

The uses and impact of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia

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Abstract

Research has shown that social media has been widely discussed among public relations practitioners and scholars in relation to how it has changed public relations practices. A study by Wright and Hinson (2017) revealed that public relations practitioners continue to strongly agree that social and other emerging media technologies have brought dramatic changes to how public relations is practiced in the United States of America. In the Malaysian context, the explosion in social media, especially social networking site such as Facebook, has caused many public relations practitioners to recognise the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with the internal and external audiences. Drawing on Wright and Hinson's (2016) survey instrument, this study measured the actual use of social and other emerging media by public relations practitioners in Malaysia, and explored its impact on public relations practices. Through a web-based survey, this study found evidence that public relations practitioners in Malaysia have frequently used social media especially Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. On average, they spent approximately 26% to 50% of their working time using social and emerging media for public relations and communications activities. The results of this study provide useful insights for academics, researchers and public relations practitioners on how social and emerging media technologies are used in the Malaysian public relations industry.

Keywords

social and emerging media; public relations; Malaysia; public relations practices

Introduction

Research shows that social media has been the subject of widespread discussion among public relations practitioners and scholars worldwide, especially in the Asia Pacific region, in relation to how it has changed public relations practices. Wright and Hinson (2017) in their 12-year longitudinal study reported that public relations practitioners continue to strongly agree that these social and other emerging media technologies have brought dramatic changes to how public relations is practiced in the United States of America. In the Malaysian context, the explosion in social media, especially social networking site such as Facebook with increased connectivity and interactivity, has caused many public relations practitioners to recognise the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with the internal and external audiences (Lee, & Low, 2013). Drawing on Wright and Hinson's (2016) survey instrument, this study measured the use of social and other emerging media by public relations practitioners in Malaysia, and explored its impact on public relations practices. Through a web-based survey, the study found evidence that public relations practitioners in Malaysia have frequently used social media especially Facebook (86.3%), Instagram (66.3%) and YouTube (45.3%) for their work, and they perceived that social and emerging media have impact on their overall communications (M=4.33), especially on how the organisation handles external communications (M=4.26). The results of this study provide useful insight for academics, researchers and public relations practitioners on how social and emerging media technologies are used in the Malaysian public relations industry.

Background to the study

Due to the advances of technological innovations, public relations practitioners have embraced social and other emerging media technologies in their practices. The increasing use of social networking sites, microblogging, podcast, vlogs, and video sharing services, have changed and shaped the practice of public relations by creating opportunities for communication between organisations and its publics. James (2007) quoted that the terrain of public relations practice is also shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (p. 137).

Prior research shows that social and emerging media technologies have dramatically changed how public relations is practiced (Wright, & Hinson, 2015; 2016; 2017). In particular, the pervasive use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have enabled public relations practitioners to create more avenues of interaction with their stakeholders. Lee and Low (2013) study disclosed that Facebook is an important channel for external communication in Malaysia. Wright and Hinson in their study (2017) also revealed that social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been frequently used in public relations practice in United States of America for communication especially external communication, and the percentage of time spent using social and other digital media for work is levelling off (p. 8).

Social and emerging media in this context refer to electronic and web-based communication channels as well as other internet-based technologies. The term emerging media is further defined as all types of communication channels based on digital technologies with interactive components that could alter the influence of distance, increase the volume and speed of communication, enable interactive

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communication and permit the merging of media forms (MU Emerging Media, n.d.). Although there is an increase in research investigating the use of social and emerging media in public relations practices as well as a rise of the amount of research on social media; the research to understand the patterns of social media usage and the way public relations practitioners are utilising these media in their practice is still inadequate (Macnamara, 2010; Rahman et al., 2017). With that in mind, this study aims to measure the use of social and other emerging media by public relations practitioners in Malaysia, and examined its impact on public relations practices in terms of communication with internal and external audiences through a web-based questionnaire survey adapted from Wright and Hinson's (2016) survey instrument. The instrument was modified and was used with permission of the authors. The results of this study provide useful insight for academics, researchers and public relations practitioners on how social and emerging media technologies are used in the Malaysian public relations industry as well as add to the literature of social media in public relations.

Literature review

Social media technologies, also known as Web 2.0, are new electronic and web-based communication channels such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, chat rooms, discussion forums, web sites, social networking sites such as MySpace and Second Life and other dialogue-creating media (Moyer, 2011). Social media are defined as a term that is broadly used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Tess, 2013, p. A60). Due to its ability to connect with people, social media have become essential to public relations as a tool for communicating with strategic publics because social media enable real-time, two-way communication (Lewis, & Nichols, 2016).

Literature shows that public relations practitioners and organisations have increasingly used social media for various purposes. For example, organisations have used social media for their communication with customers, competitors, and employees in order to create a dynamic, synchronised, and multidirectional dialogue (Reitz, 2012). In another study, social media are considered a cost effective tool in public relations research and for timely targeted dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011). Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) claimed that public relations practitioners can reap the rewards of social media by opening a conduit between an organisation and its publics. DiStaso and Bortree (2012) in their study found that public relations professionals valued social media as a tool for sharing information about their organisation which is useful for others in making informed decision as well as to help organisations be accountable for their actions. Lastly, Wright and Hinson in their 12-year longitudinal study (from 2005 to 2017) found that the use of social and other digital communication media such as Facebook and Twitter in public relations practice has continued to increase year-by-year and this provides unique opportunities to public relations practitioners to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences (Wright, & Hinson, 2017).

Despite the growing importance of social and emerging media in public relations practices, McCorkindale (2010) argued that public relations practitioners faced challenges in finding the best way to incorporate social media strategically. Another concern raised by researchers was on the measurement of public relations practices.

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In Leong, Krishnan and Lee (2012) study, public relations practitioners in Malaysia acknowledged the importance of evaluation research, yet the lack of budget and support from the top management had hamper the measurement of public relations practices. DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) further concluded that organisations should conduct training on how to determine what tools to use and how to effectively measure their use because social media measurement was a topic that many of the participants felt they had more questions than answers (p. 327).

In Malaysia, there were 24.5 million internet users in 2016 (76.9%), and of those who visited social networking sites, 97.3% owned Facebook account, followed by Instagram (56.1%) (MCMC, 2017). Prior research showed that social media have been adopted as a formal channel of communication in the Malaysian public relations industry (Lee, & Low, 2013; Gabriel, & Koh, 2016; Tang, & Chan, 2016). The widespread use of social media in public relations had helped enhance their performance such as sharing information on Facebook to generate more exposure and to bring a closer relationship between organisations and its publics (Tang, & Chan, 2016). According to Lee and Low (2013), the explosion in social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook with increased connectivity and interactivity, has caused many public relations practitioners to recognise the need to embrace these new media for effective communication with internal and external audiences. Gabriel and Koh (2016) also conducted a study with Malaysian public relations practitioners and found that they were actively using social media to communicate directly with their various constituents and further produced desired results. Thus, the Malaysian public relations practitioners have perceived social and emerging media as a preferable media for effective communication and for in-depth relationship building with various publics (Tang, & Chan, 2016). Nevertheless, the results from the studies by Lee and Low (2013), Gabriel and Koh (2016), as well as Tang and Chan (2016) about the acceptance of social and emerging media by public relations practitioners in Malaysia differed from the study by Fitch (2009) in which the Malaysian public relations practitioners were hesitant to use new media because experienced practitioners were fearful of the changing communication environment and they expressed the concern about the loss of interpersonal contact.

Although most researchers agreed that social media offer numerous opportunities for public relations practitioners, there were inadequate studies that captured the uses and impacts of social media on public relations practice particularly from the perspective of developing countries such as Malaysia (Rahman et al., 2017). In addition, the emergence of social and other emerging media has changed the practice of public relations and could pose challenges for public relations professionals. Drawing on the literature review, there is a gap in the research literature with respect to studies which examine the uses of social and emerging media and its impacts on public relations practices in Malaysia. To the best of my knowledge, only three studies were found to examine the uses and impacts of social media in Malaysian public relations industry (Lee, & Low, 2013; Gabriel, & Koh, 2016; Tang, & Chan, 2016) and were discussed in the literature review section. Therefore, this study aims to identify the uses of social and emerging media technologies by public relations practitioners in Malaysia, and to examine the impact of social and emerging media on Malaysian public relations practices in the perspectives of internal and external communications.

The two research questions (RQ) guiding this study are:

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- RQ1: how do public relations practitioners in Malaysia use social and other emerging media? and
- RQ2: what is the impact of social and emerging media on public relations practice in Malaysia?

Methodology

A web-based survey through Qualtrics.com was used to answer the RQ1 and RQ2 above. The public relations practitioners in this sample were those in the public relations agencies (external public relations) as well as in corporations and organisations (internal public relations) in Malaysia. The survey link from Qualtrics.com was distributed to public relations practitioners via email, as well as through postings on Facebook and LinkedIn. The respondents were selected via random sampling of members of Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) Malaysia who received email invitations to participate in the survey.

The web-based questionnaire survey was activated on 12 June 2017 and closed on 31 December 2017. The questionnaire comprised 11 questions (nine close-ended and two open-ended questions), and six demographic questions (five close-ended and one open-ended question) in a total of 42 items. All items in the questionnaire were adapted from Wright and Hinson's (2016) survey instrument with minor modifications on the demographic questions. The total items of the questionnaire comprised of 36 items for the nine closed-ended questions ranging from multiple-choice questions and likert-scale questions, and six items of multiple-choice questions for demographic questions. The reliability score for the scale-items was $\alpha = 0.782$, which is an acceptable value of alpha, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95 (Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011).

A total of 95 public relations practitioners in Malaysia completed the survey and the data was transferred from Qualtrics.com to IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25 and was further analysed using descriptive statistics. Although the number of respondents is not enough to generalise to the public relations population in Malaysia, yet, this study provides useful insight and aid in understanding the pattern of usage of social and emerging media by public relations professionals in Malaysia.

Findings

The analysis begins with a descriptive analysis using IBM SPSS 25 and the results of this study are displayed in Tables 1 to 4 and Figures 1 to 6. The following sections illustrate the findings to answer the two research questions of the study . how public relations practitioners in Malaysia have used the social and other emerging media and what is the impact of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia?

Demographics

Six questions were asked about respondents' demographic information. Questions asked were organisational setting, geographical location, gender, age, race, and years of working experience in public relations. Firstly, Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents worked as internal public relations ($N=67$, 70.5%), while the remaining 27 respondents (28.4%) worked as consultants in public relations

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agencies. Next, 50.5% of the respondents worked in Selangor and 42.1% worked in Kuala Lumpur. Both geographical locations form the Klang Valley, which is referred to people living in Malaysia in the area which is centred in Kuala Lumpur, and includes its adjoining cities and towns in the state of Selangor. The remaining respondents ($N=7$, 7.4%) were based in other states. Next, of those who reported their gender, 72.6% of them were male ($N = 69$) and 24.2% of them were female ($N = 23$). In terms of race, 75.8% of the respondents were Chinese, followed by Malay (9.5%), Indian (6.5%) and others (6.5%). Majority of those surveyed were younger than 30 years old ($N=59$, 62.1%) and the respondents' working experience in public relations ranging from two months to 30 years with an average of 5.45 years.

Table 1 Respondents' demographic profiles

		Number of respondents (N=95)	Percentage (%)	Mean/Average
Organisational settings	In house public relations (internal)	67	70.5	N/A
	External public relations	27	28.4	N/A
Geographical locations	Selangor	48	50.5	N/A
	Kuala Lumpur (W.P.)	40	42.1	N/A
Gender	Male	69	72.6	N/A
	Female	23	24.2	N/A
Age	Younger than 30	59	62.1	N/A
	30 . 39	21	22.1	N/A
	40 . 49	10	10.5	N/A
	50 . 59	2	2.1	N/A
Race	Malay	9	9.5	N/A
	Chinese	72	75.8	N/A
	Indian	6	6.5	N/A
	Others	6	6.5	N/A
Years of experience in public relations				5.45

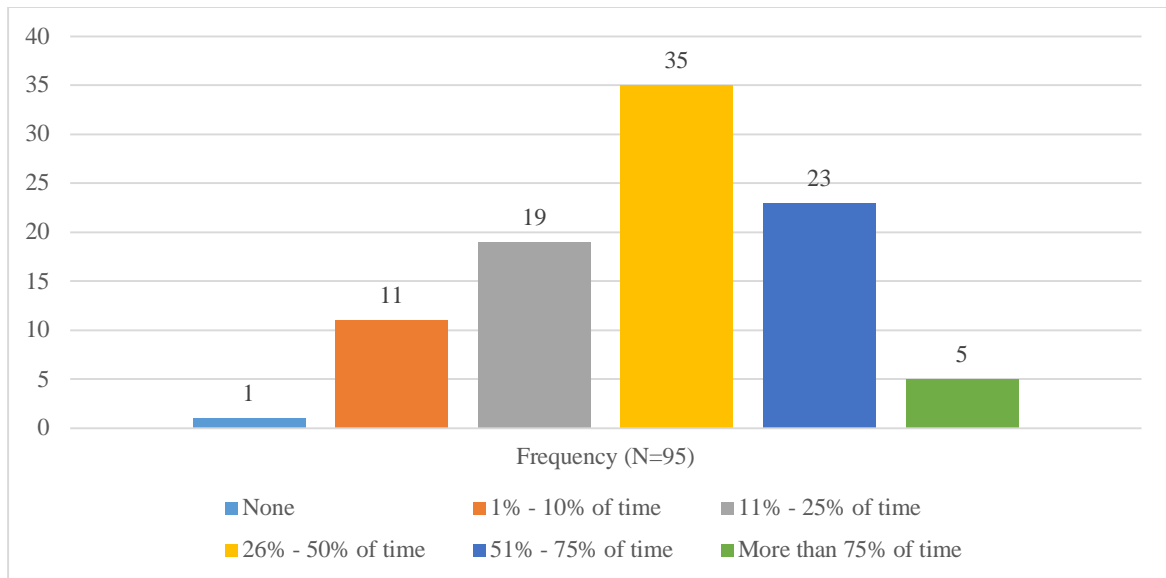
Uses of social and emerging media in public relations practices

Frequency of usage

In addressing the first research question on the use of social and emerging media by public relations practitioners in Malaysia, this section reports the findings of eight questions. Firstly, two questions were asked about the usage: the average percentage of time spent in public relations practice with social and emerging media, and the frequency of usage of ten social and emerging media technologies as part of the work in public relations (see Figures 1 and 2). Results in Figure 1 show that 35 respondents spent 26% to 50% of their time in average for public relations practice with social and emerging media (36.8%), 23 respondents spent 51% to 75% of their time for public relations and communication purposes (24.2%), and 19 respondents spent 11% to 25% of the time in public relations practices (20%). Nevertheless, 11 respondents spent less than 10% of their time in public relations practice with social and emerging media (11.6%) and only one respondent (1%) did not use social and emerging media for public relations practices.

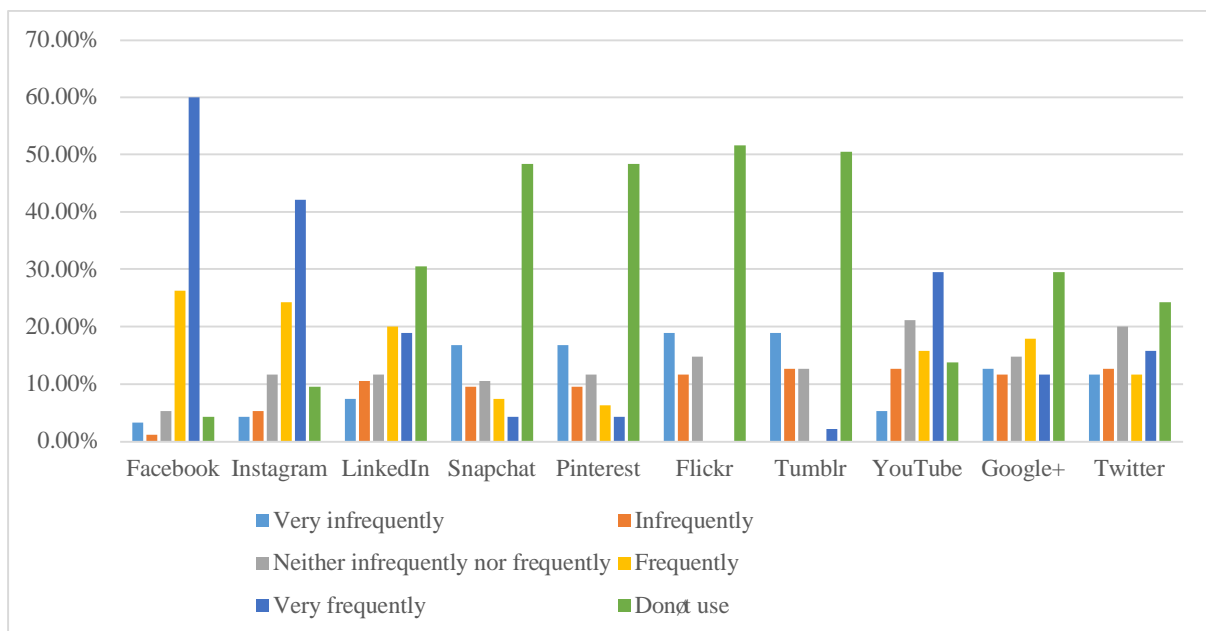
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Figure 1: Average time spent in public relations practices with social and emerging media



In another question on frequency of usage, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were the top three most used platforms by the public relations practitioners in Malaysia. From Figure 2, the respondents claimed that Facebook was very frequently ($N=57$, 60%) and frequently ($N=25$, 26.3%) used for public relations practices in Malaysia. The other media which were frequently used by public relations practitioners for work purposes were LinkedIn, Google+ and Twitter. Lastly, the public relations practitioners in Malaysia least used Snapchat and Pinterest, while more than half of the respondents did not use Flickr and Tumblr. The descriptive statistics of the ten social and emerging media used as part of work in public relations are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Frequency of usage of social and emerging media as part of work in public relations



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Perceived importance of social and emerging media usage

Additionally, there was one question in the questionnaire which asked about respondents' perception on the importance of social and other emerging media used in the overall communications and public relations efforts of the organisation. Of those who reported their perception, social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+ (M=4.90) were identified to be very important media used in the overall communications and public relations efforts, followed by video or content sharing sites such as YouTube, Flickr and Instagram (M=4.70), and search engine marketing (M=4.65) which were perceived somewhat important. The mean score for all the social and other emerging media was above 4.0, except for podcast (M=3.89). This indicates that the public relations practitioners perceived most of the platforms were important in the overall communications and public relations efforts of the organisation. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents' perception on the importance of social and other emerging media used in the overall communications and public relations efforts of the organisation

	Mean score
Social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+)	4.90
Video or content sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr, Instagram)	4.70
Search engine marketing	4.65
Social media management sites (Hootsuite)	4.53
Photo and content sharing sites (Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat)	4.35
Micro-blogging sites or platforms (Twitter)	4.26
Bookmarking management sites (SpringPro, Evernote, Google Keep)	4.16
Screencast Applications (Screenr)	4.15
Blogs	4.05
Electronic forums or Message boards	4.04
Podcasts	3.89

Department monitoring and managing social and emerging media

Next, the respondents were also asked about the department or organisational function which is primarily responsible for monitoring and managing the social and digital media communication in their organisation as well as the department or organisational function which should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing the social and digital media communication in their organisation. The results in Figure 3 show that 30.5% of the respondents claimed that digital or social media department is primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication, followed by communications or public relations (27.4%) department and marketing (23.2%). When the respondents were asked on which department should be primarily responsible, the respondents claimed that digital or social media department (42.1%) and communications or public relations department (41.1%) should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in the organisation or client organisations. The results are shown in Figure 4.

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Figure 3: Departments primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in the organisation

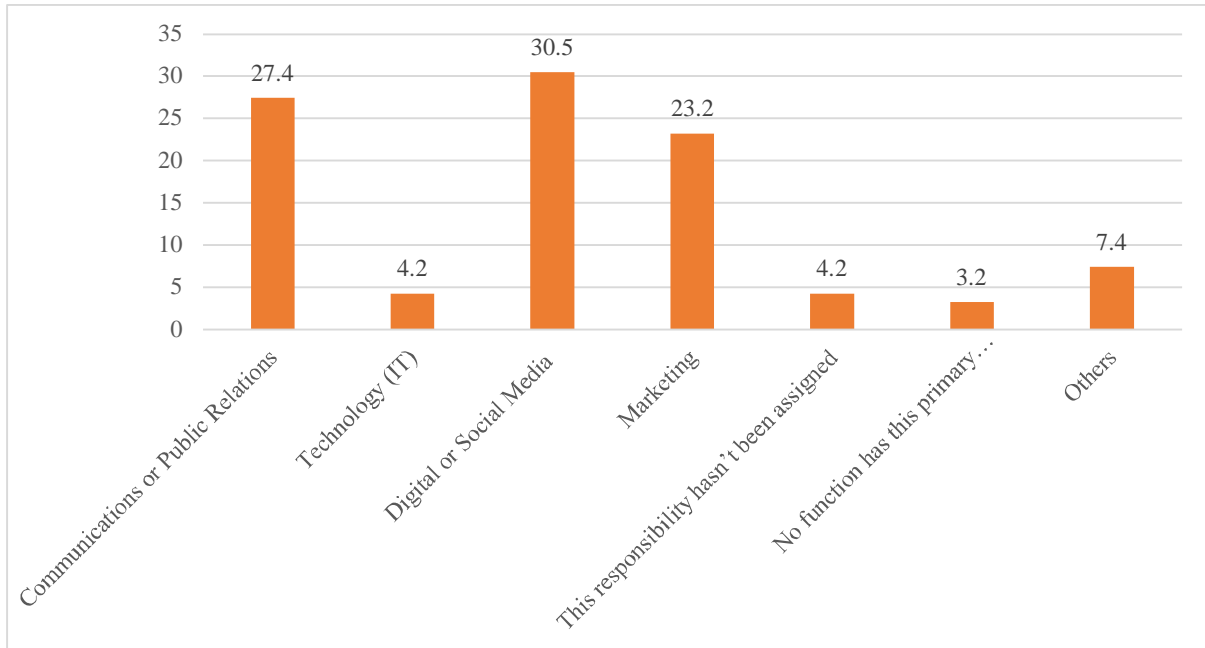
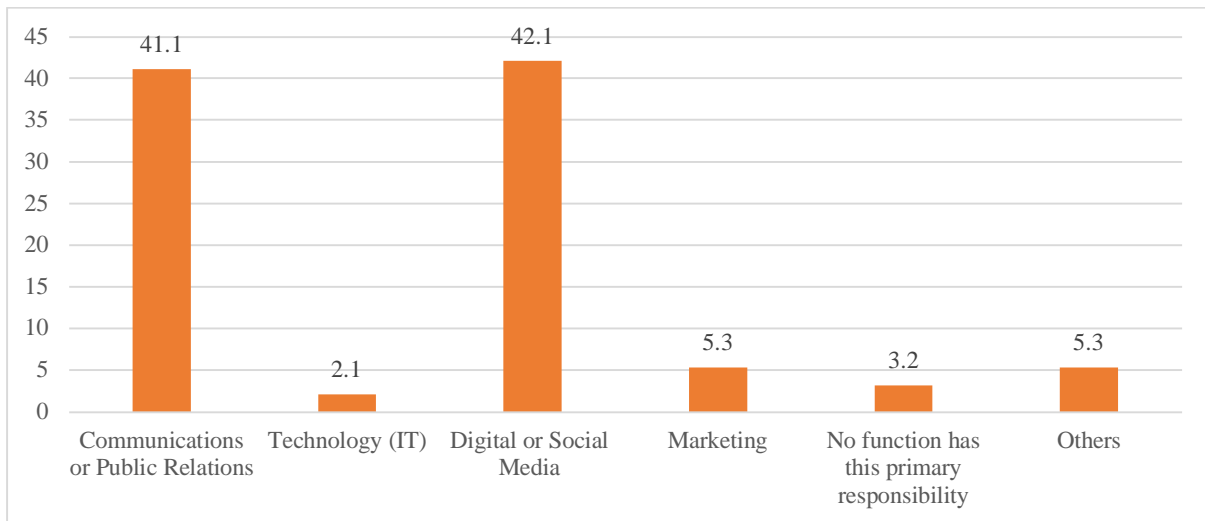


Figure 4: Departments should be primarily responsible for monitoring and managing social and digital media communication in the organisation

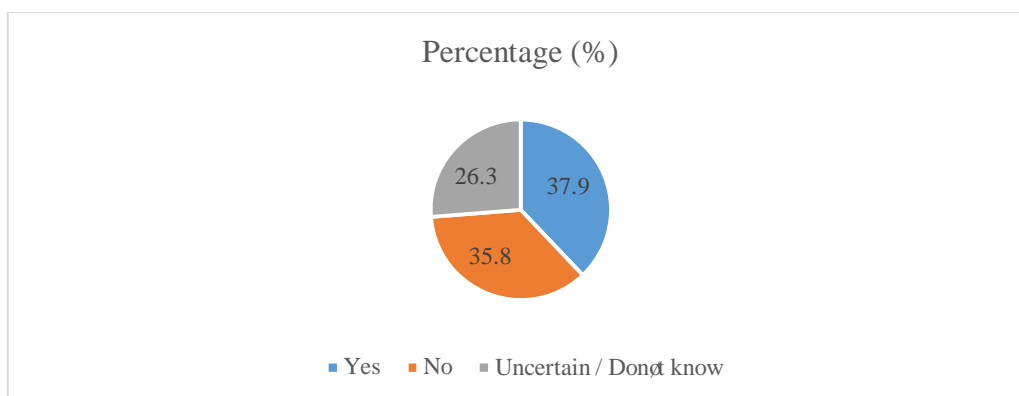


Research and measurement on communication through social and other emerging media

In terms of research and measurement on the communication by public relations practitioners via social and other emerging media, the results in Figure 5 reveal that 37.9% of respondents claimed that their organisation had conducted research measuring what people have communicated about their organisation, while 35.8% of them did not conduct any research, and 26.3% of them were uncertain or did not know whether or not their organisation had conducted any research measuring what people have communicated about their organisation via social and other emerging media.

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Figure 5: Measurement on communication through social and other emerging media



Measurement on social and emerging media communication

Lastly, Tables 3 and 4 display the results from two questions pertaining to whether or not the organisation had ever measured and should measure the following items: a) the amount of communication disseminated through social and other emerging media, b) analysed content of what's been communicated in social and other emerging media, c) the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences, and d) the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours. Results in Table 3 show that 60% of the respondents claimed that their organisation had measured the amount of communication disseminated; 65.3% of them had analysed the content of communication through social and other emerging media; slightly more than half of the respondents (56.8%) had measured the impact of social and emerging media communication has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences; and lastly 53.7% of the respondents had measured the impact of social and emerging media communication on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours.

Table 3: Measurement by organisation on social and emerging media communication

		Frequency (N=95)	Percentage (%)
Measured the amount of communication disseminated through social and other emerging media	Yes	57	60
	No	20	21.1
	Uncertain / Don't know	18	18.9
Analysed the content of what's been communicated in social and other emerging media	Yes	62	65.3
	No	18	18.9
	Uncertain / Don't know	15	15.8
Measured the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences	Yes	54	56.8
	No	19	20
	Uncertain / Don't know	22	23.2
Measured the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours	Yes	51	53.7
	No	24	25.3
	Uncertain / Don't know	20	21.1

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Next, in Table 4, results show that majority of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that public relations practitioners should measure the amount of information disseminated through social and emerging media (M=4.03); 91.5% of them perceived that they should analyse the content communicated through social and emerging media (M=4.25); a high percentage of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed (91.5%) that they should measure the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences (M=4.28); and lastly 95.8% of them agreed and strongly agreed that they should measure the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours (M=4.27).

Table 4: Respondents' level of agreement on whether or not public relations practitioners should measure the social and emerging media communication

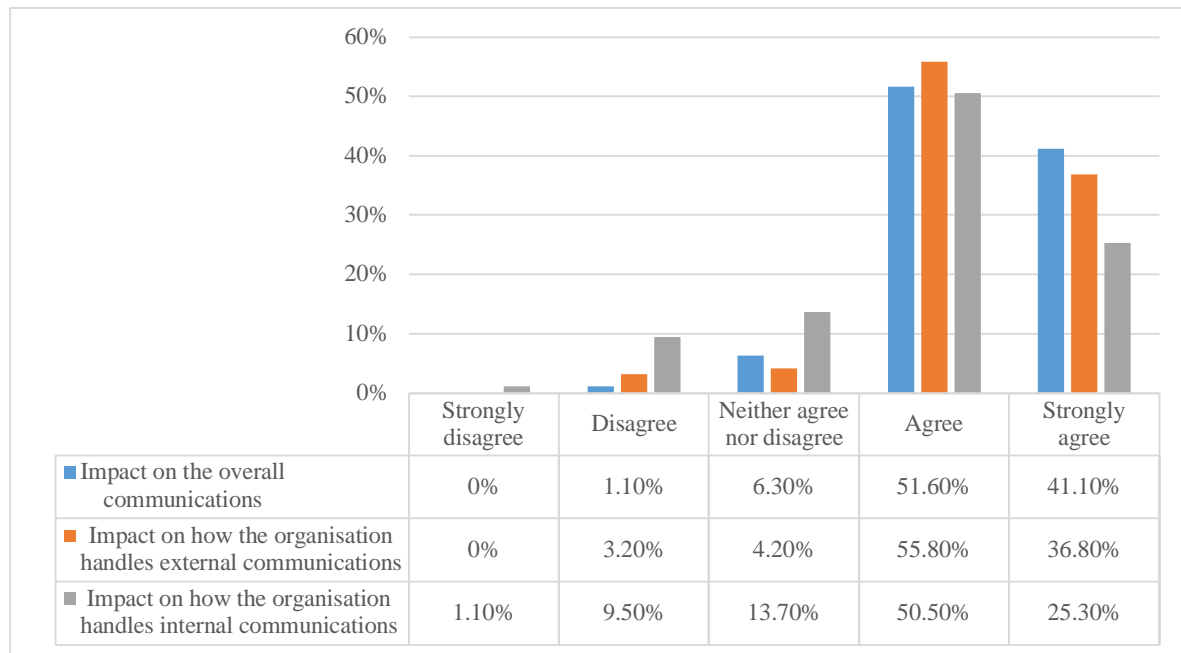
	Mean
Measured the amount of communication disseminated through social and other emerging media	4.03
Analysed the content of what has been communicated in social and other emerging media	4.25
Measured the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on influentials, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences	4.28
Measured the impact information disseminated through social and other emerging media has on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours	4.27

Impacts of social and emerging media on public relations practices

This section addresses the second research question on the impact of social and emerging media on public relations practices in Malaysia. Figure 6 shows the respondents' level of agreement that the emergence of social and emerging media has changed the way public relations is practiced in terms of its communication with internal and external audiences. The respondents agreed and strongly agreed that social and emerging media have changed the way their organisations communicate (M=4.33). In particular, 55.8% of the respondents agreed and 36.8% of them strongly agreed that social and emerging media has changed the way they conduct external communications (M=4.26). On the other hand, 50.5% of the respondents agreed and only 25.3% of them strongly agreed that the use of social and emerging media have changed the way the organisation handles internal communications (M=3.89).

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Figure 6: Respondents' level of agreement on the impact of social and emerging media on public relations practices



Conclusion

The quantitative survey revealed that public relations practitioners in Malaysia have frequently used Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for public relations purposes and in average, 36.8% of the respondents spent 26% to 50%, and 24.2% of them spent 51% to 75% of their working time in public relations and communication via social and emerging media. The results on the usage of social and emerging media by the practitioners of this study concur with the studies by Gabriel and Koh (2016) and Tang and Chan (2016). Malaysian public relations practitioners are actively using social media such as social networking site to communicate with their various constituents because it produced the desired results . increase in awareness, branding, popularity and sales (Gabriel, & Koh, 2016). Among the use of social media for public relations, Facebook and Instagram tend to have the highest popularity among the respondents as the channel of communication (Tang, & Chan, 2016). The most frequently used social and emerging media by Malaysian public relations practitioners for public relations and communication purposes was Facebook and they perceived social networking site as very important media used in the overall communications and public relations efforts. In terms of time spent, the finding of this study is consistent with Tang and Chan (2016) that public relations practitioners of both studies spent most of their time using social and emerging media for their work. But when comparing with Wright and Hinson's (2017) study, 61% of Malaysian practitioners spent in average 26% up to 75% of their time, while only 36% of American practitioners spent that same amount of time at work using social and other emerging media.

In examining the impact of social and emerging media on Malaysian public relations practices, the respondents of this study agreed that social and emerging media have changed the way their organisation communicates, especially the way it handles external communications in comparison with internal communications. This

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result concurs with Wright and Hinson's (2017) study that the impact is much more pronounced for external than internal audience (p. 7). The result on the impact is also aligned with some studies (Lee, & Low, 2013; Gabriel, & Koh, 2016; Lewis, & Nichols, 2016; Tang, & Chan, 2016) in which social and emerging media used by public relations practitioners have impacted the way organisation handles communications, especially to external audiences. In addition, the respondents claimed that their organisation had conducted research on what people have communicated about their organisation with slightly more than half of them had measured the amount of communication disseminated (60%), the content of communication through social and other emerging media (65.3%), the impact of social and emerging media communication has on influential, opinion leaders and members of strategic audiences (56.8%), as well as the impact of social and emerging media communication on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours (53.7%). DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) agreed that evaluating social media content enables public relations practitioners to better understand the effectiveness of social media in driving employee engagement and consumer purchases or actions. The authors further stated that social media measurement could identify the noise and what is of substance or has the potential to emerge as a substantive issue (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011, p. 327). However, the importance of measuring social media content was not embraced as much as it should have by the public relations industry in the United States of America. Finally, the respondents reported that the department of digital or social media department is primarily responsible to monitor and manage social and emerging media communication in organisation (30.5%) and also perceived that it should be the primary responsibility (42.1%). This result differs with Wright and Hinson's (2017) study which showed that it should be the responsibility of communications and public relations (p. 8). This is a different perception of public relations practitioners in the United States of America and Malaysia in identifying the department or organisational function responsible for monitoring and managing social and emerging media communication in the organisations.

This study concludes that most of the social and emerging media, specifically Facebook, are frequently used by public relations practitioners in Malaysia for public relations practices and as many as 92.7% of the respondents agreed that social and emerging media have changed the way communication is handled by the organisation. The limitations of this study are in the samples of the survey and the use of a single approach of research methodology . online questionnaire survey. The response rate for the survey was low (N=95) and lacking of responses from external public relations (28.4%) suggesting that results are not able to generalise to the overall population of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. Also only through online questionnaire survey, an in-depth understanding of individual participants' attitudes and perspectives towards the use of social and emerging media for public relations practices in Malaysia was not obtained. Drawing upon the limitations, future research could employ a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods with a larger sample of public relations randomly and more evenly distributed from across Malaysian public relations industry, and to include inputs from employees, business partners, clients, government and media representatives regarding their attitudes to the way social and other emerging technologies are utilised in public relations practices. Although there is a limitation of survey responses due to low response rate, this study has shed useful insight for academics, researchers and

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public relations practitioners on how social and emerging media technologies are used in the Malaysian public relations industry such as how social media is implemented in organisations and how it impacts the organisational communications.

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