Reshaping Public Relation through Social Media: A Study on Influence and Challenges in Universities

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Abstract

Objective - Social media is one of the easiest way to protect and promote good image of universities/institutions. A country like Pakistan where traditional media is often under pressure and have their commercial agendas. In such situations social media has been taking lead and becoming a good opportunity to connect with institutions to promote and protect their reputation.

Methodology/Technique - A survey was adopted to find out the influence of Pakistani social media and challenges faced through it, which focused on the attitude of PRO professionals regarding the effect of social media on their work and the challenges they faced. The respondents were PRO professionals of public and private universities.

Findings - The findings showed that majority of PRO professionals use social media which increase PR of institutions and improve the positive image building and good will of the institute. Results also shed light on the fact that language, cultural difference and inappropriate content can create negative perception. Novelty - The study researches the factors that social media platform is used to increase PR however those use it in a right way will get advantage on others.

Theme - Cooperative Communication Management.

Keywords: social media, public relation, influence, challenges
Introduction

Social media is becoming a potential platform for individuals and institutes to have a tremendous impact on people. According to Lewis (2010), social media was defined by one of the scholars as a platform that links people together by ignoring geographical factors. It is also a platform for sharing and communicating with different communities. So, social media has turned communities into online communities of popular social media sites that are used daily by millions of people.

Patel (2016) found that in the past few years, social media has attracted most of the people. The widespread use of social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and share information. Social media not only has a huge impact on people, it also has a huge impact on institutes in various industries because they develop strategies to attract viewers and gain loyalty. Public relations (PR) is unusual because professionals are constantly seeking to communicate and listen to clients who are active on social media for a long time.

According to Johnston (2018), public relations have changed in the 21st century. The internet makes it easy to send out information, but it also makes it hard to hear. The confusion of public information may make readers and viewers feel unhappy, but a message is often enough to make this possibility interesting. Small businesses using public relations must overcome some obstacles. Therefore, it is advantageous for public relations practitioners to use it. In fact, most of them it has become part of their practice and provide social media management services. This is not just about Facebook and Twitter that institutes are trying to make their presence. If modern public relations practitioners want to successfully communicate their stories, platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest and Google+ cannot be ignored.

Rajindra (2013) stated that social media is an extension of the traditional word-of-mouth network. The traditional word-of-mouth network has always been the most effective tool for disseminating information. With the development of technology, it allows anyone with an internet connection to access and express their opinions through social media.

As explained by Achilov (2016) that public relations is used to be a tool for effective work and communication with the public. Today, public relations involves leading and evolving public opinions and thinking areas. For example, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other social media allow institutes not only to access, communicate with the public, but also to resolve key issues, visit new social groups, and constantly allow them to change their thinking, attitude, and personality.

According to Sherman (2018), public relations professionals shape the image of an institute. They build brands, disseminate information about the institute, and minimize the impact of negative publicity. In a small institutes, public relations staff may need to deal with all roles - cheerleaders, media contacts, and critic mentors - themselves. In
larger institutes, employees can have more specialized roles to handle different institutional needs.

**Literature Review**

Social media is currently redefining the ways in which institutes and organizations are reaching their audiences and communicating with these individuals. Hendrix (2014) found that in an age of smart phones and social media, colleges and universities are now tasked with the ability to be able to reach their audiences in this new online environment in contrast to traditional marketing tactics such as print and in person advertising.

According to Sposato (2016), there have been many changes in the field of public relations over the past decade. Many different aspects of technology and communication progress have led to this, but perhaps it is just the growth and popularity of social media. Social media has changed the way people communicate.

As explained by Gordon (2010) that social media is affecting the communication between many institutes and people are becoming more active with these new channels, the definition of social media packaging has not yet been determined due to the emergence of many different forms.

Supa (2014) states that the increasing use of social media and its use in various parts of the world has increased its utility in Pakistan. People are learning about the use and power of social media. Now that the internet supports many controversial issues, people’s horizons are expanding. Pakistan is a country that is experiencing such a problem, it is experiencing corrupt leadership and bad governance; the problems faced by ordinary people are always ignored, but social media and digital media are providing people with such a platform. They publish their own rights statement. Social media and digital platforms not only provide companies with a platform to reach out to the people and grow, but also give ordinary people the freedom to express their opinions and power.

According to Maggiani (2012), social media has completely changed the way we communicate. Previously, conversations were communicated via email, landline, and face-to-face or face-to-face. However, due to the existence of social media, it provides a new type of communication for the society. They will learn new languages and write or convey information to a wide range of readers.

Kietzmann (2011) states that social media and community or personal social media users are able to share, communicate, create, modify, and discuss user-generated smart devices and web-based technology interactions, it is often a more interactive platform. Social media provides users with a way to keep in touch not only with offline, existing communities, but also with people who have not communicated regularly.

Social media is one of the technological changes you can't resist, because time is all starting to depend on them. According to report of Statista (2017), the fact that the Pakistani people actually actively acquire and use social media statistics shows that we
have so many people still aware of and come into contact with Pakistan’s social activities. Statistics show that only 44.6 million Internet users in Pakistan are Internet users, which means that only 22% of the population can access the Internet, of which only 35 million are active users of social media, which means that only 18% are social media users. If you delve into the number of mobile users, you will learn that there are 109.5 million mobile devices in the total population, of which 32 million are active Internet and social media users from mobile devices, which account for only 16% of our population.

Watson (2012) found that the power of social media and social media sites is increasing, but so far we need a comprehensive analysis to understand it in detail, how we can further leverage and benefit from the Internet in the globalized world. Traditional public relations activities aim to convey the key information to the target audience through the mass media.

**Institutions using Social Media**

Higher education institutions in Pakistan are using social media to engage with an audience well versed in new media channels. Sweetser (2012) explained that social media is seen as a viable tool for university communicators due to its low cost, immediacy, and use by a large number of students.

One of the main ways that colleges and universities are utilizing social media is for recruitment. According to Barnes (2011), many of the potential students to these institutions are already avid users of the technology, forcing admissions offices to meet their audience online. Ninety-five percent of college admissions offices use at least one form of social media. In 2012 study of social media adoption by university communicators, Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) noted that admissions and recruiting departments rely greatly upon social media due based on their job to communicate with younger audiences.

Although social media differs greatly from previous marketing tools used by higher education institutions, it shows great potential to be one of the most effective tools to engage students, increase enrolment and retention, and establish a foundation for strong alumni relations.

**A Shift from Traditional Media**

Traditional marketing tactics have facilitated one way communication; however, social media provide organizations with the opportunity to engage in two-way communications with their audiences. Bednar (2013) explained in regards to communication, social media has the ability to facilitate dialogue among groups that’s wouldn’t easily be in conversation with each other- current students, prospective students, alumnae, parents, and friends of the college.
According to Kang (2016), prior to the introduction of social media, higher education institutions relied primarily on websites as a basic environment for engagement between institutions and their publics due to the interactive nature of the web.

**Dialogic Problems on the Web**

Out of all the communication channels available, the Internet is becoming ideal for dialogue that leads to relationship building because of its ability to incorporate text, sound, image and movement, allowing real-time interaction to occur. Gordon (2009) explained that higher education institutions are performing poorly at utilizing the dialogic features of their websites.

According to Kent (2002), the increased usage of technological tools such as social media by millennials, the inability of higher education institutions to successfully create dialogue on traditional internet sites sparks inquiry into how well these institutions are able to utilize social media to interact with their current and future publics.

As explained by Naveed (2012) that the increasing power of social media in society, the public is no longer passively receiving information from traditional media because social media allows the public more control over the content they read, listen to and watch. Therefore, public relations practitioners re-examined traditional communication methods and considered how they now apply their work to the online world through the universal use of social media.

According to Howell (2010), social media can help build a good public relations because it allows the public to build trust and relationships with the institute directly. The increasing popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn has contributed to the rapid growth of consumer-based media. Therefore, the nature of social media websites reveals the potential for public relations to build trust and relationships between users.

Tang Meizhu (2016) states that social media has become an effective tool for institutes to communicate with the public. Many public relations are still struggling with the challenges or influence of social media. Most research shows that public relations practitioners are still not fully accepting social media. Digital PR will have the opportunity to directly persuade viewers by answering their questions, providing them with more information and explaining to them, especially when they are dissatisfied with the institute's products or services. Social media can communicate freely without regard to geographic factors. Social media can help people keep in touch with others with a few clicks of the button, and the information will be sent in the shortest possible time. In addition, social media will be used as strategic communication to obtain internal and external information about the institute.
**Diffusion of Innovations**

The diffusion of innovations theory was created by Everett Rogers in the 1960s. The basis of this theory is to examine the adoption and penetration of a technological innovation by a society. According to (Rogers, 1995), diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels overtime among the members of a social system. In order to properly illustrate the diffusion process, the theory is broken down into four elements which include innovation, communication channel, time, and social system. The theory looks closely at how ideas or innovations are spread throughout a society or public over time. The process of the diffusion over time separates participants in various groups including innovators, early acceptors (adopters), early majority, late majority, and laggards. Rogers (1995) also defined the perceived attributes of innovations which include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trial ability, and observability. Relative advantage is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes. Compatibility is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values. Complexity is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use. Trialability is defined as degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. Finally, observability is defined as the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others.

Sweetser (2012) examined how university communicators were drawn to adopt social media into their communication programs by conducting surveys with university communicators and analyzing participant responses in reference to the attributes of the innovation as defined by the diffusion of innovation theory. Diffusion theory helps frame questions of adoption of social media by public relations people by underscoring the importance of attributes of the innovations, the communication channels involved in diffusion, the decision processes of adopters over time, and the social systems in which adopters live and work.

**Methodology**

This research is interested in understanding the influence of social media in Pakistani institutes and their communications. It is the discovery of changes in the practice of public relations in Pakistani institutes; due to advances in technology, the way that public relations and the public communicate has changed from one-way communication to two-way communication. Finally, we must find out the relationship between social media and the practice of public relations in Pakistani institutes and reflect the development trend of public relations in the country.

The study is studying the influence of social media on PR practices. An analytical survey is appropriate to examine the interrelationships between the two variables of social media and PR practice. Therefore, the analysis survey is conducted to reflect and achieve the goals and objectives of this research. The survey was
conducted online. A list of institutions was composed to begin contacting for research participation. Only institutes with social media accounts were selected to be participants in the study.

Upon gathering a list of institutions, each institution was contacted to identify the appropriate PR professional in each department to receive his or her contact information. The researcher then sent out emails to the identified professionals. The emails sent to these professionals also included an informed consent document which outlined the details of the study and the possible risks of research participation. A sample of 200 respondents from the PR stream of institutes of Pakistan were selected.

**Data Analysis Method**

For this research, the study of Kent (2002) was adopted which crafted a framework for understanding how organizations can build and maintain relationships with publics on the web that is used frequently in the field of relational communication. This framework, the five principles of successfully integrating public relations dialogue onto the web, includes five features: mutuality (the recognition or organization-public relationships), propinquity (the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics), empathy (the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests), risk (the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms), and commitment (the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics).

Once the surveys were complete, each survey was transcribed. Once transcribed, each transcript was read and noted any repeating themes, practices, strategies or reasoning as noted by participants. The transcript data was synthesized as a whole to understand how institutions used social media and what factors affected the adoption/use of social media by higher education institutions. After all transcripts were analyzed as a whole, the research then analyzed them to understand if institutions are affected by their social media use. These results were then analyzed according to the elements of diffusion of innovation theory, which helped explain their adoption of the social media technology.

**Findings and Discussions**

The results of the online survey are analyzed according to the parts of the questionnaire, and are mainly presented in forms and texts to provide a comprehensive and concise introduction to the survey results. Each segment is followed by a brief analysis of each segment to highlight key information in order to provide a better understanding.
72% of the respondents who participated in the survey were mainly male PRO professionals, and the remaining 28% were female PRO professionals. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 55 years old.

The results showed that only 13% use online media compared to traditional media - radio, television and newspapers for information. At the same time, 87% of respondents chose print media and broadcast media as their most used media. Many of the institutions included in this study utilize social media as an additional form of communication in their various departmental offices. PRO of institutes are very knowledgeable of the risk that social media holds in relation to the reputation of their institutional brand.
Of the respondents, 32% used social media for 5 to 6 hours in their daily lives. In addition, 28% of people spend 3 to 4 hours using social media, and 16% of respondents use social media daily for 1-2 hours. However, the proportion of respondents who spent more than 6 hours on social media during the day was 24%. Social media is desirable because that is where students already spent their time.

The result has shown that 30% of the respondents are using it as a tool of communication. 42% using social media for the purpose of looking up the latest news and information and 19% is to promote their company, clients or institute. Therefore, it can be concluded that social media has now formed a crucial role because the public is willing to spend most of its time using it. Higher education institutions are using social media very purposefully. Their goals on social media mimic their university goals which are to increase enrolment and try to reach students to keep our enrolment numbers up.
The result shows that 84% believed that face to face communication is much stronger and clear than the communication through social media while on the other hand, 16% believed that in the era of technology, social media has helped to develop strong relationships with institutes easily without boundaries. PR practitioners now can easily search articles or information about particular clients or institutes easily by entering keywords search. A major factor that affects the use and adoption of social media by higher education is the fact that social media is primarily seen as a supplement to previous existing communication efforts in various departments. Most participants indicated that social media was one of many things that they did, which included other traditional marketing forms, and they understood the value of it but they did not see social media replacing most of the things that they did the process of choosing a college is personal and social media cannot replace impact of personalized letters or meeting someone face to face.

The result shows that 65% believed social media has strong impact on PR as it has changed the way your institute communicate with the audience because they can respond
instantaneously. Practitioners may use social media to remind their key public about particular campaign, event or clients’ messages by posting a status, photo or video. They use it to attract new students. However, this type of marketing can only help to invite the student to the campus but the decision of taking admission depends on how good the environment of that institutes is in real life and how that student perceive.

The result shows that 26% believed, social media is easy way to approach target audience that makes practitioners able to assist clients and institutes to get their messages out to wide audience at the least cost compared to traditional media but participants considered social media to be difficult to use due to the lack of staff and time that need to be devoted to the medium. There is uncertainty of reaching the message to target audience in that specific time. However, their primary strategy is printed advertisements, posters, email and more in order to reach their audiences.

Conclusion

Social media is improving the performance of the public relations industry. Most PR practitioner states that social media provides them a path to have communication with wide range of public as well as developing more close relationships, as they often use it for sharing information regarding their activities or campaign in order to increase the attention of institute between the public and client. However, the institutions selected utilized social media as an additional communication outlet in order to reach their target audiences and well as an additional tool to brand themselves online. Although many institutions use social media, it is not considered a primary strategy in regards to communication. Most institutions in this study still relied primarily on printed advertisements, posters, email and more in order to reach their audiences.

The presence of students on social media and the ability to send out messages quickly with no cost made the adoption of social media favorable to the participants in this study.
Institutions that had social media managers with experience in using social media in different environments were more successful due to their familiarity with the technology and other marketing methods. Staff size also dictated how institutions used social media. In institutions where there were more professionals in the office, more attention was spent on social media. During surveys with participants at smaller schools, staff members indicated that they had too many things on their plate to dedicate the necessary attention to social media. These factors led to a disconnect between what participants wanted to do on social media versus what they were currently doing. Lacked engagement from their audience however they lacked any specific plans on how to combat that. By beginning to take risks with things that have already shown to be successful, such as social media campaigns, institutions can improve their use of social media and in turn lead to more knowledge and better practices that can be implemented into their routines.

PROs at higher education institutions recognize that adopting and utilizing social media is critical however they are still learning how to use it effectively in order to effectively reach their audiences online.

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