

Article

Status of social media public relations research: An analysis of recent developments and trends

Ran Ju^{1*}, Sandra Braun², Dat Huynhn³ and Sarah McCaffrey⁴

¹ Mount Royal University, Calgary, Canada; rju@mtroyal.ca

² Mount Royal University, Calgary, Canada; slbraun@mtroyal.ca

³ Mount Royal University, Calgary, Canada; dhuy953@mtroyal.ca

⁴ Mount Royal University, Calgary, Canada; smcca021@mtroyal.ca

* Correspondence: rju@mtroyal.ca

Abstract: This study examined the development of social media public relations research by analyzing 189 articles published between 2008 and 2018 from two leading academic public relations journals. It focused on research topics, research subjects, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and research perspectives. Key findings suggest a boom in production, a trend toward more theoretical rigor, a set of newly favored theories, a more balanced methodological approach, and a multi-perspective orientation on research in social media public relations research. The findings depict the status of social media public relations research to date and provide a macro-level understanding of social media public relations. They also inform possible future development of this line of research.

Keywords: public relations, social media, theory, content analysis, research method.

1. Introduction

As an online platform and concept, social media emerged as early as 1997 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, it was not until 2008 that social media spread rapidly to become a global phenomenon (LePage, 2013). In the same year, it became a major factor in the U.S. presidential campaign of Barack Obama and became recognized as a useful tool in public relations (McComb-Gray, 2017; Smith, 2009). With its growth and development in subsequent years, social media has transformed the field of public relations in theory, practice, and research (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Freberg, 2019). In practice, social media has become an integral component of the modern public relations industry (Brown et al., 2013), which poses opportunities and challenges to the profession. In research, it constitutes a new research subject and facilitates a new paradigm (Duhe, 2015; Huang et al., 2017; Kent & Li, 2019).

Scholars have paid considerable attention to identifying the impacts of social media on the field, and an array of related topics have been investigated. For example, Jin et al. (2014) explored crisis communication in social media and found that the origin of the crisis affected public preferences for both form and source of information, which affected public expectations of organizational response. Tsai and Men (2018) studied companies' communication strategies and public engagement on WeChat and recommended that companies should use the intimate design of social messages by developing more interpersonal orientated and one-on-one communication strategies to enhance the organization-public relationship. Sandlin and Gracyalny (2018) analyzed YouTube apology videos and viewer comments and reported that the public's perceptions of the sincerity of the apology played a key role in the public's attitude toward the organization and, therefore, their comments and feedback regarding the apology videos. Lovari and Parisi (2015) investigated Italian municipalities'

Facebook pages to study public engagement and communication with these administrations. This study proposed a new typology of digital publics and studied the correlation between Facebook activities and civic engagement (Lovari & Parisi, 2015).

Despite the proliferation and variation of research, there is a lack of a systematic understanding of the status of social media public relations research. Considering that social media has become a major research topic and constitutes a new research subject (Duhe, 2015; Huang et al., 2017; Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012), it is necessary to ask questions such as: What is the development of social media public relations research? Compared to other public relations research, are similar theoretical frameworks being used in this area? Are similar research methods being employed in exploring and analyzing social media public relations? And what are some themes and topics being explored that are unique to social media public relations?

To answer these questions, the current study examined the existing studies on the topic of social media public relations published in two academic PR journals (Public Relations Review and Journal of Public Relations Research) from 2008 to 2018. This study depicts the status of social media public relations research to date and provides a macro-level understanding of it. As a result, public relations practitioners can better understand social media's role, function, and effectiveness in the field and better use this tool. Also, scholars can gain updated insight into the body of knowledge that has been produced by prior studies and will be able to continue this scholarship with renewed understanding and focus.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: It starts with a literature review introducing the concept of social media public relations and reviews studies on the topics related to it. This review is followed by a method section outlining the procedure of content analysis, including sample selection, codebook construction and testing, as well as the coding process. Then, a results section provides our answers to our research questions, followed by a discussion based on the major findings. Last, this paper concludes with some limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Social Media Public Relations

Although social media has been a new subject of recent public relations research (Duhe, 2015; Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012), the answer to the fundamental question, "What is social media?" remains unclear. It is challenging to develop a clear-cut conceptualization of social media due to the rapid technological development and the various forms of communication enabled by social media (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Scholars provide different definitions. For example, Boyd and Ellison (2007) used the term social networks to describe them as web-based technologies that allow individuals to create profiles, to communicate with other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse other users' connections within the system. Kent (2010) defined social media as "any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback" (p. 645). Other scholars (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) used the term web 2.0 to differentiate social media from other online applications – where web 2.0 technologies allow users and developers to create online content in a collaborative and participatory manner. Despite variations in definitions of social media, scholars agree that social media has the following commonalities: (a) platforms are based on the web 2.0 application; (b) it has user-generated content; (c) individuals and groups can create user-specific profiles; and (d) it facilitates the development of social networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Building on such a conceptual strategy, this study defines social media public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its stakeholders through technologies sharing the four commonalities above and aims to analyze the status of research on this topic.

Three key “trend studies” exploring topics related to research in social media public relations are: (a) online public relations research (Ye & Ki, 2012), (b) digital public relations research (Huang et al., 2017), and (c) social media research in advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations (Khang et al., 2012). These studies provide the foundation for the development of the current research. All three employed a quantitative content analysis to examine research articles on relevant topics from different periods. Ye and Ki (2012) targeted research published from 1992-2009; Khang et al. (2012) conducted an analysis on articles published from 1997 to 2010; and Huang et al. (2017) focused on journal articles from 2008 to 2014. Despite the different time frames, all three studies acknowledge growing scholarly attention to the topic of social media public relations. Demonstrating the potential for such research, Huang et al. (2017) argued that 2008 marked the beginning of a stage of advancement for social media research in public relations. This trend of advancement was also manifested in Khang et al.’s (2012) observation that there had been a sharp increase in the number of published articles about social media research in public relations from 2009 to 2010. In regard to social media and the practice of public relations, from 2008 onward, many organizations created official social media accounts across various platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to gain access to and communicate with their stakeholders directly (Seo & Lee, 2016). Building on trends revealed in studies and noting the ubiquity of social media in practice, this study is set within the time frame of 2008 to 2018 and asks the following research question:

RQ1: What has been the trend in quantity of research for the development of social media public relations research in peer-reviewed journals over the last decade (2008-2018)?

Several common themes were found among the studies mentioned above. Theoretical and methodological rigor was a top concern. There was a noted increase in the application of theories and theoretical frameworks, compared to the results from the previous study on internet related communication research (Cho & Khang, 2006). The application rates of explicitly applying theoretical works in research calculated by each study are as follows: 44.3% for online public relations research from 1992 to 2009 (Ye & Ki, 2012), 53.2% for digital public relations research from 2008 to 2014 (Huang et al., 2017), and approximately 40% of social media research in marketing, communication, advertising, and public relations from 1997 to 2010 (Khang et al., 2012). This signals progress in digital public relations scholarship, which once was critiqued for having a lack of a theoretical framework (Cho & Khang, 2006). Studies also identified some of the most frequently used theories: uses and gratification theory, relationship management theory, agenda setting or framing theory, dialogical theory, and excellence theory (Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012). Regarding methodological approaches, results demonstrated a trend of quantitative dominance across the three studies, with survey and quantitative content analysis being the most frequently used methods. Facing these results, all three studies expressed concerns and called for a more balanced application of methods by integrating more qualitative methods in future studies.

In addition, these studies examined research topics and research subjects. Ye and Ki’s (2012) study on research in online public relations from 1992 to 2009 indicated that websites (60%), blogs (12.2%), and the Internet in general (11.3%) were the major focus and only a few studies have examined Facebook (2.6%) and other social media (1.7%). The most frequent research topics from articles in that time period were “Internet usage” (26.1%), “Internet and strategic issues” (18.3%), and “Internet values and effectiveness” (12.2%). According to results from Khang et al.’s (2012) study on research published between 1997 to 2010, “Social media usage, perceptions and attitude” (67.7%), “social media communication issues” (22.2%), and “social issues and political issues” (17.9%) were the prevalent topics; and the top four most frequently studied social media types were computer-mediated group communication (34.2%), blogs (16.3%), social network sites (11.7%), and forum/bulletin board systems (11.7%). Huang et al.’s (2017) analysis on research from 2008 to 2014 revealed that websites and Twitter (43.3% for each) were the most frequently examined platforms, followed by blogs (41.8%) and Facebook (36.2%).

To build on the cumulative results of these studies and to explore the status of social media public relations research exclusively, this study seeks to answer the following question:

RQ2: What has been the topical, theoretical, and methodological status of social media public relations research in peer-reviewed journals in the last decade (2008-2018)?

Research in social media public relations has its critics. One major critique was that it lacked information about the public's perception of social media. Scholars have pointed out that the majority of the social media research has focused on the organization's perspective to examine its own use of social media in modern public relations practice (Kent, 2014; Valentini, 2015); but little is known about how stakeholders and various publics value or experience the organization's use of social media for public relations purposes (Men & Tsai, 2013; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012; Valentini, 2015). Perceptions and experiences of publics/stakeholders are essential components of the public relations equation, especially considering the two-way communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) as a recommendation for excellent practices. Although organizations are the agents that use social media to initiate communication, it is equally important, if not more so, to understand the experience of the publics and stakeholders as part of the model to truly establish "mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics" (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 5). Therefore, this study also asks:

RQ3: Which perspectives have been considered in social media public relations research over the last decade?

3. Method

In order to answer these questions, this study conducted a content analysis on related research articles collected from two scholarly public relations journals from 2008 to 2018. The following explains the rationale behind the selection of these two journals and describes the data collection process.

Article Selection

This study examined peer-reviewed empirical studies addressing the topic of social media public relations and excluded editorials and book reviews. Relevant articles were chosen from two major SSCI listed public relations journals, the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review*, for two reasons. First of all, SSCI journals are generally considered to have long-established publication histories and are well represented at academic institutions (Huang et al., 2017; Zhang & Leung, 2015). In addition, these two journals were used as the major sources for article collection in many previous trend studies (Huang et al., 2017, Khang et al., 2012; Meadows & Meadows, 2014; Ye & Ki, 2012). Hence, by using similar sources for article collection, this study was able to compare the current research results with the previous trend studies to reveal the developments and changes.

For the first round of article collection, the keywords of 'social media', 'web 2.0', 'social networks', and 'SNS' were used to search and retrieve all related articles from these two journals from 2008 to 2018. For the second round of article collection, the keywords of 'Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, YouTube, Pinterest, Weibo, WeChat, Line, Tumblr, Viber, Vkontakte, and Blog' were employed to retrieve any relevant articles that may have been missed from the first round of collection. After these two rounds of search, a total of 257 articles were downloaded. All of the downloaded articles were manually checked, and duplicates or irrelevant articles were deleted. As a result, a sample of 189 original empirical articles was produced, with 24 articles from the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and 165 from *Public Relations Review*.

Measures

Each article was coded based on a codebook that consists of three parts. The first part of the codebook was basic information, including the name of the journal, publication year, and the locality of the study. The second part was research information including platform studied, topical area, theoretical framework, and research method(s). The third part examined research perspective, which referred to the perspective from which this study was conducted. Specific measures in parts two and three of the codebook are as follows:

Social Media Platform

Each article was coded based on which social media platform(s) it focused on. Categories were developed inductively as the analysis proceeded. Ultimately, thirteen categories of social media platforms were developed: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, WeChat, Weibo, blogs, social media in general, multiple social mediums, and other. 'Social media in general' was used to categorize articles that did not focus on any specific social media platform but, rather, examined social media in general as a comprehensive phenomenon. 'Multiple social mediums' was used to categorize articles that examined more than one platform, for example, Facebook and Twitter. 'Other' was used for articles that focused on any other social media platform beyond the choices provided.

Topical Area

Categories of topical areas were also developed inductively as the analysis proceeded. Firstly, detailed topical categories were compiled and discussed. Then, these categories were subsumed or collapsed. At last, categories were consolidated into broader groups. As a result, fifteen categories were established (see Table 1 in Results). In the case of an article that covered dual or multiple topical categories, codes were assigned according to the article's primary topic. For example, if one study discussed how to use social media to increase engagement during an organizational crisis, the article was coded as covering the topic of crisis communication, since the main context is primarily about crisis, and secondarily about engagement.

Theoretical Framework

Each paper was coded by presence or absence of a theoretical framework. The scope of theoretical framework here referred to middle-range theory (Merton, 1968; Rogers & Svenning, 1969), which is able to introduce hypotheses or research questions. This choice was made to align the current study with previous ones (Khang et al., 2012; Ye & Ki, 2012), so that the results could be compared more directly, and also to possibly inform the question of the development of theoretical application in research in this context. The presence of hypotheses or research questions was a key factor to determine if an article employed a theoretical framework (Khang et al., 2012). If a specific theory was identified, the name of the theory was coded.

Research method

Research method was coded at two levels. The first level identified if the study employed a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed approach. The second level identified the specific research method(s) such as experiments, surveys, content analysis, or interviews.

Research Perspective

Four categories address this question, which referred to the perspective from which this study was conducted: the public, the organization/agency, both (public and organization/agency), or the practitioners/professionals.

Intercoder Reliability

All four authors served as coders. Four training sessions were held to train the team to fully understand the questions and categories in the codebook. Then, 20 articles, 10% of the total articles, were selected to perform the inter-coder reliability test. Using Cohen's kappa, intercoder reliability was 1.0 for part one, basic information; 0.82 to 0.93 for part two, research information; and 0.88 for part three, research perspective. The overall intercoder agreement for the codebook was 0.90, which was considered acceptable (Stemler, 2001).

4. Results

Development of Social Media Public Relations Research

The first research question seeks to identify the trend of scholarly studies in the last decade, including publication year and country of the study. As indicated in Figure 1, the volume of social media public relations research has gradually increased between 2008 and 2018. The years 2013, 2015, and 2017, particularly, have produced the greatest number of relevant articles. More than half of the articles were published after 2014.

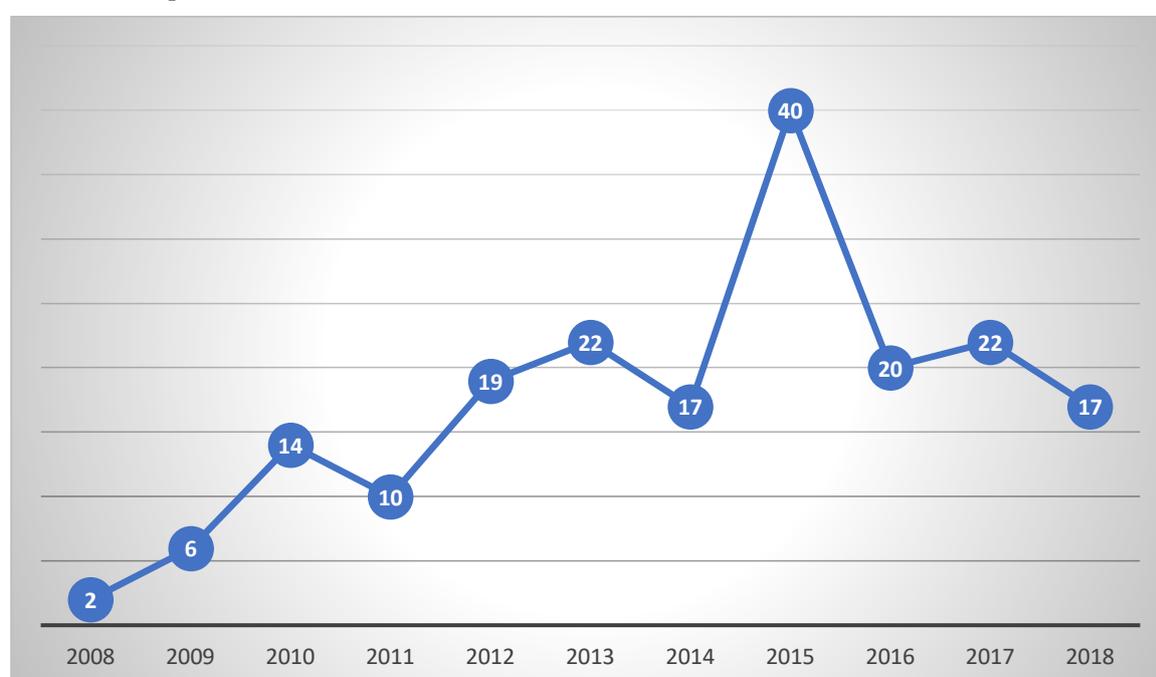


Figure 1. Number of published articles each year from 2008 to 2018

With regard to country, journal articles published in the last decade have covered a variety of geographic locations, including the United States, China, Turkey, Germany, South Korea, New Zealand, the UK, and more. Of the 189 articles studied, most ($n=136$, 72%) focused on a single-country context; 30 of them (15.9%) examined social media public relations in an international setting meaning more than one country was included in the analysis; and twenty-three (12.2%) of the articles did not provide or have a specific geographic location for their analysis. Among the 136 articles that examined social media public relations in a single-country setting, the majority of them ($n=91$, 46.3%) were conducted in the United States, followed by China ($n=7$, 3.7%), Turkey ($n=6$, 3.2%), and Germany ($n=4$, 2.1%).

Research Information

The second research question asks about the topical, theoretical, and methodological status of social media public relations research. The first sub-question examined what social media platforms

were studied in the research. The results indicated that 41.7% (n=76) of the articles examined the phenomenon of social media in general, and 50.2% (n=95) examined a single social media platform. Among those studies that selected a single social media platform, Twitter was the most-frequently studied platform (n=44, 23.2%), followed by Facebook (n=32, 16.8%). This trend is consistent with the most recent trend study (Huang et al., 2017), which indicated that Twitter and Facebook platforms received the most scholarly attention. There were 18 articles (9.5%) that examined multiple platforms, and the most frequently studied combination was Facebook and Twitter. Notably, none of the articles in this study examined platforms of Instagram, Snapchat, or LinkedIn, indicating that the social media sphere has not been fully explored over the last ten years, at least, in articles published in these two leading journals. With regard to topical areas studied, the four most frequently studied topics were: social media and crisis communication (n=43, 22.8%); social media and engagement/dialogue/organization-public relationship (OPR) (n=35, 18.5%); practitioners' general use and perceptions of social media (n=23, 12.1%); and the general use of social media by organizations/individuals (politicians or celebrities) (n=17, 9.0%). Please see Table 1 for detailed results on research topics.

Table 1. Number of articles in each topical area

Topical Area	Number of articles	Percentage
Crisis communication	43	22.8%
Engagement/Dialogical communication/OPR	35	18.5%
Practitioners' perception and use	23	12.2%
Organizations' perception and use	17	9.0%
Public's perception and use	16	8.5%
Leader and leadership	10	5.3%
Advocacy	8	4.2%
Public relations and journalism/media/advertising	6	3.2%
Organizational image and reputation	6	3.2%
Other topics	5	2.6%
Public relations campaign	5	2.6%
Internal public relations	5	2.6%
Corporate social responsibilities	5	2.6%
Public relations research	3	1.6%
Laws and regulations	2	1.1%

Regarding the theoretical framework application in social media public relations, 101 (53.4%) of the 189 articles employed one or more theoretical frameworks. This percentage is consistent with a previous trend study (Huang et al., 2017), and is higher than the results of Khang et al's (2012) and Ye and Ki's (2012) studies, implying a focus on theorization in this line of inquiry. The most frequently used theory was dialogical theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) (n=18, 9.5 %) and the second most frequently applied theory was situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) (n=16, 8.4%), followed by agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) (n=4, 2.1%), relational theory (Bruning, 2000; Ferguson, 1984) (n=4, 2.1%), and the social-mediated crisis communication model (Austin et al., 2012; Jin et al., 2014) (n=4, 2.1%). The popularity of dialogical theory and the social-mediated crisis communication model seem logical for conducting social media public relations research, since these two theories specifically focus on an online and social media context. Importantly, a certain amount of studies employed theories from diverse disciplines, such as communication, psychology, marketing, and many others. Some sample theories were: the theory of planned behavior (Kinsky et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2010; n=2, 1.1%) from psychology, use and gratification theory (Krishna & Kim,

2015; Woo, An, & Cho, 2008; n=3, 1.6%) from mass communication, and diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2010; n=2, 1.1%) from communication studies.

Various research methods were employed in the studies. More than half (64.8%) of the research used quantitative methods, including content analysis (n=61, 32.3%), survey (n=41, 21.7%), experiment (n=16, 8.5%), and network analysis (n=3, 1.6%). Less than one-third of the studies (26.3%) used qualitative research methods, with interview (n=15, 7.9%) being the most frequently used, followed by qualitative content analysis (n=11, 5.8%), and case studies (n=10, 5.3%). Although this result indicates that quantitative methods still dominated social media public relations research in the last decade, a slow shift away from quantitative dominance was observed, considering the quantitative methods usage rates reported in previous studies were 82.4% (Khang et al., 2012), 71.3% (Ye & Ki, 2012), and 68.1% (Huang et al., 2017). In addition, two advancements in methodology of social media public relations research were noted from the results. First, a number of studies used a mixed-method approach (n=17, 9.0%), indicating an advancement in methodological consideration toward a more sophisticated and comprehensive research design. Secondly, a small portion of the studies employed more advanced research methods such as computer-aided content analysis and an automation program in Python, signaling that computer-technology-aided methods are gradually being incorporated into this line of inquiry.

Research Perspectives

The third research question sought to identify which perspective was the focus of social media public relations research in the last decade. According to the analysis, three main perspectives (the general public, the organization/agency, and the practitioner) were relatively evenly distributed among the 189 articles. Sixty-six (34.9%) articles examined social media public relations from the public's perspective, 54 articles (28.6%) focused on the perspective of the organization/agency, and 48 (25.4%) articles were from the practitioners' perspective. Compared to previous results, which indicated dominance of the organization's perspective (Huang et al., 2017), these results suggest a multi-perspective orientation in social media public relations research, one that seeks to understand how publics, organizations/agencies, and public relations practitioners value or experience the use of social media for public relations purposes. This may be a reflection of an increasing recognition of the critical interplay among publics, organization/agency, and public relations practitioners, suggesting how social media is made efficacious for public relations purposes.

Another characteristic of this multi-perspective orientation was that some of the articles (n=21, 11.1%) incorporated perspectives of both the organization/agency and public simultaneously. These studies examined how social media was used by the organization for public relations purposes and how stakeholders perceived such usage, truly embracing the two-way communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) in research and capturing the dialogic nature of the medium (Kent & Li, 2019).

5. Discussion

This study examines the development of social media public relations research in the past 10 years by analyzing 189 articles published in two leading public relations academic journals between 2008 and 2018. Special attention was paid to the development, research topics, theoretical and methodological approaches, and perspectives of these featured studies. The following section unpacks the implications of the research findings.

Booming Stage, Internationalization, and Research Topics

The analysis of the development of these studies indicates a continuously increasing trend in the number of social media public relations studies, confirming the predictions from previous studies

(Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012) that the advent of social media has gradually facilitated the formation of a new paradigm (Huang et al., 2017; Kent & Li, 2019). The quantity of the relevant studies analyzed in this project indicates there has, indeed, been much development and growth in this area. One noteworthy finding involved that more than half of the examined articles were published in 2014 to 2018, coinciding with the argument made by previous studies (Duhé, 2015; Huang et al., 2017) that 2014 was the end of the advancement stage of digital public relations research. Hence, this study argues that 2015 signifies the beginning of a new stage of social media public relations research: a booming stage. The characteristic of this new stage is the high number of social media public relations studies published in public relations literature, compared to the number of similar studies published before 2015. This stage attests to the continuously increasing scholarly attention on this research topic.

The analysis also identified a trend of internationalization in social media public relations research. The locality of research has included a variety of countries across the six continents: North America, South America, Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania. In addition, 15.9% of the articles examined social media public relations in an international context that compared issues across national settings. Although a large number of the articles were contextualized in the United States, the emergence of articles exploring social media public relations in other countries, such as the UK, France, Italy, China, South Korea, Kuwait, Israel, and Turkey, demonstrates that social media public relations research has started to respond to the scholarly call for an international research agenda for public relations (Grunig, 2009; Rittenhofer & Valentini, 2015), and confirms that social media public relations is a global phenomenon.

Different topics were addressed in social media public relations research and among these topics, the most popular ones reflected the nature of social media. Crisis communication was the most often discussed topic. This prevalence was probably due to the challenges that social media poses to the public relations industry in crisis communications (Liu et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2018). Engagement/dialogue/OPR was the second most often studied topic. Social media has been praised for its ability to build relationships and facilitate dialogue and engagement (Kent & Li, 2019; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012); hence, it is natural that scholars would explore corresponding topics of dialogue, engagement, and OPR. This finding also confirms Ye and Ki's (2012) assertion that social network studies have expanded the focus beyond organizations to interactions between organizations and their publics. Practitioners' general use and perception of social media was the third most popular topic. Even though social media is already part of public relations practices, practitioners still have questions and concerns and continuously seek information about using social media for public relations (DiStaso et al., 2011); therefore, academics devote time to exploring many areas related to how to use social media in public relations.

New Favored Theories and Interdisciplinary Theoretical Orientation

Analysis on theoretical framework applications finds more studies in social media public relations employ explicit theoretical frameworks. In contrast to the results from earlier trend studies (Khang et al., 2012; Ye & Ki, 2012) which indicated a low level (below 45%) of theoretical application,

results from this study present a higher application rate of 53.2%, revealing a trend toward theoretical rigor that coincides with the result from a recent trend study (Huang et al., 2017).

The findings also present a set of newly favored theories in social media public relations research. The most frequently used theory in social media public relations studies was dialogical theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998), overtaking excellence theory in public relations research in general (Huang et al., 2017; Pasadeos et al., 2010) and in Internet-related public relations research (Ye & Ki, 2012). The dialogical theory was proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998) and specifically focuses on the online communication context, so it is logical that this theory was used most often to explore the social media sphere. In addition, the social-mediated crisis communication model (Jin et al., 2014), a relatively new framework that specifically focuses on crisis situations in social media, emerged as one of the top five most used theoretical frameworks. This finding is encouraging, as it indicates that scholars are using new concepts and theories to understand novel aspects of social media, those that cannot be well explained with established theories, responding to the call from Khang et al (2012).

Another trend observed through the analysis was an interdisciplinary perspective on theoretical framework application. A number of studies employed theories from other disciplines such as psychology (social presence theory; Ruggiero, 2000); sociology (role theory; Dozier & Broom, 1995); mass media communication (use and gratification; Windahl, 1981), and communication studies (diffusion and innovation theory; Rogers, 2010). The use of theories from other disciplines may be explained by the fact that the areas of public relations and social media are interrelated but distinct. While both areas emphasize relationship, interaction, and conversation, social media has unique aspects of technology components and strategic management, including the right timing, platform, and circumstance for sending messages (Freberg, 2019). These distinct features require theories from other fields to lead exploration. Hence, social media public relations research has extended boundaries for research, allowing more opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, and suggest a unique interdisciplinary perspective on theoretical framework applications. Together, the new theories and interdisciplinary orientation in these studies indicate a new paradigm.

A More Balanced Methodological Approach and New Methods

In terms of methods used in social media public relations research, although quantitative research methods remained dominant (64.8%), this application rate is much lower than rates from previous studies: 82.4% (Khang et al., 2012), 71.3% (Ye & Ki, 2012), and 68.1% (Huang et al., 2017). In addition, it found that an increasing number of studies used a mixed-method approach (n=17, 8.9%) that mainly combined quantitative and qualitative methods. These findings suggest that scholars interested in this research subject are gradually shifting away from the quantitative-dominant paradigm and have answered the call for a more balanced method of application by integrating more qualitative methods (Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012; Ye & Ki, 2012).

Content analysis, including both quantitative and qualitative analysis, was the most frequently used method in the sample studies. This choice is logical considering textual data from social media is the most prevalent and easiest to obtain. In addition, social media public relations research provides content analysis with a new application. Although this method was once criticized for providing little information about users' perceptions (Ye & Ki, 2012), it is used to explore users'

reactions with organization messages and public relations activities by analyzing users' comments or other interactive data. This new application provides information about users' perception, creating a new use of the method.

Scholars have argued that the methodology should change when exploring a new or different research subject (Cappella, 2017; Huang et al., 2017). It is the case in social media public relations research. The analysis reveals that a portion of the studies have started to incorporate new research methods and new data collection methods, including a computer-aided content analysis (De Moya & Jain, 2013) and automation program in Python (Zhao et al., 2018). The current study predicts that new methodologies will continuously be developed and incorporated into this field of inquiry.

Multi-Perspective Orientation in Publics and Organizations

Analyzing research perspectives, this study found that social media public relations research over the past ten years has shifted from a dominance of the organization perspective, implying a possible paradigm shift (Kuhn, 2012). This study found that the number of articles that examined social media public relations from the public perspective has exceeded the number that focused on the organization/agency perspective. Additionally, a portion of research has incorporated both perspectives to provide a fuller understanding of the issues with social media public relations.

Public relations research has long been criticized for its hyper-focus on the organization and agency perspective, while neglecting the public perspective (Huang et al., 2017; Kent, 2014; Valentini, 2015). Our findings suggest a shift of such a perspective, documenting that scholars have integrated the public perspective into the equation. This perspective shift may be due to social media's unique feature of interactivity (Kent & Li, 2019). Social media enables user-generated content and two-way communication; thus, data of the public has become increasingly available from such functions as 'like', 'repost', and 'comment' on various platforms, encouraging examination by researchers. Hence, this study argues that the multi-perspective orientation is a feature that characterizes social media public relations research.

Future Directions for Social Media Public Relations Research

The findings also suggest some future directions for social media public relations. First of all, several new areas of study have emerged from the analysis. There was a rise in articles on emerging topics (Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012; Ye & Ki, 2012). These topics warrant scholarly attention: social media influencers, internal public relations and social media, and laws and regulations of social media in public relations. These topics suggest possible future directions for scholars to explore as important, yet understudied, areas of study (Duhe, 2015).

Secondly, findings indicate that the social media sphere was not fully explored in articles published in these two journals. There was no examination and analysis of Snapshot, Instagram, and LinkedIn and future research should expand to these platforms to gain a comprehensive understanding of social media. Methodological limitations might explain why these platforms were not examined. For Snapchat and Instagram, the major form of communication is visual. Without a rigorous methodology for analyzing visual communication, it is hard for researchers to study these

platforms in a scientific way. Hence, not only is a broader examination needed, further development with respect to methods and research design should include visual communication as well.

Finally, although dialogical theory and the social-mediated crisis communication model have gained popularity among studies, most studies still use existing frameworks to understand social media public relations. This phenomenon fits one of the phases in the paradigm shift process: anomalies (such as social media) are often incorporated into the old paradigm (Kuhn, 2012). In order to facilitate the development of social media as a novel research subject in public relations, new theories and concepts are still needed to address its unique aspects, such as narrowcasting or user-generated content (Cappella et al., 2015).

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study offers insight into the status of social media public relations research in the last decade. It is based on the findings and conclusions of studies in two journals. Research results suggest that: a) social media public relations research has entered a booming stage since 2015; b) studies published between 2008 and 2018 trended toward more theoretical rigor, had a new set of favored theories, and used a more balanced methodological approach; and c) those studied have used a multi-perspective research orientation. Because of the selection criteria, this study does not purport to be comprehensive or conclusive. It seeks to open a conversation on social media public relations research regarding what has been done in the past and what can be done in the future.

The following limitations of this study should be noted. First, it solicited articles from only two academic journals. Although this was done to be consistent with prior trend studies (Huang et al., 2017; Khang et al., 2012; Meadows & Meadows, 2014), it may limit the quantity and quality of relevant articles. It is noted that public relations scholars increasingly publish in and consult different communication journals. Publications from other communication journals also might be more experimental, theoretical, and critically informed, providing different perspectives on the status of social media public relations research. Future research should consider expanding the data pool to include articles from other academic journals. Secondly, the sample was limited to academic peer-reviewed articles, which may exclude relevant information from the industry. Future studies should consider trade articles to cover information from both academia and industry to better address the opportunities and challenges social media has brought to public relations and its research. Thirdly, the study employed manual content analysis conducted by researchers and their assistants. With the development of technology, software-aided content analysis is available. Such a method can analyze a much larger database. Future studies are encouraged to incorporate such technology into analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media public relations research.

Funding: This work was supported by the Internal Research Grants Fund Award [Award Reference: 101552] of Mount Royal University.

References

- Allagui, I., & Breslow, H. (2016). Social media for public relations: Lessons from four effective cases. *Public Relations Review*, 42(1), 20-30.
- Austin, L., Fisher Liu, B., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188-207.
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230.
- Broom, G. M., & Sha, B. L. (2013). *Cutlip and Center's effective public relations*. London: Pearson Education.
- Brown, B., Sikes, J., & Willmott, P. (2013). Bullish on digital: McKinsey survey results. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/bullish-on-digital-mckinsey-global-survey-results>
- Bruning, S. D. (2000). Examining the role that personal, professional, and community relationships play in respondent relationship recognition and intended behavior. *Communication Quarterly*, 48, 437-448.
- Cappella, J. N. (2017). Vectors into the future of mass and interpersonal communication research: Big data, social media, and computational social science. *Human Communication Research*, 43(4), 545-558.
- Cappella, J. N., Kim, H. S., & Albarracín, D. (2015). Selection and transmission processes information in the emerging media environment: Psychological motives and message characteristics. *Media Psychology*, 18(3), 396-424.
- Cho, C. H., & Khang, H. (2006). The state of internet-related research in communications, marketing, and advertising: 1994-2003. *Journal of Advertising*, 35(3), 143-163.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.
- Cormode, G., & Krishnamurthy, B. (2008). Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. *First Monday*, 13(6). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v13i6.2125>
- De Moya, M., & Jain, R. (2013). When tourists are your "friends": Exploring the brand personality of Mexico and Brazil on Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 39(1), 23-29.
- DiStaso, M. W., McCorkindale, T., & Wright, D. K. (2011). How public relations executives perceive and measure the impact of social media in their organizations. *Public Relations Review*, 37(3), 325-328.
- Dozier, D. M., & Broom, G. M. (1995). Evolution of the manager role in public relations practice. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7(1), 3-26.
- Duhé, S. (2015). An overview of new media research in public relations journals from 1981 to 2014. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 153-169.
- Ferguson, M. A. (1984, August). Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships [Conference Presentation]. Annual Meeting of Association for Education in Journalism, Gainesville, FL.
- Freberg, K. (2019). Social media and emerging media: Theoretical foundations. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *Public relations theory: Application and understanding* (pp. 97-112). John Wiley & Sons.

- Grunig, J. E. (2009). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation. *PRism*, 6(2), 1-19.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Huang, Y. H. C., Wu, F., & Huang, Q. (2017). Does research on digital public relations indicate a paradigm shift? An analysis and critique of recent trends. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(7), 1364-1376.
- Jin, Y., Liu, B. F., & Austin, L. L. (2014). Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management: The effects of crisis origin, information form, and source on publics' crisis responses. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 74-94.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Kent, M. L. (2010). Directions in social media for professionals and scholars. In R. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (2nd ed., pp. 643-656). Sage.
- Kent, M. L. (2014). Rethinking technology research and social media. *Public Relations Review*, 40(1), 1-2.
- Kent, M. L., & Li, C. (2019). Toward a normative social media theory for public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 46(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101857>
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), 321-334.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 21-37.
- Khang, H., Ki, E., & Ye, L. (2012). Social media research in advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(2), 279-298.
- Kinsky, E. S., Drumheller, K., Gerlich, R. N., Brock-Baskin, M. E., & Sollosy, M. (2015). The effect of socially mediated public relations crises on planned behavior: How TPB can help both corporations and nonprofits. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 27(2), 136-157. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2014.97682
- Krishna, A., & Kim, S. (2015). Confessions of an angry employee: The dark side of de-identified "confessions" on Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 41(3), 404-410.
- Kuhn, T. S. (2012). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (50th ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Lee, H., Park, S. A., Lee, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2010). Assessment of motion media on believability and credibility: An exploratory study. *Public Relations Review*, 36(3), 310-312.
- LePage, E. (2013). The evolution of social media (2008-2013): An infographic. <http://blog.hootsuite.com/evolution-of-social-media-infographic/>
- Liu, B. F., Austin, L., & Jin, Y. (2011). How publics respond to crisis communication strategies: The interplay of information form and source. *Public Relations Review*, 37(4), 345-353.
- Lovari, A., & Parisi, L. (2015). Listening to digital publics. Investigating citizens' voices and engagement within Italian municipalities' Facebook pages. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 205-213.
- Lovejoy, K., & Saxton, G. D. (2012). Information, community, and action: How nonprofit organizations use social media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 337-353.

- McComb-Gray, D. (2017). Social media on the campaign trail: Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Content Group. <https://contentgroup.com.au/2017/09/social-media-campaign-trail-obama-trump/>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of Communication*, 43(2), 58-67.
- Meadows, C., & Meadows, C. W., III. (2014). The history of academic research in public relations: Tracking research trends over nearly four decades. *Public Relations Review*, 40(5), 871-873.
- Men, L. R., & Tsai, W. H. S. (2013). Beyond liking or following: Understanding public engagement on social networking sites in China. *Public Relations Review*, 39(1), 13-22.
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social theory and social construction*. Free Press.
- Obar, J. A., & Wildman, S. S. (2015). Social media definition and the governance challenge: An introduction to the special issue. *Telecommunications Policy*, 39(9), 745-750.
- Pasadeos, Y., Berger, B., & Renfro, R. B. (2010). Public relations as a maturing discipline: An update on research networks. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22, 136-158.
- Rittenhofer, I., & Valentini, C. (2015). A "practice turn" for global public relations: An alternative approach. *Journal of Communication Management*, 19(1), 2-19.
- Rogers, E. M. (2010). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). The Free Press.
- Rogers, E. M., & Svenning, L. (1969). *Modernization among peasants: The impact of communication*. Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3(1), 3-37.
- Sandlin, J. K., & Gracyalny, M. L. (2018). Seeking sincerity, finding forgiveness: YouTube apologies as image repair. *Public Relations Review*, 44(3), 393-406.
- Seo, D., & Lee, J. (2016). Web 2.0 and five years since: How the combination of technological and organizational initiatives influences an organization's web 2.0 performance. *Telematics Inform*, 33(1), 232-246.
- Smith, A. (2009). The Internet's role in campaign 2008. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/>
- Stemler, S. (2001). An overview of content analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 7(17), 137-146.
- Tsai, W. H. S., & Men, R. L. (2018). Social messengers as the new frontier of organization-public engagement: A WeChat study. *Public Relations Review*, 44(3), 419-429.
- Valentini, C. (2015). Is using social media "good" for the public relations profession? A critical reflection. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 170-177.
- Valentini, C., & Kruckeberg, D. (2012). New media versus social media: A conceptualization of their meanings, uses, and implications for public relations. In S. Duhe (Ed.). *New media and public relations* (pp. 3-12). Peter Lang.
- Windahl, S. (1981). Use and gratification at the crossroads. In G.C. Wilhoit & H. deBock (Eds.), *Mass communication review year book* (pp. 174-185). Sage.
- Woo, C. W., An, S. K., & Cho, S. H. (2008). Sports PR in message boards on Major League baseball websites. *Public Relations Review*, 34(2), 169-175.
- Ye, L., & Ki, E. J. (2012). The status of online public relations research: An analysis of published articles in 1992-2009. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(5), 409-434.

- Zhang, Y., & Leung, L. (2015). A review of social networking service (SNS) research in communication journals from 2006 to 2011. *New Media & Society, 17*(7), 1007-1024.
- Zhao, X., Zhan, M., & Jie, C. (2018). Examining multiplicity and dynamics of publics' crisis narratives with large-scale Twitter data. *Public Relations Review, 44*(4), 619-632.
- Zhao, X., Zhan, M., & Liu, B. (2018). Disentangling social media influence in crises: Testing a four-factor model of social media influence with big data. *Public Relations Review, 44*(4), 549-561.



© 2021 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).