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Research in Brief

Social media use, perceptions of decision-making power, and public relations roles

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Public relations practitioners in this study who were more frequent users of social network sites and social media tools reported greater perceptions of their own structural, expert and prestige power. Forty of 115 members of a PRSA chapter responded to the survey request. In terms of day-to-day practice, the sample matched national samples of practitioners, with manager and technician questionnaire items loading on the exact same factors as in prior studies. However, those enacting predominantly manager roles did not differ significantly from those enacting predominately technician roles in social media use. This study points to the need for future research to examine more closely the use of social media in the daily roles of public relations practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Sallot, Porter, and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) found that public relations practitioners perceive that use of the World Wide Web has empowered them to enhance their roles – as managers or technicians (Dozier, 1992) – and elevate their status in organizations. Although prior research has examined how public relations practitioners use the Web and blogs for power, the current study focuses specifically on whether participation in social network sites and adoption of social media tools is associated with public relations practitioners' perceptions of their power within their organizations.

2. Decision-making power

Finkelstein (1992) defines power as "the capacity of individual actors to exert their will" (p. 506). He further conceptualizes four types of decision-making power: *structural power* encompasses a manager's formal position within an organization, such as level and number of titles and compensation; *ownership power* encompasses shareholdings within the organization and relationships with the top management team; *expert power* is based on the contacts and relationships managers develop within the environment that make others turn to them for advice on strategic decisions; and *prestige power* is a form of personal prestige or status through powerful friends and/or privileged backgrounds.

Thomsen (1995) reported that practitioners use the Web to gain information, which can increase their expertise and structural power. Sallot et al. (2004) found that practitioners who use the Web to manage their clients' issues improve their reputation with their client, which enhances their prestige power. Web expertise also may empower practitioners to own their own firms or consulting practices (Sallot et al., 2004). Public relations practitioners also seek industry leadership by using emerging tools such as blogs to target publics more effectively (Porter, Trammel, Chung, & Kim, 2007).

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3. Public relations roles

Dozier (1992) summarized manager and technician roles. "Managers make policy decisions and are held accountable for public relations program outcomes. They view themselves and are viewed by others in the organization as communications and public relations experts." (p. 333). In contrast, technicians carry out the "mechanics of generating communication products that implement policy decisions by others" (p. 333). Researchers have maintained that to be effective, the public relations function must maintain membership in the dominant coalition of organizations (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992). Acceptance into the dominant coalition indicates manager-level role attainment and power within an organization.

4. Social network sites, public relations roles and power

On one hand, technicians are likely to spend more time writing and reading materials than managers (Dozier & Broom, 2006). If so it may follow that technicians may be the ones handling the social media. On the other hand, since the Web provides many opportunities for issues management, relationship management, and environmental scanning, and these functions are more often associated with manager roles, managers may spend more time using social network sites and tools than technicians.

5. Hypotheses and research question

Hypotheses 1–3. Practitioners who use social network sites and social media tools more frequently will perceive they have greater structural power (H1), expert power (H2), and prestige power (H3) within their organizations than practitioners who use social network sites less frequently.

Hypothesis 4. Owner–practitioners use social network sites and tools more frequently than practitioners who are not owners.

Research question. Which type of public relations practitioner (predominantly manager or predominantly technician) uses social network sites and tools more?

6. Methods

The sample for this research consisted of 115 members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Hawaii chapter. E-mail invitations to participate were sent to the entire chapter membership by the communication director in January and February 2009. The invitation included a link to a SurveyMonkey survey instrument.

The first section of the survey included a 5-point scale that asked respondents to indicate how often they use social network sites and tools in their profession and a checklist of 34 social media tools used by public relations practitioners. In the second section of the survey, organizational power questions were put forth, as adapted from Porter and colleagues (Porter & Sallot, 2005; Porter et al., 2007). In the third section, respondents were asked manager and technician questions. The results of the confirmatory factory analysis of roles were consistent with prior research, with each item loading on the same role factor as it had in the prior three studies reported in 1979, 1991 and 2001 (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Kelleher, 2001). The last section included general demographic questions.

7. Findings

Sample. The response rate was 34.8% ($n = 40$). Thirty participants (75%) were females and 10 (25%) were males. Of those who provided their age ($n = 38$) the mean was 37.15 years.

Use of social network sites and tools. As expected, those participants categorized as more frequent users of social network sites (those who reported using social media tools and sites "a few times a week" or "all the time") reported trying a greater number of social media sites and tools than those who were less frequent users ("at no time, "about once a month," or "a few times a month"). More frequent users reported having used a mean of 12.55 ($SD = 3.64$, $n = 17$) social media tools and sites from the checklist compared to 6.18 ($SD = 3.64$, $n = 22$) for less frequent users, $t(37) = -4.03$, $p \leq .001$.

Hypothesis 1. The mean score for perceived structural power reported by practitioners who used social network sites and tools more frequently ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .89$, $n = 22$) was significantly greater than practitioners who reported using social network sites less frequently ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .90$, $n = 17$), $t(37) = -2.8$, $p \leq .01$.

Hypothesis 2. The mean score for perceived expert power of practitioners who used social network sites and tools more frequently ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.231$, $n = 22$) was significantly greater than practitioners who used social network sites less frequently ($M = 2.53$, $SD = .80$, $n = 17$), $t(37) = -3.1$, $p \leq .01$.

Hypothesis 3. The mean score for perceived prestige power of practitioners who used social network sites and tools more frequently ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.19$, $n = 22$) was significantly greater than practitioners who used social network sites less frequently ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .66$, $n = 17$), $t(37) = -2.7$, $p \leq .01$.

Hypothesis 4. Only three respondents reported owning or founding their organization. None responded, "social network sites and tools empowered me to own my own company."

Research question. There was no significant relationship between the manager–technician role and frequency of use of social network sites and tools, X^2 (1, n = 36) = .013, $p \leq$ .91.

8. Discussion

Structural power. Practitioners who frequently used social network sites were more likely to report feeling empowered to be promoted into their current positions. The information they gain from using social network sites may be used as a strategic tool, which can empower them to advance within organizations.

Expert power. By understanding how social network sites work, practitioners may determine what information is relevant to their clients and organizations and how they can use these sites to listen to and engage with publics. Since social network sites offer news, information, and story ideas, practitioners also may use them as a media relations resource, which can increase their perceived expertise.

Prestige power. Results were strongest for prestige power, which is a form of personal prestige or status through powerful friends and/or privileged backgrounds (Finkelstein, 1992). Practitioners who use social network sites may be more likely to perceive their prestige as enhanced by having influential "followers" or "friends" through sites such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*, respectively. Engaging in relationships through social network sites can build a practitioner's social capital, which may then boost status or prestige.

9. Managers and technicians and social network sites

There were no significant differences found in social network use between those primarily performing public relations manager and technician roles. Since social network sites are still quite new to everyday public relations practice, many among both managers and technicians are beginning to learn how to adopt it into their practice. Converged social definitions (Markus, 1994) are still evolving.

10. Limitations and conclusion

Although the data revealed clear similarities to national samples in day-to-day roles as conceptualized in prior literature, members of this sample may differ from other public relations practitioners in other professional organizations or those with no professional affiliation.

Finkelstein's (1992) power measures were gauged with only a single question to measure each concept. Multi-item scales for each dimension of power could improve the validity and reliability of the measures.

Clearly, the findings suggest a relationship between social network use and power. This corroborates Porter and Sallot's (2005) findings that public relations practitioners perceive that Web use in general has enhanced their power in their organizations.

As Dozier and Broom (2006) have noted, the evolution of the role set used to identify managers and technicians "may need constant reinvention through intensive observation of what communicators do in their day-to-day work" (p. 146). Intensive observation of the roles of public relations practitioners should indeed now include use of social network sites and social media tools.

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