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The Evolving Role of Social Media in Public Relations in East African Countries

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper was to explore how social media platforms have transformed the landscape of public relations, examining best practices, challenges, and case studies.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the evolving role of social media in public relations in east African countries. Preliminary empirical review revealed that organizations utilize social media for crisis communication in the digital age. Organizations increasingly use social media platforms during crises to provide real-time updates, address concerns, and engage with stakeholders. However, challenges arise in managing misinformation and maintaining consistent messaging across platforms.

Recommendations: Social Identity Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Dialogic Communication Theory may be used to anchor future studies on the evolving role of social media in public relations. PR practitioners should stay updated with the latest trends and technologies in the ever-changing landscape of social media. This includes familiarizing themselves with emerging platforms and understanding their unique functionalities. Maintaining a consistent brand voice and messaging across various social media channels is highlighted as essential for building a coherent and recognizable brand image. Thirdly, the study suggests harnessing the power of data analytics to monitor and measure the impact of social media campaigns, enabling PR professionals to make informed decisions and refine their strategies. Furthermore, cultivating authentic and transparent interactions with the audience and addressing negative sentiment are all deemed vital for maintaining credibility and trust in the digital realm.

Keywords: *Social Media PR Evolution, Digital Transformation PR, Social Media Impact, Changing PR Strategies, Communication Trends*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public relations strategies play a crucial role in shaping perceptions, managing reputation, and establishing a positive image for organizations in developed economies. The evolving nature of public relations and its impact on stakeholder engagement has increased over time (Smith, 2018). In the United States, for instance, the use of digital media in PR strategies has become increasingly prevalent. According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), 84% of PR professionals in the U.S. consider social media as a key tool for disseminating messages and building relationships (PRSA, 2019). Furthermore, the integration of data analytics has enabled organizations to measure the effectiveness of their PR efforts more accurately. In Japan, the importance of cultural sensitivity emphasized is in PR campaigns. They note that adapting global strategies to fit local values and traditions is essential for resonating with the Japanese audience. Such tailored approaches have led to notable successes; for instance, Toyota's PR campaign in 2019 that focused on sustainability and environmental consciousness contributed to a 4% increase in brand perception among Japanese consumers (Toyota, 2019 Annual Report).

In developing economies, public relations strategies have displayed varying degrees of effectiveness due to diverse socio-economic landscapes. There are many challenges and opportunities faced by organizations in India since the integration of traditional and digital PR tactics has been instrumental in enhancing brand visibility and credibility. For example, companies like Hindustan Unilever have successfully utilized PR campaigns emphasizing social responsibility, leading to a 20% increase in consumer trust over a span of two years. The role of influencer collaborations has amplified PR efforts. Similarly, the rise of social media influencers has enabled companies to reach a wider audience and foster authentic connections. This is evident from campaigns like Burberry's partnership with popular British influencers, which resulted in a 15% growth in online engagement and a 7% increase in sales during the campaign period (Johnson & White, 2018).

In sub-Saharan economies, public relations strategies have encountered unique challenges, often tied to infrastructural limitations and cultural diversity. The Nigerian context and emphasizes the importance of community engagement in PR initiatives. Companies like MTN Nigeria have adopted strategies that involve local communities, resulting in increased customer loyalty and improved reputation (Adeyanju & Rahman, 2019). Similarly, the use of storytelling in South Africa's PR landscape has influenced brands like Nando which have effectively utilized storytelling to connect with audiences on socio-cultural levels, leading to heightened brand affinity and recall (Mpfu & Adigun, 2020). These examples showcase the adaptability of PR strategies in sub-Saharan economies to overcome challenges and build meaningful relationships with stakeholders.

In East African countries, the role of social media in public relations has undergone significant evolution in recent years. Social media usage has been steadily rising across the region, with an average annual growth rate of 20% in the number of social media users (Ndirangu and Muturi, 2018). Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have become essential tools for businesses and organizations to engage with their audiences, with the number of active users surpassing millions. For instance, in Kenya, Facebook has emerged as a prominent platform for public relations activities, with a user penetration of over 16 million and a 5% increase in the last year alone. Additionally, Twitter is being increasingly utilized by PR professionals in Tanzania, where the number of active users has risen by 25% in the last two years. This trend reflects the growing

significance of social media as a means to disseminate information, manage reputations, and foster interactions between organizations and their stakeholders.

The utilization of social media platforms has become a pivotal aspect of modern public relations (PR), reshaping the ways organizations communicate and engage with their stakeholders. Social media offers a multifaceted landscape where PR professionals play distinct roles to achieve strategic goals. Firstly, social media serves as a channel for information dissemination, allowing PR practitioners to convey messages directly to a global audience. This role of social media aligns with the core PR function of managing organizational communication by facilitating the rapid distribution of news, updates, and announcements. Secondly, social media platforms enable dialogue and engagement, transforming PR into a dynamic and interactive process. PR professionals engage with stakeholders, respond to queries, and address concerns in real-time, fostering transparency and building trust (Austin & Liu, 2018). This interactive role aligns with PR's function of fostering positive relationships and maintaining reputation.

Furthermore, social media serves as a platform for strategic storytelling, enabling PR practitioners to craft narratives that resonate with audiences. Through compelling visual and textual content, organizations can shape their brand image and values, connecting emotionally with stakeholders. This role of social media is closely intertwined with PR's function of creating and maintaining a favorable image. Lastly, social media platforms provide a space for influencer collaboration, where PR professionals can leverage partnerships with online personalities to amplify brand messages and reach wider audiences (Yang & Kang, 2018). By strategically aligning with relevant influencers, PR practitioners extend the reach and credibility of their messages, effectively enhancing brand visibility and perception. In essence, the roles of information dissemination, engagement, strategic storytelling, and influencer collaboration within social media platforms have revolutionized PR practices, enabling organizations to effectively manage their reputation and communication in the digital era.

Statement of the Problem

The problem at hand centers on understanding how the evolving role of social media in PR intersects with the broader objectives of reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication. This comprehensive problem statement explores the need to decipher the optimal ways to effectively leverage social media platforms for PR purposes, addressing issues related to authenticity, information control, stakeholder expectations, and the blurring boundaries between personal and professional spheres. The conceptual link between public relations (PR) and social media represents an ideal synergy that capitalizes on the dynamic nature of digital communication platforms to enhance PR outcomes. This integration involves utilizing social media channels as tools for disseminating timely and relevant information, fostering authentic dialogues with audiences, leveraging storytelling techniques, and strategically collaborating with influencers to amplify messages (Kent and Taylor, 2019).

The interactive and participatory nature of social media platforms aligns with the core principles of PR, enabling organizations to build trust, transparency, and strong relationships with their target audiences (Liao & Wei, 2021). Moreover, the visual and narrative capabilities of social media facilitate the creation of compelling stories that resonate with audiences, influencing perceptions and emotional connections (Yang & Kang, 2018). In this context, social media platforms act as a versatile canvas where PR professionals craft narratives that align with organizational values and

objectives. Furthermore, the ability to collaborate with influencers and brand advocates on social media allows PR practitioners to extend their reach, tapping into existing communities and enhancing the credibility of their messages (Li & Shaver, 2020). This conceptual link between PR and social media embodies an ideal situation where organizations effectively leverage digital platforms to communicate, engage, and manage their reputation in the evolving media landscape.

The evolving nature of PR practices in the digital era, emphasizes the need for organizations to adapt their strategies to effectively engage with audiences on social media platforms (Kent and Taylor, 2019). This adaptation is not without challenges, as evidenced by studies such as Yang and Kang's (2018) exploration of how social media influences employee behavior and organizational outcomes, indicating the multifaceted effects and consequences of social media engagement. Moreover, point out the complexities of crafting narratives and managing brand image in an environment where messages can quickly be reshaped by the audience. This growing body of research underscores the pressing need for a nuanced understanding of the evolving role of social media in PR, including its implications, opportunities, and potential pitfalls.

The problem impacts a range of stakeholders, including PR professionals, organizational leaders, consumers, and the general public. PR professionals are tasked with navigating the rapidly changing landscape of social media, adjusting strategies to ensure that messaging aligns with organizational values while resonating with diverse audiences (Austin & Liu, 2018). Organizational leaders face the challenge of maintaining brand integrity and reputation in an era where information can spread rapidly and uncontrollably (Li & Shaver, 2020). Consumers and the public are affected by the influx of information, the potential for misinformation, and the increasing demand for transparency and authenticity (Liao & Wei, 2021). The problem's significance lies in its potential impact on reputation management, stakeholder relationships, and overall organizational success. Successfully navigating the evolving role of social media in PR can lead to enhanced stakeholder trust, positive brand perception, and improved communication outcomes (Kent & Taylor, 2019). Conversely, missteps in managing social media PR efforts can lead to reputational damage, loss of stakeholder confidence, and a compromised brand image. As such, addressing this problem is crucial for organizations striving to effectively harness the power of social media platforms within their PR strategies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Social Identity Theory

Originated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, Social Identity Theory focuses on how individuals define themselves in relation to group memberships and how these identities influence behavior and interactions. This theory is highly relevant to understanding the evolving role of social media in public relations. As social media platforms provide spaces for individuals to express their identities and affiliations, PR practitioners can leverage this understanding to tailor messages that resonate with specific target audiences. By recognizing the influence of social identity on social media engagement, organizations can craft content that aligns with users' self-concept, enhancing the effectiveness of their PR efforts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, the Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on how individuals actively choose and consume media to satisfy specific needs and desires. In the context of the evolving role of social media in public relations, this theory highlights that users engage with social media platforms for various purposes, such as information-seeking, social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression. Understanding the diverse motivations behind social media use enables PR professionals to tailor their content to meet users' specific needs, ensuring that messages are relevant and engaging (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Dialogic Communication Theory

Proposed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, the Dialogic Communication Theory emphasizes the importance of two-way communication, open dialogue, and mutual understanding in PR efforts. This theory is particularly pertinent to the evolving role of social media in PR, as social media platforms enable real-time interactions and conversations between organizations and their stakeholders. By adopting a dialogic approach, PR practitioners can engage in meaningful conversations, address concerns, and co-create content with stakeholders. This fosters transparency, builds trust, and enhances the overall effectiveness of PR strategies on social media platforms (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Empirical Review

Cheng & Cameron (2018) examined how organizations utilize social media for crisis communication in the digital age. Mixed-methods approach involving content analysis of social media posts and interviews with PR professionals. Organizations increasingly use social media platforms during crises to provide real-time updates, address concerns, and engage with stakeholders. However, challenges arise in managing misinformation and maintaining consistent messaging across platforms. PR practitioners should develop comprehensive crisis communication strategies that leverage the speed and reach of social media while ensuring accurate and coherent messaging.

Lwin & Phau (2019) explored the impact of social media on stakeholder engagement in the context of non-profit organizations. Survey-based research involving non-profit PR professionals and stakeholders. Social media platforms facilitate increased engagement with stakeholders, allowing non-profits to amplify their messages, connect with supporters, and drive fundraising efforts. However, maintaining consistent engagement remains a challenge. Non-profit PR teams should develop a robust social media strategy that aligns with organizational goals and actively engages with stakeholders.

Zhao, Lee, Li & Sun (2022) analyzed the use of visual content in corporate communication through social media platforms. Content analysis of visual elements shared by organizations on social media and in-depth interviews with PR practitioners. Visual content, such as images and videos, enhances engagement and message recall on social media. Organizations are advised to strategically utilize visual elements to convey complex messages effectively. PR professionals should incorporate visual storytelling techniques into their social media strategies to maximize audience engagement.

Lee & Kim (2019) investigated the role of social media influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward brands. Survey of consumers and analysis of social media posts

featuring influencer-brand collaborations. Influencers significantly impact consumer perceptions, trust, and purchase intentions. Consumers are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers they perceive as authentic and relatable. PR practitioners should carefully select influencers who align with the brand's values and target audience to maximize the positive impact of influencer collaborations.

Yoon & Chung (2018) examined the relationship between social media engagement and corporate reputation in the airline industry. Data collection from social media platforms, along with customer surveys and sentiment analysis. High levels of social media engagement positively correlate with enhanced corporate reputation. Responding to customer feedback promptly on social media contributes to improved perceptions of corporate responsibility and trustworthiness. Airlines should prioritize social media engagement as a strategic tool for managing corporate reputation and fostering positive customer relationships.

Yang & Brown (2020) investigated how organizations utilize storytelling techniques on social media to connect with audiences. Case study approach involving content analysis of storytelling campaigns on various social media platforms. Storytelling campaigns that evoke emotions, authenticity, and relatability resonate with audiences, leading to increased engagement and brand loyalty. PR professionals should craft compelling narratives that align with brand values and resonate with target audiences to enhance the impact of their social media communication.

Vaccari Valeriani & Barberá (2019) explored how social media platforms influence the dynamics of interpersonal communication and opinion formation during political campaigns. Analysis of political communication on social media platforms and surveys among users. Social media significantly impacts political discourse and public opinion, allowing users to engage in active discussions, share information, and form opinions. However, the presence of echo chambers and misinformation challenges the quality of political discourse. Political campaigns and PR professionals should leverage social media to engage diverse audiences, foster constructive discussions, and combat the spread of misinformation.

Research Gap

While existing research has shed light on various aspects of the evolving role of social media in PR, a notable research gap remains in understanding the intersection between organizational objectives, stakeholder expectations, and the dynamics of various social media platforms. Research that delves deeper into how different social media channels influence stakeholder engagement, message dissemination, and overall PR strategy implementation is essential (Rudeloff & Michalski, 2023). Moreover, there's a need for comprehensive frameworks that guide PR professionals in navigating the evolving landscape of social media and aligning it with broader organizational goals (Austin & Liu, 2018). By addressing these gaps, research can provide valuable insights into optimizing the evolving role of social media in PR for the benefit of organizations and their stakeholders.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus,

the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

Our study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Yoon & Chung (2018) examined the relationship between social media engagement and corporate reputation in the airline industry. Data collection from social media platforms, along with customer surveys and sentiment analysis. High levels of social media engagement positively correlate with enhanced corporate reputation. Responding to customer feedback promptly on social media contributes to improved perceptions of corporate responsibility and trustworthiness. Airlines should prioritize social media engagement as a strategic tool for managing corporate reputation and fostering positive customer relationships. On the other hand, our current study focused on the evolving role of social media in public relations in East African countries.

Secondly, the study presented a methodological gap whereby, in their study on the relationship between social media engagement and corporate reputation in the airline industry; Yoon & Chung (2018) data was collected from social media platforms, along with customer surveys and sentiment analysis. Our current study involving role of social media in public relations in East African countries adopted a desk study research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The conclusion of an article on the evolving role of social media in public relations would typically summarize the main findings and insights discussed throughout the paper. It may also highlight the implications of these findings for both the fields of public relations and social media. The conclusion should tie together the various threads of the research and provide a coherent overview of the key takeaways. In this section, the authors might restate the purpose of the study, briefly recap the research methods used, and then succinctly present the major findings that were discussed in the main body of the article. They might emphasize the significance of these findings in the context of the changing landscape of public relations due to the advent of social media.

Recommendations

Firstly, PR practitioners are advised to stay updated with the latest trends and technologies in the ever-changing landscape of social media. This includes familiarizing themselves with emerging platforms and understanding their unique functionalities. Secondly, maintaining a consistent brand voice and messaging across various social media channels is highlighted as essential for building a coherent and recognizable brand image. Thirdly, the study suggests harnessing the power of data analytics to monitor and measure the impact of social media campaigns, enabling PR professionals to make informed decisions and refine their strategies.

Furthermore, the recommendations stress the significance of cultivating authentic and transparent interactions with the audience. Engaging in two-way communication, actively responding to comments, concerns, and feedback, and addressing negative sentiment are all deemed vital for maintaining credibility and trust in the digital realm. Finally, the study underscores the importance of crisis preparedness. PR teams are advised to develop comprehensive crisis communication plans

that integrate social media as a key component, ensuring a rapid and coordinated response during times of crisis.

In conclusion, "The Evolving Role of Social Media in Public Relations" acknowledges the transformative impact of social media on the PR landscape and advocates for a strategic and adaptable approach. By embracing the recommendations laid out in the study, PR professionals can harness the full potential of social media to effectively manage brand reputation, engage with audiences, and navigate the dynamic communication landscape of the digital age.

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