SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS, TRENDS, OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of social media on PR. Specifically, it examined the social media analytic tools, trends, opportunities as well as implications of social media adoption on PR with focus on practitioners in Lagos State. Interviews were conducted with selected PR practitioners in Lagos to obtain facts and views for this study. Findings revealed that social media has greatly influenced the practice of PR. However, social media use is shaped by communication strategy, objectives, engagement strategy, and the target audience. Furthermore, the common trends in use among practitioners include influencer push/influencer PR, listening and analytic (software) tools, brand neutralization, hashtagging, sponsored tweet/posts and use of social media pages of established news outlets. The result also showed that analytic tools like Hootsuite, Meltwater, Sprout Social are used for social media management and engagement. Therefore, social media has completely altered the pattern of corporate communication with its transient and ephemeral nature which makes it difficult for afterthought communications to be retrieved, deleted, or sometimes reviewed. But when compared with conventional media, social media provides better opportunities for wider reach, precise targeting, audience analytic, instant/immediate feedback, location-based messaging, and better audience measurement.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Relations, PR tools, Modern Public Relations

Introduction

The public relations (PR) industry in Nigeria and across the world has witnessed enormous changes in the last few years as a result of social media. The social media phenomenon has created new channels, opportunities as well as challenges for

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practitioners and business owners wishing to engage their publics. The main driving force behind these changes is nature of social media itself which conflict with the traditional model of practice. With social media, the power over the message is no longer an exclusive preserve of the organization, the various publics and stakeholders have equal power to initiate dialogue. This portends a huge challenge for practitioners on how to effectively leverage this new form of engagement so they can control their narratives. Social media has altered the pattern of corporate communication, affecting the ways PR campaigns are formulated, conducted and measured.

Globally, as at 16th of July, 2020, more than half of all the people on Earth use social media, (DataReportal, 2020). Exactly 3.96 billion, equaling almost 51% of the total global population use social media. In other words, more people use social media today than people who do not. As at June 2020, Facebook had 2,603 billion monthly active users; YouTube has 2 billion monthly active users and WhatsApp has 2 billion monthly active users respectively, (DataReportal, 2020).

In Nigeria, total active mobile lines stood at 198, 961, 361 as at July, 2020, (National Communication Commission, NCC, 2020). There were 85.4 million internet users and there were 27 million social media users as at end of January 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Nigeria has 27.4 million Facebook users as at June 2020 and it’s estimated to reach 43.5 million in 2025, (Statista, 2020); and there were 6, 408, 000 active Instagram users as at end of February 2020, (NapoleonCat, 2020).

The widespread adoption of social media among people has led to increase in the use of social media as means of engagement for many public relations practitioners, with practitioners now employing various PR tools and methods to engage and communicate with publics. However, there is a dearth of local studies that examined how PR practitioners in Nigeria use social media, the trends and tools in use and the implications of social media on PR practice. The paper aimed to directly address these gaps.

Specifically, the paper sought to address the following research questions:

- What is the current state of social media adoption among PR practitioners in Lagos State?
- What are the trends and social media analytic (software) tools used by PR practitioners in executing their PR functions on social media?
- What are the opportunities and implications in the use of social media for PR?
Literature Review

Understanding Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as a group of online-based applications built on the platforms and technological foundations of Web 2.0 (Web 2.0 is used to describe multiplicity of second generation webpages and applications that permit anyone with web access to create and share information, text or audio-visual materials they have created). Dewing (2012) views social media as a range of Internet-based mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user created content, or join online communities. Specifically, social media facilitated the growth of interactive dialogue among communities of users regardless of their physical locations. It also provides ways for users to find one another, and then communicate with each other using instant messaging, (Baran, 2010).

However, a reflection on the nomenclature of social media by Adelabu (2011) found that three components typify social media: concept (information, art); media (physical, electronic, or verbal); and social interface (intimate, direct, social viral, electronic broadcast or syndication or print). Also, the major uniqueness of social media is its interactive capabilities, (Toivo, 2013). Like never before, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok WhatsApp, WeChat, LinkedIn, SnapChat and blogs are transforming the way in which people receive and share information. Interactivity of social media adds value through its ability to facilitate meaningful conversation with, and between users. More so, social media and blogs provide an opportunity for users to express themselves and connect with likeminded people.

Social media technologies include: blogs, vlogs, wall-postings, email, picture sharing, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, etc., (Anchor et al, 2013) It is important to note that many of these services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms. Users of social media platforms access the services through web-based applications available on laptops, desktops or downloaded apps on their mobile devices (such as smartphones, tablets). Some of the most popular social media sites with over 500 million registered users include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WeChat, QZone, LinkedIn, Weibo, and WhatsApp. Other popular platforms include Quora, Pinterest, Telegram, Reddit, Viber, LINE, SnapChat and many more. Nevertheless, Anchor et al (2013) classified social media into seven different types, they include: (i) Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia); (ii) Blogs and microblogs (e.g; Twitter, LinkedIn); (iii) Content communities (e.g. YouTube and Daily motion); (iv)
Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook); (v) Virtual game Worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and; (vi) Virtual social Worlds (e.g. Second Life).

**Understanding Public Relations**
The British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) defines PR as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. Onabajo (2013) contends that PR is essentially communications aimed at promoting a desirable image for a person or group seeking public attention (public could be customers, stockholders, employees, suppliers, government, competitors, general public etc.). Broom (2009:25) offers a more succinct definition of public relations referring to it as: “…the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.” From the three above definitions, it is evident that public relations is essentially about communicating effectively in order to build valuable relationships (with the ultimate aim to earn goodwill of the various publics) and therefore the social media being a medium for social interaction and communication is bound to have implications for the practice of PR.

Historically, PR has existed for centuries. From the ancient Egyptians to the medieval period- people have been using communication channels and means to relay information and obtain feedbacks, (Adoni Media, 2018). However, modern PR originated in the United States in the early 20th century with pioneers such as Edward L. Bernays and Ivy Ledbetter Lee, (Onabajo, 2013). While the true founder is often debated, PR first served as a way to manage and manipulate public opinion through many uses such as sociology, mass psychology, mass society theory and magic bullet theory. In fact, earliest practitioners saw it as a propaganda tool, (Adoni Media, 2018).

Throughout centuries, PR has served as a major tool for people to build and maintain strong relationships and positive public image, (Adoni Media, 2018). However, as the media technology grew in popularity and acceptance, so did PR.

**Social media and Modern PR**
The world of PR practice across the globe is changing at an unprecedented rate as social media technology is disrupting the established traditional models of PR and as consumers and the public are continually changing the ways in which they access, consume and react to information.
Before the advent of internet and social media, public relations professionals primarily engaged with the public after a major change, (Boitnott, 2017). The engagement could be announcement of new offerings, management of crisis to minimize reputation damage or as a reaction to industry changes. The focus of a PR publicity campaign was all about securing decent coverage in television, radio and dailies; and engagement was limited to print (newspaper, magazine, bulletin, newsletter) and electronic media (TV and radio, (Agba, 2017).

However, with the emergence and popularity of social media, many public relations professionals are forced to play a much more nuanced role. Nowadays, they proactively engage in reputation management activities, identify potential problems, carefully vet information before it is passed to the public, counsel leadership, and identify potential problems in a business relationship with the public, (Boitnott, 2017). Also, for brand reasoning, explanations, and crisis response, modern public relations professionals look to social media as the first line of defense in an increasingly connected world, (Boitnott, 2017).

With social media, PR is more about relationships and people. PR professionals are now forced to engage two-way communication based on mutual understanding, (Komodromos, 2014). This is because monologue has changed to dialogue; social media influencers and bloggers are gaining recognition as industry authorities (particularly influencers that focused on specific areas like investment, media, technology, business solution, sports, entertainment etc.) earning the same respect and reach as traditional media. Komodromos contends that PR professionals will continue to understand the social media environment and how best to integrate social media tools with traditional PR.

Although, Damasio et al (2012) observe that the public relations practices of many organizations still rely on linear and non-symmetrical models and processes, (e.g. advertising campaigns, press conferences, advertorial, press releases, sponsored actions etc.), without giving much thoughts to feedback or the relevance of this information to its publics. These models appeal to organizations and certain professionals because it is much easier to control the narrative publicized through the mass media (i.e. television, radio, newspaper). However, such models are no longer suitable to emergent communication practices enabled by interactivity of social media platforms. Rashidi (2020) submits that social media plays many roles in PR such as content promotion, engaging with customers and public alike, customer feedback and multiplicity of other
uses. Also, it is an affordable and accessible channel for any business. More so, social media is accessible, affordable and convenient to use by PR professionals.

Additionally, several social media analytic/management tools are used by PR departments, agencies and professionals to automate their engagements on social media. According to Royse (2019), these tools help to post content, resize images, find hashtags and mentions, engage audience, schedule post in days, weeks or even months ahead of time, and perform multiplicity of other related functions.

**Theoretical Framework**

Technological Determinism Theory formed the theoretical framework for this study. The Theory was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) and further popularized by Marshall McLuhan in 1962. The theory proposes that technology defines the nature, culture and means of communication in society, (McQuail, 2010). This is because the sequence of invention and application of communication technology influence the direction and pace of social change.

In looking at the relevance of this theory to this paper, concern is with the development of the social media technologies and their rapid penetration in all spheres of life, including PR; the PR world is moving fast with the trend and pace of technological innovations. Unlike the conventional corporate-controlled media, user-centered social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc. allow individual users to become media gatekeepers and content-creators who collaboratively and proactively engage with companies through likes, posts, and comments within their personal social networks.

New technologies such as Internet and social media have fundamentally changed the way businesses engage with their publics. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp have grown in popularity and acceptance in the last few years, altering the process of PR and creating rooms for the public to initiate dialogue. Another incredible example of how social media has altered PR is the use of software (such as Hootsuite, TweetDeck, Talkwater, Meltwater etc.), based on algorithms that track social media mentions, hashtags, schedule posts, etc. on different social media platforms to predict general level of contentment, helping brands and businesses to gauge public sentiment towards their services/products.

**Methodology**

In addressing the research questions posed by this study, a qualitative approach (In-depth-interview) was adopted to elicit information from eight purposively selected Lagos based
PR practitioners who are active and registered members of Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). PR professionals in Lagos were interviewed in Lagos using the structured interview method. Wimmer and Dominick (2010) contended that, the structured interviews are very useful when dealing with limited number of respondents and when the aim is to gather knowledge and insights through respondent experience.

Although the population for this study included all PR professionals in Lagos, the interview was restricted to practitioners in Lagos due to time, logistics and bureaucratic protocols involved in extending the study to the entire country. Also, Lagos is widely considered as the media and commercial hub of Nigeria and almost all the PR agencies in Nigeria have their businesses domiciled in Lagos. The register of current members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) served as the sampling frame. Additionally, purposive sampling was employed to allow only practitioners who have minimum experience of seven years and manages PR campaigns for brands, who were available and willing to participate were chosen as respondents.

Results/Interpretation
Data gathered through the in-depth interviews conducted with the PR practitioners in Lagos State are analyzed and presented below. While some of the respondents did not have a problem with the researchers mentioning their names in the report, others pleaded anonymity. (Respondents were selected from the following organizations: Media Reach, Media Perspective, Novelli Porter, Digi Group, Jumia Group, Startimes and Aqua Online.)

State of Social Media Adoption among Pr Practitioners in Lagos State
This research question sought to find the extent and state of social media use among PR practitioners. All the interviewees confirmed that social media is a very important tool for PR as it connects brands to their publics easily and faster, is relatively cheap and can be very useful in collating feedback and measuring sentiment.

Respondents admitted that nowadays there is hardly any PR campaign that would be successful without social media; because whatever goes to other mediums must also go to social media, whether paid or own social media. Paid in terms of social media influencers, blogs and third-party pages and own is social media page of the brand. Influencers are those that are popular on social media, have huge following, and are believable; they are those paid to manage key messaging and some brand propositions. Interviewees affirmed it is almost impossible to execute PR campaign without the use of social media.
However, respondents submitted that their social media use is shaped by their communication strategy, objective of the campaign, markets, budgets, and plethora of other factors. A respondent observed:

The nature of the target audience for the campaign usually inform and influence our choice of media mix, which in most cases will include a careful selection of relevant social media platforms that can convey the key messages to the intended recipients. When deciding what social media platforms to use, we give consideration to the following factors: (1) audience demographics - because different strata of the audience consume information from only a few - and some from a potpourri of - social media channels i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, (2) reach of the medium, and (3) budget. Social media has become an indispensable communication vehicle through which we interact with publics, considering its far-reaching impact.

They described their activities on social media as sharing company’s updates and new developments, post promotion, crisis management, influencer marketing, equity PR and e-commerce.

However, respondents pointed that what seems as an advantage about social media over other channels can also be a demerit simply because the transient, ephemeral nature of social media makes it completely difficult for afterthought communications to be retrieved, deleted, or sometimes reviewed. Once the message is sent, pulling it back might be unlikely.

Trends and Social Media Analytic (Software) Tools Used by Pr Professionals in Lagos State

Analysis of responses showed the current trends in social media use by PR professionals. Some of the trends are influencer push/influencer PR, use of listening and analytic tools, brand neutralization, hashtagging, sponsored tweet/posts, commission on campaign threads, use of news platforms on social media (The Punch, The Guardian, The Nation, Channels TV), amongst others.

For many of the respondents, the key trending practice is the use of social media influencers to pass across messages. Influencers are like news platforms on social media.
Many people on social media are not accustomed to reading long posts which makes it easier for Instablog, KapTV, PulseTV, and many others to thrive a lot because their words are usually 140 characters, but Twitter has recently raised the word limit to 280 characters. Describing the importance of influencers in passing across messages, a respondent said:

… a lot of the influencers have their own audience that they have been able to carve out over time because of the information(posts) they put out e.g Maraji, Instablog, TundeEdnut, Pulse, Ogbenidipo, Omojuwa, Ayourb, Woli Agba, those personalities have been able to carve out a huge following for themselves. For instance, if Maraji says a product is good, that she uses it, her followers want to buy and try it too.

Furthermore, respondents pointed that different influencers have different areas of influence, so PR professionals go for influencers who are opinion leaders in the areas they are targeting. They noted when it’s about finance/investment Subomi, Kola Oyeneyin, Kalu Aja Asemota Victor, Eyin Aboyeji are some of the biggest influencers. Ogbeni Dipo, Omotayo are right for education and personal developments; Funmi Oyatogun, Dharmola, Irinajo are known for travel and tourism; many other areas have key influencers who can drive key brand messaging.

Additionally, respondents also singled out Twitter as one of the most effective medium for PR. A respondent said:

.. Twitter is one major platform that is being deployed majorly for PR. So there is a lot of interesting trends for brands on Twitter; but they (clients) have been able to understand the needs for that medium. And PR agencies have been able to use it well for their clients.

Asides influencer PR push, Hashtagging, use of twitter and sponsored tweet, PR professionals also help brands use their own pages to push out messages and engage with their publics. But most of the brands do not have huge followership like social media influencers. Although, brands like Malta Guinness, Star etc. have huge followings, however, they noted that, people trust information that is coming from outside sources.
than from the brand itself. Also pages of established media outlets like The Punch, Channels TV, The Guardian are also used.

Another major trend identified by respondents is brand neutralization. A respondent said:

Brands are now trying to be human. A water brand might say ‘this water is good for you, I enjoy taking it myself’. Brands on social media are trying to position themselves as sentient, by acting as a living entity.

Listening was also another major trend identified by PR professionals. Respondents argued that before the advent of social media, PR practitioners then just disseminate their messages, and barely consider feedback, except when necessary. A respondent said:

…With social media, brands are forced to listen to what people have to say about them first, they may choose to react or not. But it’s all about listening to what people are saying, because people have seen advertisement and promotional messages, and they have seen how brands try to make themselves look good. So listening helps by gauging the sentiment of the public.

Additionally, various social media aggregate tools were identified by PR professionals in listening and managing their social media profiles and presence. Some of the tools identified by respondents include Hootsuite, Meltwater, Talkwater, Brand24, and Sprout Social. Explaining the importance and purpose of the tools, a respondent said:

There is no single tool that does everything when it comes to social media. While you have this tool that does post like Hootsuite, there are some that are meant for listening. So you have to listen beyond what people are saying on your pages. Someone might say ‘I tag an XYZ brand because I bought a product that is not good’. Sometimes, they would not tag the brand, they would just say it, and you wouldn’t hear about it without an aggregate tool. ‘What are they saying about me on the blogs, what are they saying about me on the Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other major social media platforms.’ Tools like Meltwater would help you take all of these information and analyze them. ‘Oh
your brand was mentioned 150 times today on Facebook, 60 out of these responses were negative while others were neutral. There is also Brand24, Hootsuite, Sprout Social and many more.

In all, these social media management/analytic tool help PR professionals to post content, find hashtag and keep abreast of public’s sentiments about their brand, find mentions, engage the audience, schedule post for days, or weeks or even months ahead and a host of other functions.

**Opportunities and Implications in The Use of Social Media For Pr Practitioners in Lagos State**

The third research question sought to identify the opportunities and implications created by the use of social media for PR. Interviewees mentioned several benefits of social media for PR such as precise targeting, audience analytic, instant/immediate feedback, wider reach than traditional mainstream media, location-based messaging, and better audience measurement. A respondent said:

There are lots of opportunities for brands on social media. It is a wide world web where everybody is involved in it. Brands can reach their target audience faster, they can get feedback almost immediately and measuring is very visible. Unlike in conventional media PR campaign where you are not able to get feedback of your target audience, social media allows you to get immediate feedback whether positive or negative, so you can know whether your campaign is progressing or not. And that helps you to do a proper evaluation; whether you are coming back stronger or improving on whatever you are pushing out.

Furthermore, analysis of the implications showed that they are mostly positive. Respondents believed that social media present a more personal communication style as publics and brands can now connect directly and build better, beneficial relationships. Social media also allows for both one-on-one and one-to-many communications. However, interviewees alluded that it is important for brands to be alert and not get carried away by their antics on social media because it is easy to go viral for the wrong reasons and these things stay forever.
In PR agencies, respondents observed that social media adoption has created big changes in terms of structuring. Some departments had been collapsed or joined together to reflect current realities. They observed that PR, as it was practiced before the advent of social media, was laid back.

Additionally, social media is impacting the structure of agencies. Content writers in agencies are now careful of the content they are putting out and envisage how people would respond to it.

But the positive implications of using social media far outweigh the negative. From the analysis of the implications, it can be deduced that that social media has created more beneficial relationships between brands and their publics, brands are constantly concerned about getting muddled in negative/fake or misleading stories/comments, some departments in PR agencies and PR department have been collapsed or joined together to reflect the realities brought by social media, PR content writers are now more careful of the content they are putting out and envisage possible comments/reactions to their social media posts.

**Conclusion**

So far, an attempt has been made to examine the state of influence and state of social media adoption on PR practice and also the current trends and software analytic tools used by PR professionals in carrying out their PR duties on social media. Attempt was also made to identify the opportunities and implications in the use of social media for PR practitioners. Findings revealed that state of social media adoption among PR practitioners in Lagos is wide and all the respondents use social media for executing their PR duties for their clients. Some of the PR duties on social media include sharing company’s updates and new developments, post promotion, crisis management, influencer marketing, equity PR and e-commerce. However, their social media use is shaped by campaign strategy, objectives, audience engagement strategy, target audience, and key messages they are trying to push out. Besides, the major trends in social media adoption for PR are: influencer push/influencer PR, use of listening and analytic (software) tools, brand neutralization, hashtagging, sponsored tweet/posts, commission on campaign threads, push on social media pages of established news outlets (The Punch, The Guardian, The Nation, Channels TV), amongst others.

Findings also reveal the various analytic tools used by PR professionals in their engagement on social media. Software tools like Hootsuite, MeltWater, LightWater, Sprout Social are used. These tools help PR professionals to post content, find hashtag
and keep abreast of public’s sentiments about their brand, find mentions, engage the audience, schedule post for days, or weeks or even months ahead and a host of other functions.

In all, social media provides better advantage over conventional media in areas such as: precise targeting, audience analytic, instant/immediate feedback, wider reach, location-based messaging, and better audience measurement.

**Recommendations**

We make the following recommendation in light of the findings of this study:

Social media as a medium keeps evolving; therefore, PR professionals must continue to update their knowledge of tools, methods and approaches to use on social media to provide the best PR experience/engagement for their clients.

Also, since PR professionals are always weary of negative feedbacks on social media, practitioners that are interested in attracting large public attention and influence on key public policy issues, must find creative ways to break through the fear of negative feedbacks/posts on social media.

Another observation made is that, currently, most PR practitioners’ approach to social media use for public relations is somewhat based on information dissemination and achievement of marketing goals. Engagement of wider publics involving government, regulatory agencies, competitors, suppliers etc. is still lacking. Therefore, the study recommends for practitioners to maximize the opportunities offered by social media in creating wider public engagement for their clients.

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