape, practitioners were asked about their opinions on social and digital media influence.

Zimbabwean practitioners agreed that the emergence of social and other emerging media had changed the way their organization or client communicated ($M = 4.17$; $SD = 1.07$); handled external communication ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .96$); and handled internal communication ($M = 3.92$; $SD = .98$) (Table 1).

Respondents agreed that social and emerging media had enhanced the practice of public relations ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 1.18$) and influenced traditional mainstream media ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 1.18$). However, the practitioners were neutral on whether traditional mainstream media influenced social media and emerging media ($M = 3.28$; $SD = 1.20$) (Table 2).

Additionally, to better understand their daily activities, the respondents were asked about their digital and social media responsibilities.

Overall, 94% of respondents spent time working on blogs and other social media. Of the 94%, 52% of the practitioners reported spending more than half their time on blogs and other social media. Only 6.5% of the practitioners spent less than 10% of their time on work-related social media (Table 3).

The majority of practitioners (42%) agreed that the communication/PR departments were primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and emerging media communication in their organizations, followed by digital/social media (17%), marketing (13%), technology (8%), and HR (8%) departments (Table 4).

When asked who should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and other emerging media communication, the majority (55%) agreed the job function belonged to the communication/PR department. Furthermore, digital/social media was second (20%) followed by marketing (8%), and technology (5%) (Table 5).

To gauge whether any research was being conducted as part of their duties, the Zimbabwean practitioners were asked questions about measurement.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents said their organizations had conducted research measuring what members of other strategic publics have communicated about their organization via blogs, social media, and other emerging media, while 50% noted they had not. (Table 6).

Overall participants agreed that practitioners should measure the amount of communication that is being disseminated ($M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.04$) and the content of what is being communicated ($M = 4.11$; $SD = .94$) about their organization or client (Table 7). Similarly, the respondents agreed that organizations should measure the impact information disseminated on digital media about their organizations and clients has on influentials, opinion leaders, and strategic audiences ($M = 3.99$; $SD = .94$); and the impact that information has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions, and behavior ($M = 4.0$; $SD = .93$) (Table 7).

Less than half (42%) of practitioners said they were currently measuring the amount of information being communicated on digital media about their organization by members of other strategic publics. Fifty-two percent confirmed whether their companies had ever measured what is being communicated online. Similarly, respondents verified that their companies had at some point measured the impact the information disseminated had on influentials (57%) and attitudes, opinions and behaviors (51%) (Table 8).

Finally, to assess the extent of social media and digital media usage, participants were asked about the relevance and their daily usage of each platform.

As shown in Table 9, social network sites such as Facebook and micro-blogs such as Twitter were highly ranked when subjects were asked how important a list of 12 categories of

new media were “in the overall communications and public relations efforts of (their) organization(s).” Similar result showed for the question asking how important each of these new media should be.

The Zimbabwean practitioners were asked how often they accessed specific digital media sites as part of their work in public relations (Table 10). The mean scores ranging from very infrequently to very frequently revealed that Facebook ($M = 4.22$; $SD = 1.04$) was accessed more frequently followed by YouTube ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.05$), Twitter ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 1.21$), LinkedIn ($M = 3.66$; $SD = 1.18$), and Instagram ($M = 3.66$; $SD = 1.18$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess how practitioners in Zimbabwe were using social media and other emerging technologies. Overall, there was consensus that the emergence of social and other new media has changed the way Zimbabwean professionals communicate and handle external and internal communication. These results are consistent with previous studies on social media use in public relations (Wright & Hinson, 2017). As scholars and practitioners continue to understand the Zimbabwean public relations landscape, more in-depth assessment as to how communication has changed practices needs to be done.

Although the respondents agreed that social and emerging media have enhanced the practice of public relations and influenced traditional mainstream media, they were neutral on whether traditional mainstream media influenced social media and emerging media. This finding differs from previous research where participants agreed that traditional media influenced new media (Wright & Hinson, 2015). This might be because Zimbabwean media is state-run, and social media have given Zimbabwean citizens a platform to control and broadcast their own messages without government as the gatekeeper, versus other countries where the media is independent, and emerging and traditional media complement each other.

Zimbabwean practitioners are spending their workday on digital media. In fact, 52% of the practitioners reported spending more than half their time on work-related digital media. As a whole, 94% of the practitioners spent some time on work-related digital media activities, similar to the 99% of practitioners in the Wright and Hinson (2017) study. This widespread use further underscores the important role social and digital media play in public relations activities.

In accordance with Wright and Hinson (2017), the designation of who “is” versus “who should” be responsible for managing and monitoring digital media fell on the public relations and communication department, followed by the digital/social media and marketing departments. Interestingly, the Zimbabwean practitioners listed the human resources and the information technology (IT) departments as being responsible for digital media as well. One possible explanation could be human resources monitors social media for employee digital use compliance. However, a larger number of U.S.-based practitioners (63%) listed public relations as being responsible and 75% noted that public relations should be responsible for monitoring and managing social media (Wright & Hinson, 2017), compared to 42% and 55% Zimbabweans, respectively. This difference highlights the different stages of practice is in the two regions. Since Wright and Hinson began their longitudinal study in 2009, the lowest point for the North American participants was reported in 2017 for “who is responsible” (63%) and in 2016 for “who should be responsible” (68%) for digital activities. North American public relations

functions seem to be more clearly defined compared to Zimbabwe, as North America has a longer, more established, and well documented public relations history.

Furthermore, this disparity can be explained by how much marketing and public relations are intertwined in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe there were more respondents with marketing degrees (22%) than degrees in public relations (14%). Additionally, the top professional organizations MAZ and ZIPR had similar enrollment (12%, 11% respectively). Finally, although marketing was ranked third for being primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social media in both regions, For the U.S study it was lower (4%) in 2017 compared to Zimbabwe (13%) in 2019. This highlights the need for public relations to continue to set itself apart from other fields as the respondents came from a mixture of educational backgrounds such as marketing, mass communication, business administration and law. This is not to say these fields cannot contribute to public relations. However, professionals should be equipped with the proper strategies and tactics that are emphasized in a public relations curriculum.

There is a clear disconnection of what should be measured and what is being measured. Although the participants agreed that practitioners should be conducting digital and social media research, the majority of organizations are not measuring their digital footprint and impact. In fact, only 36% of the respondents said their organization had conducted research measuring what members of other strategic publics had communicated about their organization. This result resembles Wright and Hinson's (2017) preliminary studies on social and digital media measurement in 2009 (39%) and 2010 (38%). Resembling their counterparts in Asia-Pacific (Macnamara et al., 2018), the UK (CIPR, 2017), and North America (Wright & Hinson, 2017), Zimbabwean practitioners should refocus some of their time and skills enhancing their research capabilities as it is a vital part of public relations strategy.

Consistent with Wright and Hinson's (2017) study, the respondents agreed that Facebook and Twitter were not only the two most important platforms, but should also be the most important for their organization's communication and public relations efforts. Ultimately, Facebook emerged as the platform used most frequently for public relations work, followed by YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. One should note that the YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn scores were close, so one could conclude that practitioners spend roughly the same amount of time on each platform. More investigation is needed as to how these platforms are being utilized in daily public relations activities in the workplace. Nonetheless, these results align with social media usage in other African countries such Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Tunisia (Pew Research Center, 2018) and echo global trends of the most used social network sites (Smart Insights, 2018).

Practical Implications

International research results have direct impact on practitioners locally and globally (Thomas, 2016). The Institute for Public Relations (IPR) underscored the importance of research as it helps advance the profession, demonstrate the business value public relations brings to organizations, and allows practitioners to systematically understand the evolving role and impact of public relations (Thomas, 2016).

Practitioners are using social media worldwide, however, some regions still need to factor in government intervention. As social media continues to gain influence, Moore (2018) advised African practitioners to strategically navigate government regulations to ensure that they use

social and digital media in a manner that will allow them to adapt to the dynamic digital environment. Currently, Zimbabwean practitioners are having to deal with new internet and social media government regulations, which were yet to be published at the time this study was conducted

For practitioners and researchers looking to penetrate the global public relations market, studies such as this one provides a foundation for understanding the layout, capabilities and opportunities that exist in specific countries. The emerging markets of South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria have established research, university programs, and more straightforward public relations practices as a result of research. Practitioners and organizations from around the world have a clearer understanding of how to operate in those countries as is exemplified in Kenya (Kiambi & Nadler, 2012) and Ghana (Wu & Baah-Boakye (2009, 2014). In Zimbabwe, practitioners are using the top social media websites, so they are poised to work with multinational firms and clients who communicate with their publics via the same channels.

Considering the rate of mobile phone penetration in Africa, Ukono et al. (2018) anticipated that new media technologies will help public relations deal with some professional communication challenges such as increasing the digital footprint beyond urban areas and into rural communities as well.

Only 41% of Zimbabwean practitioners are affiliated with a professional organization, reflecting U.S. and global trends (Modella & Alhassen, 2006). Practitioners worldwide should be encouraged to join professional organizations as it helps with networking and staying up-to-date with industry developments. Participating in professional organizations has helped other African nations raise their professional standards and formalized the profession (Modella & Alhassen, 2006). As organizations such as IPR continue to broaden their influence (Thomas, 2016), involvement with underrepresented countries may help encourage practitioners to join public relations organizations that will keep them updated on the latest trends in research, pedagogy, and practice.

Practitioners and scholars should also continue to stress the value of digital public relations in the business mix and education, especially in countries such as Zimbabwe, where it is typically equated to marketing. In this study alone, there were more respondents with marketing degrees and affiliated with the professional marketing association compared to public relations.

As professionals begin to comprehend the use of social and digital media in the workplace, they can also start to differentiate the seven social media roles identified by Neill and Lee (2016), and understand where they can be most effective for the benefit of their clients and publics, e.g. a role as a social listener on Facebook.

Finally, social and digital media measurement should be a top priority for practitioners. As noted, research efforts continue to be a global issue, from limited research skills in the UK (CIPR, 2017) and Asia-Pacific (Macnamara et al., 2018) to less than 50% of practitioners conducting social and digital media research in North America (Wright & Hinson, 2017) and Zimbabwe. As a start, there are many free digital tools such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights that offer robust metrics, and most social media platforms provide free metrics for business accounts that practitioners can use. Long term, focusing on emerging media research in university public relations programs and career advancement courses may help better equip practitioners in their measurement responsibilities.

Conclusion

No study comes without limitations. First the researcher had to rely on snowball sampling to recruit participants, therefore these results cannot be generalized to all public relations professionals in Zimbabwe. Second, the data is based on respondent's self-reporting, therefore they may have over or under reported the time spent on social media. Finally, due to internet connectivity issues, some respondents were not able to complete the questionnaire, so their entire questionnaires were excluded from the study. In the future, providing a paper and pencil option may yield a higher response and completion rate.

Although this study was fashioned after Hinson and Wright's (2015, 2017) studies, this analysis is the first to look at Zimbabwean practitioners. Future research should look at a cross-cultural comparison to determine more detailed similarities and differences. These results are instrumental to adding the voices of practitioners from a developing African nation. As Gallagher (2014) of Ketchum remarked, "... my hope is that we'll continue to see public relations flourish in Africa... as our industry forms an ever-widening network of individuals and agencies that share a belief in the power of communications." (p.4). Based on this sentiment, this study adds to the international conversation on how digital and social media are changing and shaping the practice of public relations worldwide.

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APPENDIX

Mean Comparison Tables

Note: All results based on completed questionnaires from (N=248) respondents

Table 1

Mean analyses of responses to the question: “Please tell us whether you agree or disagree that the emergence of social and other emerging media has changed the way your organization (or your client organizations)”

	M	SD
Communicates?	4.17	1.07
Handles external communication?	4.12	.96
Handles internal communication?	3.92	.98

Note. Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “strongly disagree” and “5” = “strongly agree.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the stronger the agreement.

Table 2

Mean analysis of responses to these questions asking subjects if they agreed or disagreed with these statements.

	M	SD
Social media and other emerging media have enhanced the practice of public relations?	4.07	1.18
Social media and emerging media influence the traditional mainstream media?	4.02	1.11
Traditional mainstream media influence social media and emerging media?	3.28	1.20

Note. Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “strongly disagree” and “5” = “strongly agree.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the stronger the agreement.

Table 3

Responses to these questions: “On the average, approximately what percentage of your time working in public relations and communications is spent with blogs and other social media?”

Percentage	None	1-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	>75%	Missing
% of Time	0%	6.5%	15.3%	20.2%	34%	18%	6%

Table 4

Responses to the question: “Which organizational function IS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE for monitoring and managing social and emerging media communication in your organization?”

Dept	Comm or PR	HR	Mkting	Digital/Social Media	Legal	Technology	Don’t Know	Not Assigned	Other	Missing
%	42%	8%	13%	17%	1%	8%	2%	2%	1%	6%

Table 5

Responses to the question: “In your opinion, which of the following functions SHOULD BE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE for monitoring and managing social and other emerging media communication in your organization?”

Dept	Comm or PR	HR	Mkting	Digital/Social Media	Legal	Technology	Don’t Know	Not Assigned	Other	Missing
%	55%	4%	8%	20%	.4%	5%	0%	0%	2%	6.5%

Table 6

Responses to the question: “To the best of your knowledge, has your organization ever conducted research measuring what members of other strategic publics have communicated about your organization via blogs social and other emerging media?”

<i>N</i> = 248	Percentage
Yes	36%
No	50%
Uncertain/I Don't Know	14%

Table 7

Mean analysis of responses to these questions asking subjects if they agreed or disagreed that public relations practitioners SHOULD measure:

	M	SD
The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations (or client organizations) through blogs and other social media.	3.96	1.04
And/or analyze content of what's being communicated about their organizations (or their clients) in blogs and other social media	4.11	.94
The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.	3.99	.94
The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behavior.	4.0	.93

Note. Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “strongly disagree” and “5” = “strongly agree.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the stronger the agreement.

Table 8

Percentage of respondents answering “Yes” to the question asking, “To the best of your knowledge, has your organization (or a client organization) ever measured...”

	YES
The amount of communication that is being disseminated about their organizations (or client organizations) through blogs and other social media.	42%
And/or analyze content of what’s being communicated about their organizations (or their clients) in blogs and other social media	52%
The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of other strategic audiences.	57%
The impact information disseminated about their organizations (or their clients) through blogs and other social media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behavior.	51%

Table 9

Mean Analysis Comparisons between responses to the questions: “How important ARE/ SHOULD each of the following in the overall communications and public relations efforts of your organization (or your client’s organizations)?”

	ARE	SHOULD
Blogs	3.79	4.11
Electronic Forums or Message Boards	3.83	4.12
Podcasts	3.42	3.83
Search Engine Marketing	3.83	4.08
Social Networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	4.30	4.39
Micro-Blogging Sites (Twitter, etc.)	4.00	4.29
Video Sharing (YouTube, etc.)	3.96	4.21
Social Media Management Sites (Hootsuite, etc.)	3.48	3.82
Bookmarking Management Sites (SpringPro, Evernote, Google Keep, etc.)	3.39	3.72
Screencast Applications (Screenr, etc.)	3.14	3.55
Enterprise Social Media Sites for Private Comm. Within an Organization (Yammer, etc.)	3.27	3.71

Note. Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where “1” = “Very Unimportant” and “5” = “Very Important.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the perceived importance.

Table 10

Mean Analysis Comparisons to the question: "Please tell us how frequently you access each of the following social networking, micro-blogging and video sharing sites as part of your work in public relations." Responses range from "1= Very infrequently to "5 =Very frequently"

Social Network	M	SD
Facebook	4.22	1.04
YouTube	3.98	1.05
Twitter	3.87	1.21
LinkedIn	3.66	1.18
Instagram	3.49	1.24
Hootsuite	2.37	1.13
Flickr	2.36	1.06
Pinterest	2.74	1.21

Note. Mean scores are based on responses to five-point Likert-type scales where "1" = "Very infrequently" and "5" = "Very frequently." Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the frequency.