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FACTORS INFLUENCING USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN LAGOS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates use and adoption of social media among public relations practitioners in the Nigeria context. The objectives of the study include to understand factors which influence use of social media as well as to identify benefits accrued from the adoption of these platforms among public relations professionals. Using Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the paper provides evidence on the relevance and application of the theory in explaining the adoption of social media among public relations practitioners in Lagos State, Nigeria. Through in-depth interview, eight members of the Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN) were interviewed for the study. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings show that public relations professionals in the study use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, among others to promote their clients by establishing and maintaining effective engagements with their clients' publics. The results also identify gratifications such as instantaneous feedback, monitoring, wide reach and constant engagement by public relations practitioners. It is, therefore, recommended that public relations practitioners should always avail themselves with information and communication technology capable of enhancing their engagements with different publics while future study should also focus on the degree to which public perceptions are influenced based on social media contents of an organisation.

Keywords: Use, social media, public relations practitioners, Lagos State, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Today's public relations' roles is beyond information dissemination; it also includes knowing when an organisation's publics are expressing their opinions about the organisation's policies and objectives. Carrying out periodic and environmental scanning to identify and measure public perceptions and opinions through various media will give the practitioners an opportunity to engage and interact with the concerned or aggrieved publics. Information and technological environments enable the practitioners to assess, monitor and evaluate the impact of their public relations efforts, resulting to timely modifications if and when necessary.

It is unrealistic to provide an omnibus list that covers all the situations regarding the role being played by public relations in an organisation. Suffice to say it entails tracking and analysing the most important trends and forces capable of influencing an organisation's performance and image. This implies that the success or otherwise of public relations efforts is contingent upon their identification and use of the right media, for the right publics, and at the right time. The proliferation of media has made the selection of media for specific publics very idealistic.

It is, therefore, pertinent to point out that the adoption of social media platforms as public relations tools is significant due to the enormous power they have in reaching heterogeneous members of an organisation's publics. The increasing number of media has led to the audience fragmentation who are constantly being exposed to plethora of information that shape their perceptions and understanding of an organisation's issues and policies. Organisations and their publics do not have to solely rely on mainstream media any longer as the emergence of new or social media provide them an opportunity to appraise any issue of public interest.

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Statement of research problem

The use of social media has brought about rapid changes in how organisations relate with their publics. Key communicative performance indicators include level of engagements in terms of shares or likes as far as the digital media are concerned. They offer the practitioners a variety of platforms through which they can deliver persuasive messages on behalf of their organisations or clients. Academic attention has been deservedly focused on the integral role being played by social media platforms in public relations. For example, Lee (2013) had suggested that social media have played and still playing a transformative role in public relations landscape. And in actualising effective two-way communication process, social media platforms are very crucial in achieving this objective because of their universality and interactivity (Luo & Huan, 2012). The adoption of these media is apparent owing to the fact that they have become a way of life among many organisations' key constituents (Andoh-Quainoo & Anoor-Antwa, 2015).

While studies (e.g., Aja, Chukwu & Odoh, 2019; Ebrahim, 2017; Ndinojuo, Gbeneka, Diegbegha, & Eludu, 2016) have suggested how attributes and prospects of social media platforms such as trialability may influence their adoption among public relations practitioners, there is a strong disconnect between some organisations and their publics. This is evident from incessant crisis which may have been caused by communication gap. Therefore, given that social media platforms have become widely acceptable by young and old people. It has become necessary for public relations practitioners to adopt them. As a result, this study poises to understand prospects of using social media platforms as well as perceived concerns following the adoption of the media by public relations practitioners.

Research objectives

The general goal of this study is to understand factors that influence use of social media among public relations practitioners in Lagos State. However, the study shall seek to:
1. Identify communication and social interaction factors that influence use of social media platforms by public relations practitioners;
2. Understand relative advantages for using social media platforms by public relations practitioners; and
3. Understand concerns for using social media platforms by public relations practitioners .

Social media and public relations

Kaplan and Haenlein (2012, p.61) defined social media as 'a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'. Social media are seen as web and mobile-based technologies through which social interactions and corporate communication take place. Although used almost interchangeably, social media and social networks are quite different from one and other as the latter is a sub-category of the former. Therefore, social media are platforms through which organisations update and interact with their publics. Social media are also referred to as social networking sites

(SNS). These are web 2.0 platforms that allow users to share user-generated contents with others whom they share an online community or interest together (Lee & Kim, 2018).

The SNS are not only a computer-based information networks, they also link people together, including organisations and various interest groups. The networking sites can be accessed in a number of devices such as computer, laptop, tablets, smart phones while an individual's social media accounts can also be linked into two or more devices. Among features of SNS include sharing of digital photo and video, uploading of events and activities in real-time and connecting with business partners and associates (El-kasim, 2020).

Through the SNS, public relations messages can be received, interpreted and replied to interpersonally by publics (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Among the popular social networks in Nigeria are - Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Viber, LinkedIn, Skype, Google+, MySpace, Badoo, and Netlog (El-kasim, 2020). According to Statista (2020) report, the ten most popular social networks among internet users in Nigeria by third-quarter in 2020 include: WhatsApp (93 per cent), Facebook (86.3 per cent), YouTube (81.6 per cent), Instagram (71.3 per cent), FB Messenger (67.2 per cent), Twitter (61.4 per cent), Telegram (56.3 per cent), LinkedIn (32.8 per cent), Tiktok (31.9 per cent), and Snap Chat (31.2 percent).

With millions of the internet users in Nigeria who are predominantly youths, social media are goldmines through which public relations messages and other communicative efforts are delivered (Olohungbebe, 2017). Although social media are primarily adopted for building interpersonal relationship, there is no doubt that they are beneficial to public relations (Al-Badi, Tarhini, & Al-Bolushi, 2020).

Review of related studies

Studies (e.g., El-kasim, 2020; Al-Badi, Tarhini, Al-Bolushi, 2020; Cook, 2015) have identified different reasons why public relation practitioners use and adopt social media for promoting a brand, cause, and the likes. These include, (a) communications and social interactions, (b) relative advantage (c) and online reputation management. In view of this, an attempt will be made to examine each of these categorisations based on the extant literature.

(a)   Communications and social interactions
Social media can be broadly categorised into two, namely: content and interactions (Cook, 2015). Through contents (such as posts, tweets, and pins), public relations practitioners disseminate information capable of generating interest and clicks that may eventually lead to an issue raised becoming a trend on social media platforms. Social interactions is a process through which public relations practitioners establish and maintain effective exchange of information between a customer on behalf of their employers or clients. It is, therefore, a way through which public relations practitioners establish meaningful or effective relationships with various constituents. These relationships revolve public engagement, search as well as social major trends. The essence of social interactions is to measure the

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virality of a content or success of engagements by public relations.

Depending on a platform, social interactions implies different meanings. For example, while social interactions on Facebook include *likes, comments, shares* and *emoji* reactions, it implies an aggregate of *favourites, mentions/replies* as well as *retweets* for a profile on Twitter. For LinkedIn, social interactions are *likes* and *comments* (El-kasim, 2020; Montgomery, 2018; Kmieckowiak, 2017; Cook, 2015). From the foregoing studies, this research question was developed to ascertain the communication and social interactions motives of public relations practitioners for using social media:

RQ 1:What are the communication and social interaction motives of public relations practitioners for using social media?

(b)   Relative advantages
Social media have changed and are changing how public relations practitioners carryout their activities, thereby leading to changes in organisations' attitudes and behaviours. Through social media, public relations practitioners showcase their activities and events for a period of time. Studies (e.g., Kim & Syn, 2016; Edosomwan *et al.,* 2011) have linked the legitimacy and credibility of a brand by customers and other public relations stakeholders to the outcome of evaluative process of organisations' presence on social media. Chief among benefits of using social media in promoting a brand, according to Samuel and Sarprasatha (2015), include brand awareness, business transparency, accountability as well as sustainable mutual relation with key constituents. El-kasim (2020, p.4) identified the following as a broad range of advantages for using social media to promote organisations' brands and public relations efforts by:

> Breaking down barriers between business [organisation] and customers [publics]; disrupting and bypassing traditional hierarchical business models; allowing for more targeted marketing and outreach; increasing interagency [inter-departmental] collaboration through internal social networking tools and most importantly, building on the power of the direct and cost-effective social connections; and creating a new 'lean start-up model' (building no frills applications and distributing them quickly and widely with minimal cost) for tech startups.

Based on the finding of the extant literature reviewed, this research question is developed:

RQ2: *What are the relative advantages for using social media among public relations practitioners?*

(c)   Online Reputation Management (ORM)
Public perception of a credible brand is based on the performance of organisations' usage of social media to promote their image. No wonders, organisations leverage on social media in order to establish and maintain good public image and reputation virtually (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Based on the principles of integrated marketing communications, public relations practitioners adopt social media for brand awareness and preference among existing and potential customers or publics (D' Silva, Bhuptani,

Menon, & D'Silva, 2011). The emergence of new media, and social media in particular, have expanded the scope of the "internet society where thousands of people or online communities who have diverse but vested interest in an issue that affects an organisation converge.

However, the anonymous nature of online communities have made organisations vulnerable to both factual or unfounded criticisms and accusations. The process of ORL involves landscaping (looking out for social media platforms or accounts that contain information about an organisations), after which data are assessed to identify preconceptions and opinions expressed therein. This will help public relations practitioners to determine the level of consistencies between the information disseminated by the organisation and the knowledge of an issue by the publics (Olohungbebe, 2017). Therefore, the ultimate role of public relations practitioners while monitoring and evaluating people's comments about their organisations online is to act as internet or social media "guardian" and advise their employers and clients accordingly. In view of the findings of the reviewed literature, the following question is developed:

RQ 3:*What are the concerns for using social media among public relations practitioners?*

Theoretical Framework: Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

This study is anchored on Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT, Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003) as modified by Al-Badi et al. (2020). The UTUAT model was developed following a review of eight theories including Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the combination form of TAM and TPB (C-TAM-TPB), Model of PC Utilization (MPCU), Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT), Motivational Model (MM), and the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). As a by-product of behavioural studies, the model has a unique combination of characteristics as well as strengths of the aforementioned psychological and sociological theories (Momani, 2020; Momani & Jamus, 2017).

A few number of theories including social construction theory (Ogbu, 2019), diffusion of innovation (Ebrahim, 2017), uses and gratification theory (Olohungbebe, 2017), have been used to explain the adoption of information technology, but this study poises to contribute to further understanding of the applications of the UTUTAT in relations to public relations practice in Nigeria. However, Al-Badi *et al.* (2020) suggested that the UTUAT is effective in explaining factors influencing the adoption of social media among public relations practitioners, this paper poises to explore the model further using qualitative approach.

The UTUAT model has been used across several disciplines including information systems and public relations (Al-Badi *et al.,* 2020). The model assesses an individual's willingness to accept a technology and their ability to use and adopt them (AlQudah, 2014). The four main constructs of the model include: performance expectancy (the degree to which an individual believes that the adoption of a technology will help accomplish a task); effort expectancy (the ease-of-use of

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a technology); social influence (the degree to which an individual's decision to adopt a technology is influenced by important others); and facilitating conditions (the degree to which an individual believes organisational and technical conditions exist to support their adoption of a technology (AlQudah, 2014).

In relation to this study, however, the UTAUT is mostly applicable in the sense that *performance expectancy* and *effort expectancy* of the model explains the perceived benefits public relations practitioners will gain for their adoption of social media. This position is consistent with Al-Badi *et al.* (2020) finding that organisations with public relations department adopt social media because they perceived them to be beneficial.

Research method

This study which seeks to understand perspectives about a social phenomenon (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). It is an exploratory study aimed at understanding the adoption of social media among public relations practitioners. As a data collection instrument, the use of in-depth interview provides an insight on use of social media by public relations practitioners as networking and communication tools. In addition, the use of Informants in the study helps in establishing different reality or perspectives that exist regarding a phenomenon (Azeez & Saadudeen, 2020). The population of the study was made up of members of the Public Relations' Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN) who are fifty-six in number (PRCAN, 2020). The choice of the participants was informed in order to understand perspectives of the consultants on their adoption of social media as communication tools.

Two formats were adopted in conducting the interviews: email and physical contact. An interview guide containing open-ended questions (such as: "*Do you use social media platforms for public relations activities?" "Which social media platforms do you use for PR activities? What factors motivate you into using social media for PR activities?" "What are the benefits of using social media for PR activities?" "What are the challenges encountered in using social media for PR activities?"*)was sent to the email addresses of the Informants who afterwards sent their responses via the same platform while others were interviewed through face-to-face interaction.

Data, collected through interviews, were coded and analysed using the thematic analysis. It is a method through which repeated patterns in a qualitative dataset are identified, sorted and analysed. This method has the capacity to provide answers to research questions which a study six answers for (Azeez & Saadudeen, 2020). Eight members of the PRCAN were selected using purposive sampling. They were recruited based on their willingness to participate in the study. There are divergent views regarding the appropriate sample size for a qualitative study. For example, Baker and Edwards (2012) and Cresswell (2014) suggested between twenty and fifty informants. In view of this, the selection of eight informants in this study is deemed adequate given the fact that certain criteria such as member check, adequate engagements with the PRCAN members as well as researchers' reflexivity were used to determine the saturation point of the interview.

Data presentation and Discussion

The data are presented and discussed under different themes which captured research questions raised in the study. The data reflect informants' experiences while using social media for public relations activities. The research questions are discussed in turn in this subsection.

RQ 1: Consistent Engagement and Virtual Office as Communications and Social interactions' motives for using Social Media

Based on the informants' views, consistent engagement and use of social media as virtual office among public relations practitioners are the most common factors for the adoption of social media by public relations practitioners. They described their motive while adopting social media platform for communication and social interaction. For example, Informant 1 described his experience thus: "You do not only get feedback from source through social media, but also the platforms give room to sample opinions. They enable you to know people's minds or preference for something". Similarly, Informant 6, like Informant 1, stressed that, "no much of inhibition while engaging publics via social media, as this is very common to traditional or mainstream media. You can forward a message and get a feedback instantaneously".

However, according to Informant 4, social media, like other new media, are like "virtual office" through which they interact with the public "without time and geographical barriers". This is supported by Informant 7 who declared that "social media offer opportunity to put out information about our company including our clients' brands". From the foregoing, it can be inferred that the adoption of social media among public relations practitioners is due to their interactive in nature (Waters &Feneley, 2013; Obar, 2014).

Furthermore, a change in media consumption's patterns is another communication and social interactions' motive as claimed by some Informants. For example, Informant 3 said that:

> It is important to communicate through social media in order to reach certain segment of the market. How many people from this young generation will read newspaper except online version? They wake up and go online because virtually, all newspapers have online editions. It is easier for you to have them [social media] on the go.

Likewise, Informant 5 captured it thus:

> It is obvious that media consumptions are changing and the reach of traditional media is inhibited by obvious infrastructural deficit. For instance, newspaper circulations figures are declining. And with the dearth of reading culture, social media have become news stand. They are handy and regarded and can be adopted for a personalized approach to pitching a product for clients with the widest coverage.

Based on the findings of this study, it shows consistent patterns and trends with extant literature (e.g., Andoh-Quainoo & Anoor-Antwa, 2015; Lee, 2013) on the adoption of social media among public relations practitioners. As

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noted by the Informants, they are not only aware of the importance of using the platforms for promoting a client and their brand, but they also acknowledge dangers portend by social media to their reputation if conscientious efforts were not made. The finding further reveal that although social media are easy and cheap to use, they are capable of jeopardising public relations efforts easily by bringing down clients and their brands' image into disrepute.

This is consistent with McCorkindale and Wright's (2011) observation that the inability of public relations practitioners to identify threats online poses a risk in tackling internal and external crisis in an organisation. The change in media consumption patterns, according to Carr and Hayes (2015), was necessitated due to the adoption of social media which are mass personal and persistent in nature. Therefore, social media allow public relations practitioners to massive messages which can be received, interpreted and replied to interpersonally by the public.

RQ2: Instantaneous feedback and Measurable ROI as Relative Advantages of Social Media

When public relations practitioners were asked about relative advantages of social media, the dominant replies bother on interactive nature of the platforms which give room for instantaneous feedback from the public. According to Informant 7, "these media offer feedback to the clients and how their customers feel about them and their brands, even better that what research can offer". This is similar to Informant 7 who said that "although research is very important in ascertaining perceptions and all of that, social media give us an opportunity to feel customers' feedback directly in form of "likes" and what people tweet about them". Therefore, the use of social media can be likened a metaphorical two-way street, which according to Al-Badi *et al.* (2020), allow public relations practitioners to initiate interactive communication with publics.

However, there is another marketing communication perspective shared by some public relations practitioners in respect of the adoption of social media for promoting clients and their brands. For example, Informant 1 put it thus:

> You do not only get instant feedback from the audience through social media, but you can also measure every aspect of communication plan which is very important factor for clients. This is because there is always an argument over the return on investment (ROI).

From the various submissions of the Informants, it is established that there are a few number of factors that influence the usage and adoption of social media among public relations practitioners. Chief among these is the need to provide instant feedback to and constant engagement with publics on behalf of an organisation and a client. This is in line with the pursuit of excellent public relations practice, which according to Lee (2013), involves the use of social media in facilitating interactive, two-way symmetrical, multi-dimensional interactions between an organisation and its publics.

As revealed by the Informants, their success story on the use of social media in public relations has to do with having

clients who come back with another brands or recommending them to another prospective clients. Also, the adoption of social media has consistently become part of communication or media plan as organisations have platforms though which they can establish measurable ROI of their businesses. This position is consistent with El-kasim's (2020) suggestion of the increasing role of social media in integrated marketing communication. In other words, the platforms offer more than providing updates to customers and publics, they are also deployed for direct selling by connecting customers with clients' brands.

RQ 3: Media Planning and Susceptibility to Attacks as ORM on Social Media

When public relations practitioners were asked to share their experiences on the use of social media for online reputation management on behalf of their clients, they disclosed that factors such as target audience and patterns of adoption of social media. In other words, the choice of social media platforms to be deployed for a promotion of a client is largely dependent on the perceived effectiveness and prevalence of a platform among public relations target audience. Twitter and Blogs were identified as the most effective platforms for maintaining good presence online. For example, Informant 6 has this to say: "Social media are important especially for technological clients and products, For instance, if you want to show how good a phone is, you can achieve that online". Similarly, Informant 4 painted a more vivid illustration:

> Facebook is information market place. That is, the melting point where people gather to do all sorts. So, the best way to do it is to drop something in their middle. Some people come to Facebook to share information while others come to interact with one another. If you post something on Newsweek, people that are on site will see it. If you put it on Twitter, those that are following you will see it. But if you put it on my website, I will need to go and run an advert for the such information

Furthermore, Informant 1 captured his experience on the media plan through which ORM is done on behalf of his clients:

> Recently, we did something on behalf of detergent company in Ibadan and uploaded some pictures. We shared the information for people to see it. And we are also trying to get our hearts together to upload something on YouTube again for detergent. We had a workshop on digital media, so we uploaded some pictures on Facebook and we got calls. We actually uploaded some adverts on our Facebook page. We have also recommended it for some clients to do promotion. We also have a client, a new generation bank whom we bought banner headlines for online.

In view of the Informants' experiences shared in the study, it can be inferred that the motives for adopting social media platforms among public relations practitioners include, but not limited to, sensitising the public on issues pertaining to poor service delivery on behalf clients, moderating conversations online when necessary; conducting pilot studies; as well as offering explanation on grey areas on behalf of clients (Saadudeen, 2014).

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However, some Informants have reservations on the use of social media for ORM. To them, the platforms may portends danger for clients' reputation if not handled strategically. The dominant view expressed by almost all the informants bother on posting or sharing of misleading contents capable of tarnishing the image of clients and their brands. Majority of them acknowledge the implications of having a harmful content to go viral on social media platforms. For example, Informant 7, painted the picture thus: "A blog can put up something injurious to your brand".

And unlike newspaper and TV where you can do a simple rejoinder to quench or ward-off attacks, you got to be on different platforms doing damage control. "Informant 3 also expressed similar viewpoint when he explained that "ORM is difficult because attacks can come from different people, disgruntled customers, sacked employees, competitor who is looking for how to hit on you, and many others. Damage control is difficult to do because social media have different dimensions."

It can further be inferred that some of the views as expressed by practitioners attest to the fact they lack control over what people may say and where and when to say something negative about their clients (McCorkindale & Wright, 2011). While it is acknowledged that unacceptable practice or bad behaviour may attract criticism online, public relations practitioners, on behalf of organisations, have to fight for a place in an online shareholders' society

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides contextualisations and explanations on factors that influence the use of social media in promoting clients and their brands. While the UTUAT model was developed from and has been improved upon through quantitative studies across several disciplines (AlQudah, 2014), its application in public relations (e.g. Al-Badi et al., 2020) has been limited to non-quantitative. Thus, the adoption of the UTUAT in this study has proved that the model has a wider application. This is evident from the experiences of the Informants whose dominant motives are performance expectancy and effort expectancy. Based on the findings, social media platforms have relative advantages which include instantaneous feedback from and consistent engagement with publics. In all, the adoption of social media among the Informants showed a positive relationship with UTUAT factors. Thus, this is consistent with Al-Badi et al's (2020) findings that public relations practitioners are more likely to use social media tools if they find them credible.

It should be stated that public relations practitioners generally use Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter in a very interactive way. The adoption of social media therefore becomes necessary because they are symmetrical and multidimensional in nature. Based on the findings, it is, therefore, recommended that public relations practitioners should always avail themselves with information and communication technology capable of enhancing their engagements with different publics while future study should also focus on the degree to which public perceptions are influenced based on social media contents of an organisation.

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