

Social Media and Public Relations: The perception and adoption of Facebook by Malaysian Public Relations Consultancies as effective external communication tool,

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0214

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The explosion in social media, especially social networking site such as Facebook with increased connectivity and interactivity has caused many public relations (PR) agencies begun to recognise the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with a variety of internal and external audiences. Yet, researches examining the relationship between social networking sites and public relations are limited especially in Malaysia context, thus this study aims to examine the use of Facebook and its implication by Malaysian PR consultants as a communication platform in the agency. The objectives are to: (1) determine the use of different types of social networking sites by PR consultants; (2) investigate the use of Facebook amongst PR consultants for external communication; (3) find out the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook for external communication; as well as (4) gauge the perception and adoption of Facebook amongst PR consultants as effective external communication tool. A qualitative research method was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Malaysian PR consultants in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, who are members of 'Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia' (PRCA Malaysia). The participation of the respondents was voluntary. The results reveal that Facebook becomes an increasingly important communication channel for external stakeholders. Facebook has been adopted as a formal channel of communication in PR agency, yet it could not replace traditional media such as face-to-face, email and corporate website because they still play a vital role for external communication.

INTRODUCTION

Social media, a web-based technology medium mainly used for social interaction such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs along with professional networking site such as LinkedIn had recently exploded in terms of its popularity not only among common users, but also in public relations (PR). PR practitioners have used micro-blogging sites, social networking sites and video sharing services in getting information on the local, regional and international scene (Wright, & Hinson, 2010). In addition, PR practitioners in Malaysia have used social networking sites to research on campaigns and monitor public opinion because it serves as a platform for accessing and downloading information (Fitch, 2009).

While social media could be proven popular among general social interactions and prominently integrated as part of marketing strategies, it is still a new form of communication for PR practices compared to e-mail and face-to-face interaction. Besides, despite the popularity and the increased use of social media such as Facebook in PR (Wright, & Hinson, 2012), not all PR consultancies have integrated Facebook as its formal communication tools. With this in mind, this study aims to examine the perception of PR consultants in Malaysia for using Facebook as well as to determine their attitude towards adopting Facebook as an effective external communication channel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Social Networking Sites

Social and other new communications media that deliver web-based information was invented with the intention to facilitate communication among people. Huang (2010, as cited in Westover Jr., 2010) defined social media as the “web-based services that allow individuals and organisations to share and exchange information and connect with others” (p.27). Besides, Safko, and Brake’s (2009, as cited in Wahlroos, 2010) definition of social media is the “activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinion using conversational media” (p. 11).

According to Boyd, and Ellison (2008, p. 211), “social networking sites are the latest online communication tool that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. While Decker, and Frank (2008, as cited in Abd Jalil, Abd Jalil, & Abdul Latiff, 2010) stated that “social networking sites offer the infrastructure to (1) make relationships explicit, so individuals can explore their personal network, and (2) make new connections and establish new relationships. To emphasise this articulated social network as a critical organizing feature of these sites, Boyd, and Ellison (2008) labelled them as “social network sites” (p. 210).

Facebook

Facebook was launched in February 2004 by its founder Mark Zuckerberg. Despite the presence of other strong competitors such as MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn,

Facebook increased its users in a rapid pace and it is now one of the biggest social networking sites in United States of America (Tuunainen, Pitkanen, & Hovi, 2009).

According to The Associated Press (September 2012), Facebook has reached 1.01 billion people with 584 million active users each day and 604 million users using Facebook from a mobile device each month. On the other hand, Leeming, and Danino's (2012) case study on Facebook usage indicated that the total number of Facebook users in Malaysia has grown tremendously to approximately 10.1 million in one year's time. In a research conducted by Universiti Teknologi MARA (Perlis), Facebook was rated the most popular social network sites in Malaysia (Shafie et al., 2011).

Facebook is beneficial for users in maintaining a large, diffuse network of friends, and to enhance their social capital, which is defined as the benefit one receives from one's relationship with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, as cited in McCorkindale, 2010). Facebook began with a focus on colleges and universities, but now it has been widely used in high schools, professionals in corporate networks and other organisations such as non profit organisation (Boyd, & Ellison, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Acquisti, & Gross, 2006).

Facebook use in organisations and PR

Facebook has been used in organisations of different field. In education, Facebook is used as a tool to facilitate communication and internationalisation (Leeming, & Danino, 2012). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) discussed how Facebook helped users in maintaining the relationships as they change offline communities, and suggested colleges and universities should have take advantage of this medium to maintain alumni relationships when the students graduated.

In addition, Facebook has facilitated the communication in an organisation, and serve as a tool for users to complete their work. McCorkindale (2010) investigated how corporations have used Facebook for relationship maintenance, engagement and also information dissemination. Koufaris (2002, as cited in Yang, & Lin, 2011) stated that Facebook provides a rich entertainment-based platform for employees to create and complete assignments. Joyce (2011) found the highest percentage of Facebook adopters is in the Technology sector. For other organisations, they tend to use Facebook for sharing investor-related material such as press releases, industry-related news articles, media coverage and information on conferences (Wright, & Hinson, 2012).

Given the relative newness of social media, researches examining the relationship between social networking sites and public relations are still limited. Only a handful of studies have investigated the use of Facebook in PR such as Aloisio (2011); Wigley, and Zhang, (2011); Khaizuran (2010); and Wright, and Hinson (2010) to name a few. Khaizuran's (2010) findings showed that half of the respondents have used Facebook for PR activities. Aloisio (2011) analysed how PR practitioners utilised Facebook as a publicity tool to disburse information to its online community of fans and the results show that Facebook was able to cultivate excitement, momentum, and a virtual relationship was formed with 3 million fans and to stimulate dialogue among them. Besides, Wigley, and Zhang's study (2011) discovered that PR

professionals have incorporated the use of Facebook into their crisis communication plans as it is used as an alternative communication tool to disseminate and monitor information in times of crisis. Even though PR practitioners are heavily reliant on traditional sources for information, they still utilise Facebook to find out about news in general and even for PR or communication-related news (Wright, & Hinson, 2010).

PR Consultants' Association of Malaysia (PRCA Malaysia)

PRCA Malaysia was established in 1999 and currently having 16 corporate members and 59 individual members (PRCA Malaysia, 2012) with a total of 170 members. PRCA Malaysia is an independent, non-profit organisation representing PR practitioners that are either working in-house or in consultancies. It brings together consultants from specialist public relations and communications firm that are dedicated to enhance the standards in the practice of PR in the country (PRCA Malaysia, 2012). PRCA Malaysia's objectives are to dedicate in encouraging PR excellence, contributing effectively to organisational goals nationwide and also becoming a model for effective communication (PRCA Malaysia, 2012). Besides, it serves as a forum for PR consultants in Malaysia to discuss relevant industry-related issues, such as professional development, evaluation, quality and training. The Association provides a platform and enables individuals to exchange information and view, while striving to set industry standards, develop young consultants, and provides a unified voice for PR practitioners (PRCA Malaysia, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has been validated as a powerful and parsimonious framework to predict user's adoption of information systems (Davis, 1989, as cited in Chuttur, 2009). TAM suggests that when users come across new technologies, there are factors that determine whether they are willing to accept or reject the use of it. The TAM model is shown in Figure 1.

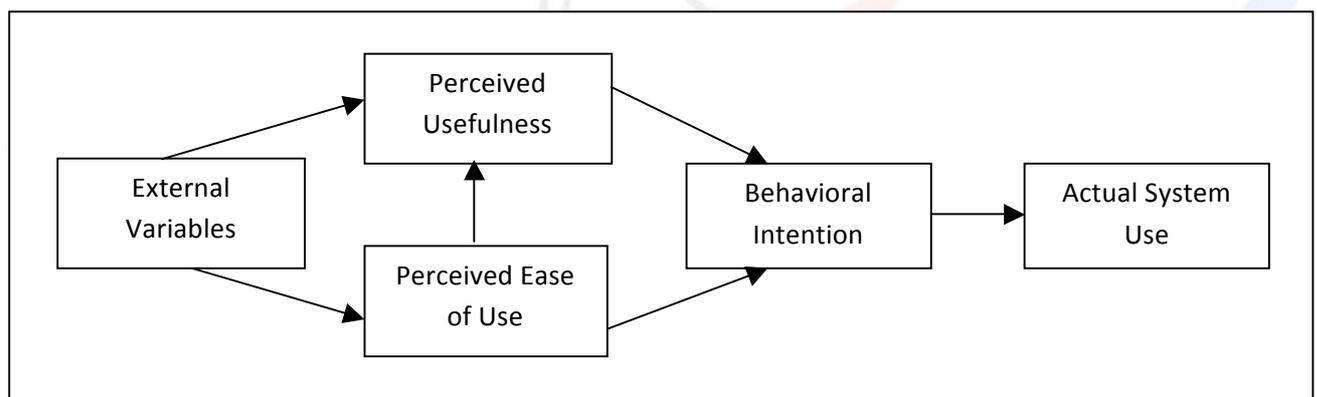


Figure 1: TAM Model (retrieved from Venkatesh, & Davis, 1996, as cited in Chuttur, 2009, p. 10)

According to TAM, adaption behaviour is determined by the intention to use a particular system, its perceived usefulness and its perceived ease of use (Jahangir, &

Begum, 2008). Perceived usefulness was defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her work performance, while perceived ease of use relates to the user's perception of the amount of effort required to utilise the system or the extent to which a user believes that using a particular technology will be effortless (Davis, 1989 as cited in Kate et al., 2010).

TAM has emerged as one of the most influential models in the stream of research of Information System (Malhotra, & Galletta, 1999). The TAM model has demonstrated that it is a valid, robust and powerful model as a predictive or explanatory model of the usage of different technologies, however, it does not help understand and explain the acceptance of a technology in a way that promotes the development of a strategy having a real impact on the usability and acceptance of the technology (Bertrand & Bouchard, 2008). Looking at the strength of TAM model in predicting the attitude and behaviour of individuals on their intention of using a technology in an organisation, TAM is used in this study as a theoretical framework for investigating the adoption of Facebook by PR consultants as a communication tool in the agency.

Research Questions

The four research questions guiding this study are:

1. What types of social media used in the PR agencies in Malaysia?
2. Why do the PR consultants use Facebook?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook as a communication tool with external public?
4. To what extent do PR consultants adopt Facebook as an effective external communication tool?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was adopted in this study. A face-to-face semi-structured interview was conducted with PR consultants in PR agencies in the Klang Valley region. The most important advantages of using interview are the wealth of detail and accurate responses that it provides regardless of the difficulty in generalising the data (Wimmer, & Dominick, 2011). In addition, interview uses a smaller non-random sample in explaining the questions of 'how' and 'why' (Wimmer, & Dominick, 2011) PR consultants use Facebook as an external communication tool. Using a volunteer sample, three PR agencies were selected.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with five PR consultants with an average duration of 55 minutes. The participants were not selected through any mathematical guidelines as they were willingly participated in the interview (Wimmer, & Dominick, 2011). There are four male and one female consultant participated in the interview. 16 structured questions were discussed in the interview in which the interviewees were to provide their use of social networking sites and the usage level of Facebook for external communication, as well as their opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook usage and Facebook adoption as an external communication tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of social media used in PR agencies in Malaysia

To understand the prevalence use of social media in PR agencies, the interview began by asking the PR consultants on their use of social media in the agency. From the findings, there are five types of social media used in the agency such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+. Four interviewees have use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+ in their workplace for PR functions. While another interviewee only use Facebook in his PR agency.

Three interviewees mentioned that different types of social networking sites have dissimilar functionalities in PR practices. Each of them have their own pros and cons, therefore PR agencies need to identify the communication objectives and to select the most appropriate social media in order to achieve the highest efficiency in reaching their target audiences. Mr Chris (Edelman, Executive) quoted: *“It’s all depends on what your client needs, who you are speaking to, as different media speak to different audiences. Before we suggest any social media platform, what we do is, we do our research, we do our homework.”* On the other hand, Mr Isa (Text100, Senior Account Executive) mentioned: *“If you want speed, it’s Twitter. If you want viability, you may want to look at Facebook, if you want impact, you may use YouTube. If you want the professional, use LinkedIn.”*

According to two interviewees, Facebook was used for real time customer relationship management and to monitor problems faced by their customers. One of them added that Facebook is handily served as a customer service due to its convenience. Mr Gan (Fleishman-Hillard, Account Executive) stated: *“Our Facebook site has involved into a customer service. We have a team to answer those technical questions.”*

Besides Facebook, two interviewees mentioned that Twitter was often used for media relations purposes. PR practitioners often reply questions from the media via Twitter and share it by rebroadcast the same message to the other publics. Furthermore, the interviewees claimed that Twitter enables fast communication which allows PR practitioners to monitor issue that goes around the world. *“On Twitter, we answer a lot of questions but we tend to do a lot of media relations too. They tweet us questions and we actually answer them via twitter as what we have done for our client.”* (Mr Isa, Text100, Senior Account Executive).

Purposes of using Facebook by PR consultants

The second research question addressed the motives for using Facebook in PR agencies. Results show that Facebook was used based on several reasons, such as immediacy of information dissemination and the urgency of announcements; fast interaction and direct two-way communication for engaging with target audiences; serve as an extra platform to monitor the latest and updated news, to gather public opinions and feedbacks from the public or competitors; and lastly to use the largest social networking sites for targeting specific target group of audiences.

Among all the interviewees, two of them stated that instead of using traditional media or other social media for information sharing, Facebook would be a better choice for the reason that it provides an immediacy of information dissemination to their target audiences. Mr Chris (Edelman, Executive) quoted: *“So yeah, of course Facebook is very useful in terms of disseminating information immediately.”* Another interviewee claimed that: *“We post announcements on the latest marketing or promotional updates, or even short news announcements, on platforms such as Facebook.”* (Mr Chee, Text100, Account Director).

Another reason for using Facebook was for engagement with the public. One interviewee added that Facebook enables interaction with their target audiences through organising giveaways or contests, carrying out events and road shows, as well as uploading photos and videos. They approach and interact with their public in different ways for keeping in touch with them.

Besides, Facebook served as an additional platform for PR practitioners to monitor news, and to gather public opinions and feedbacks from their publics and competitors. Mr Isa (Text 100, Senior Account Executive) mentioned: *“You would get information such as how journalists or media are attending the event of your client’s competitor, what they are doing, and they got this, and that. That’s usually how we highlight what our competitors are giving out as media gifts to our clients.”*

Advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook by PR Consultants

This research question addressed the uses and implications of Facebook as a formal channel of communication in the PR agencies. During the interviews, the interviewees discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook. Based on the interviews, Facebook has a number of advantages such as (i) it is the biggest communication platform among all social media to showcase PR contents; (ii) it possess a large group of active users; and (iii) it allows fast communication compared to traditional media.

Two interviewees stated the following:

Mr Isa (Text100, Senior Account Executive) quoted: *“I think Facebook is a bit easier. For example if we publish about a product in traditional media, maybe more people would see it. But nobody would be able to ask any question, you can’t ask a single question if you heard a story in Star newspaper, in the paper format.”*

Mr Gan (Fleishman-Hillard, Account Executive) mentioned: *“Facebook is fast compared to traditional media. Like I have mentioned, it’s the biggest platform now, so obviously it will be the better choice, rather than Twitter or MySpace.”*

However, Facebook has several disadvantages. From the interviews, the disadvantages and challenges of using Facebook are (i) tons of information, events and activities on Facebook could lead to distraction; (ii) rumours and negative feedbacks from the public might go viral; (iii) PR practitioners could not provide the exact measurement for the return of investment (ROI) in social media; (iv) the meaning of the original message might be altered; and (v) very time consuming.

Several comments by the interviewees on the disadvantages of using Facebook include:

Mr Gan (Fleishman-Hillard, Account Executive) quoted: *“Facebook as much as it is, it’s the biggest; it is also the most clutter. I’m sure you’re not going to read every single thing on Facebook. So the challenge is to actually stand out among others.”*

Mr Chris (Edelman, Executive) stated: *“Facebook is like the internet, your messages could be diluted, as people are sharing the pieces of your content.”*

Mr Chee (Text100, Account Director) mentioned: *“We can measure a newspaper clip, we can tell you the dollar, how much that clip is worth. But with social media, we can measure some of it, but others are very hard to measure...we can’t give you the exact figures.”*

PR consultants’ adoption of Facebook as effective external communication tool

The final research question aims to measure the PR consultants’ adoption of Facebook as a formal channel of communication with external stakeholders. The perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are the two factors in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis (1989) for predicting the users’ intention or adoption towards the new technology. The findings of this study show that all interviewees agreed that Facebook is easy to use, however not all of them agreed that it is useful for PR practices.

All interviewees stated that Facebook is easy to use because it can be understood clearly and being used without any difficulty. Besides, it does not require any additional skills or training to operate it. Three interviewees claimed that it is easy to use Facebook to do what they want and be skilful in using it. Mr Gan (Fleishman-Hillard, Account Executive) stated: *“Facebook is pretty straight forward, so we don’t really need to master it. Facebook has evolved tremendously and is pretty convenient in terms of helping one manage a community and page. No rocket science needed for this social media network.”*

There are several thoughts about the usefulness of Facebook in PR practices from the interviewees. Among all interviewees, two of them said that Facebook is a plus because their job requires them to be on Facebook 24/7 to monitor their clients’ event or fan pages. They further claimed that Facebook can enhance their productivity as various news items are often shared by their friends and acquaintances on Facebook. Mr Isa (Text100, Senior Account Executive) stated: *“We have to be on Facebook all the time; I’ll get into trouble if I’m not on Facebook managing my client’s pages. So for me it’s a plus, which mean I can be on Facebook whole day and to communicate to the media, communicate with people in the industry, through groups and chats.”* Another interviewee mentioned that Facebook allows him to accomplish his tasks quicker and improved his time management when using Facebook. *“Believe it or not, it makes my time management a little better. I learn to cut a lot of time. My habit 5 years ago, I’ll probably have to go through all the sites. But in Facebook, people just put up the greatest stuffs.”* (Mr Chee, Text100, Account Director).

However, three interviewees mentioned that even though Facebook provides a lot of functionalities, it could not be considered totally useful when it comes to their job. The interviewees stated that compared to other tools, Facebook does not facilitate them in accomplishing their work faster. It is not totally useful in the sense that it does not improve the time used for completing the task. One interviewee claimed that Facebook actually resulted in an increase of workload due to the time spent in monitoring the fans' page. Mr Chris (Edelman, Executive) stated that Facebook is not totally useful for PR functions: *"Some clients require Facebook, some clients don't. So as part of my job, Facebook doesn't make my job or work faster."*

In summary, all interviewees agreed that Facebook can only be used as an additional platform in the agency; it will never replace any other forms of communication used for PR functions such as face-to-face, email, and other social media such as Twitter or Google+.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the uses and implications of Facebook as well as to investigate the perception and adoption of Facebook by Malaysian PR consultants as an external communication tool. Findings show that five types of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+ are used by the PR consultants. These social media platforms are used for information sharing and public engagement.

The interviewees claimed that Facebook has been used for information dissemination and for urgent announcements to external stakeholders, and, in some instances, it is used for research on campaigns and public opinions monitoring. Facebook is able to perform two-way communication and allows fast interaction with the target audiences compared to traditional media. The result on the prevalent use of Facebook in PR is consistent with prior literature such as Khaizuran (2010). Besides, the interviewees mentioned that Facebook is used as an additional platform to publish information and for announcement to their public, is consistent with Aloisio's (2011) findings which claimed that Facebook is utilised to disburse information to its online community of fans.

According to the interviewees, there are advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook in PR agencies. From the interviews, the three advantages are: (i) Facebook is the largest communication platform compared to other social networking sites used for showcasing PR content; (ii) Facebook possesses a large group of active users; and (iii) Facebook enables fast interaction and two-way communication. On the other hand, the five disadvantages of using Facebook are: (i) it could cause distraction to the audience due to large chunk of information, activities and campaigns on Facebook; (ii) rumours and negative feedbacks from the public might cause negative impact to the organisations; (iii) lack of exact measurement for the return of investment (ROI) in social media; (iv) the initial meaning of the message could be altered; and lastly (v) it is time consuming.

Most of the interviewees agreed that Facebook is a large communication platform which enables them to distribute information. This is considered as an advantage for them to do free publicity where information can be published with a minimum cost. However, there are challenges faced by the interviewees for using Facebook such as

negative comments received from nasty fans and how audience purposely create problems.

In regards to the perceived ease of use, all interviewees agreed that Facebook is easy to be operated and there is no hassle in figuring how to use it. In addition, Facebook enables some of the interviewees to be skilful in using it and allows them to do what they want for their job. Even though Facebook is perceived easy to be used, three interviewees claimed that Facebook is not perceived to be useful in improving their job productivity because being active on Facebook all the time is part and parcel of their job.

In conclusion, the results show that though Facebook has been adopted as a formal channel of external communication in the PR agencies due to its popularity and its perceived ease of use. It is only serves as an extra platform for the PR consultants to get in touch with the external audiences, it is yet to replace the traditional media because face-to-face, email or other traditional media still plays a vital role in PR practices.

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