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THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF ONLINE PR ACTIVITIES BY PR PRACTITIONERS IN JORDANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The growing significance of public relations (PR) within higher education institutions can be attributed to the utilization of new digital media technology, which facilitates engagement and provides timely accessibility to content. The purpose of this study was to investigate how public relations practitioners in Jordanian universities conceived of online PR. To do so, twenty-two PR managers were interviewed in-depth and face-to-face using a purposive sample technique. The data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software for content analysis via a thematic analysis technique. Thus, public relations professionals classified online public relations into two categories. The first group encompassed a modern technology revolution that reached. The second group comprised effective, interactive, fast, easy, and sustainable tools. One primary finding was that decision-makers should provide educational courses about social media to PR practitioners on an ongoing basis to deepen their understanding of the social media concept and the importance of its role in PR work.

Keywords: Activities, Conceptualisation, Jordan, Online Public Relations, University

1. Introduction

Organizational members frequently take an extended period to comprehend, accept, and apply any new concept (Arabi & Mansur, 2006). It is still important to understand how important audiences receive and distribute information so that you may impact them when it matters most. This is true even in the online era of public relations. To accomplish this, one must comprehend the theories and tactics underlying modern technology (Alyaqoub et al., 2019). To properly consider social and relational issues, PR practitioners, according to Kent and Saffer (2014), must have a broad awareness of emerging technology and its applications rather than limiting their attention to present practices.

Researches have been conducted to help PR practitioners comprehend the notion of online PR using various types of methodologies. For instance, a mixed-method approach was used by Bhargava (2010) with 133 survey participants and 10 interviewers. He came to the conclusion that New Zealand public relations professionals lacked an adequate grasp of the characteristics of online PR, the tools that go along with it, and the spectrum of applications in actual practice. Due to a lack of understanding, he noticed that the use and implementation of the many web tools differed greatly. The practitioners' educational backgrounds, areas of specialization, Internet literacy, and organizational context where they worked were found to have an impact on this discrepancy. This suggests that the ignorance and poor usage of these tools by PR practitioners may be due to a lack of individual abilities in applying and comprehending their relevance (Alsharairi et al., 2022).

In order to understand Singaporean and Malaysian PR practitioners' perspectives and how these attitudes affected their use of social media, Fitch (2009) study was performed. He found that while some seasoned public relations professionals appreciated the opportunities offered by new media, others were concerned about how the landscape of communication was changing. This dread was brought on by ignorance about social media and new media. Another reason why people didn't comprehend social media, according to Fitch (2009), was a lack of knowledge and technological competence. According to the findings, some practitioners may have felt uneasy about the changing communication techniques. Some even assertively commented that they felt profoundly alienated by new media. Despite the fact that several maintained an eye on blogs, none of the practitioners in question had their own blogs or use other social media as part of their public relations strategies (Fitch, 2009). None of the professions routinely used social media.

However, other studies have revealed that professionals are aware of the proper applications of online PR. Saka and Göncü (2017), for instance, discovered that despite a sluggish start, Turkish practitioners had started to understand the potential of digital communication and had made significant progress in identifying and using the proper digital platforms and tools for effective PR practices. Additionally, Turkish PR professionals were eager to change and aware of the benefits that digital communication may provide.

On the other hand, Liptak (2012) showed that American PR professionals lagged behind in the utilization of social media, largely as a result of their ignorance of social media and their inability to use it effectively. According to Liptak (2012), older practitioners tended to favor conventional tactics over cutting-edge technical ones like social media. Older practitioners' unfamiliarity with the idea of online PR was the main cause of the lack of usage.

According to Fitch (2009) study, a lack of knowledge, skill, and experience about the advantages of these platforms and how to use them is to blame for this ignorance of and fear of using social media. The influence of age was also underlined in this study. Fitch concluded that there were differences between younger practitioners who used technology and older practitioners who did not, mostly because younger practitioners employed technology in all aspects of their lives, not only at work.

Robson and James (2013) found that many PR professionals used social media for their organizations but didn't comprehend it. None of the practitioners were members of the organization's main coalition, but they blamed the organization for management's social media restrictions. Robson and James (2013) suggest that such professionals may not be authorized to utilize social media or implement a strategy. The dominant coalition of an organization may not feel comfortable opening up to social media discussion and feedback if they lack two-way symmetrical communication skills. This study indicated that practitioners struggled to accept and grasp internet PR since there was no institution-wide strategy.

Toledano and Avidar (2016) explored the ethical dilemmas that arise when PR professionals use social media in Israel and New Zealand. They also demonstrated that practitioners had little understanding of or interest in online PR. This ignorance has had a huge impact on social media PR ethics. These concerns appeared to be centered around problems with transparency, phony commenter identities, payments to bloggers, and payments to social media professionals for smear campaigns. Due to the state of the sector in Israel and New Zealand at the time, they discovered that certain practitioners had adopted similar practices. According to Toledano and Avidar (2016), practitioners did not typically regard message sponsor disclaimers as an ethical tool.

Inya (2017) asserts that the majority of PR managers in Kenyan higher education only sometimes used social media because they were unaware that social media may result in backlinks to their websites, which are considered extremely important in the international rankings of their universities. As a result, managers usually use social media primarily as useful communication tools than as an integral component of their plan for gaining worldwide exposure (Inya, 2017). This study also shows how the underutilization of practitioners in these institutions, a crucial interface for any tertiary education institution looking to attract students, is a result of higher education administrators' inadequate comprehension of the concept and significance of online PR.

The majority of studies usually agree that public relations practitioners lack a thorough understanding of internet PR. There are numerous variables that contribute to practitioners' ignorance of online PR, but they mainly fall into two categories. The strategies, plans, policies, training, and rehabilitation programs that the organization is meant to provide to practitioners are included in the first category, which is specific to the organization. The second group focuses on the practitioners themselves. This disorder entails a lack of comprehension and sporadic misuse due to insufficient information, skills, awareness, and training, which creates ethical questions. The communication process fails because PR experts are unable to handle symmetrical two-way contact between the public and the organizations because they lack knowledge of how to use modern technology tools (such as social media). Accordingly, the research question guiding this study was how PR practitioners at Jordanian universities conceptualize online PR.

1.1. Underpinning theory

1.1.1. Two-way symmetrical communication model

Eeffective PR models are crucial for organizations to stay competitive and thrive in the digital landscape. Because, it builds and maintains a positive reputation and help organizations to connect with their target audience and build long-term relationships. By creating messaging that aligns with their mission, values, (Kent, 2013). PR models help businesses to stay current and responsive to changes, allowing them to pivot and adjust their strategies as needed. Contextually, Higher education institutions prioritize effective PR models will be better positioned to succeed in the competitive online space. As a result, Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four main models of PR for communication between organizations and their stakeholders/publics. These models are namely; the press agentry, public information models, which are both based on one-way dissemination of information, the two-way asymmetrical model, which focuses on organizational efforts to change public, and the two-way symmetrical model of PR, which focuses on a balanced relationship between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Generally, the four-model describes how PR can be effectively and ethically practiced by offering a normative theory in the two-way symmetrical model. Mixed- motive PR combines the two-way symmetrical model and the two-way asymmetrical model (Parveen et al., 2015). Therefore, the two-way symmetrical model for communication maintains both the best interests of organizations and its publics in the fairest and balanced way possible. Through the utilization of this model, both an organization and its publics can collaborate to both grow and strengthen an organization, leading it to greater success (Kirat, 2006). Culturally speaking, two-way symmetrical communication is linked to the notion that power is distributed equally between groups, which is an oversimplification given the diversities of culture and organizations across the globe (Gregory & Halff, 2013). The Arabic culture of Jordan is one of those diverse cultures, and this study helped determine how Grunig's model can be adopted and adapted to meets the values and norms of that society. In addition to helping to benchmark the spread of professional knowledge among PR practitioners at Jordanian universities and give guidance on what must be done in the future to improve practices (Bashir & Aldaihani, 2017).

This model is characterized as the ideal form of PR. It describes an equivalence scale of communication rarely found in real life, in which each party is willing to alter its behavior to accommodate the other party's needs. While a monologue-style communication distinguishes other models, the symmetric model encompasses a dialogue. In this model, an organization's management exchanges views with stakeholders, possibly influencing both management and its publics to adjust their attitudes and behaviors. Thus, communication in this model is entirely reciprocal, and the power relationships are balanced. The appellations of the sender and receiver are inapplicable in this communication process because the intention is mutual understanding (Windahl et al., 1992). Grunig and others have argued that this model is the most ethical because the model creates equality of exchange and is the foundation of excellence in PR. Nonetheless, others have criticized this logic, arguing that a PR practitioner is never disinterested. An employer or client always exists, and because organizations rarely act against their own best interests, the communication remains asymmetrical (Theaker, 2013). Thus,

these arguments align with the current research. By using the two-way symmetrical model, this study was able to understand and explore the experiences of PR officers in the universities while using social media in their work. This is because there is a need to develop a framework to guide practices for the PR community at large and PR practitioners at Jordanian universities precisely so that they can take full advantage of the affordances of new technology-based communications.

1.2. Mythology

The present study explored the usage of online public relations (PR) in the context of public and private educational institutions, with a particular focus on PR managers as the chosen participant population. The selection of these managers was based on their responsibilities in handling public relations professionals. To do this, a total of 31 managers were selected for the study, out of which 22 were involved in in-depth interviews. The determination of the sample size was based on achieving saturation thresholds, ensuring thorough insights were obtained. In the present research, in accordance with the participants' suggestions, all interviews were carried out within university settings, namely in designated office spaces, with time frames ranging from 45 minutes to 1 hour. In advance of the interviews, those interviewed were provided with information regarding the research and became aware of the various types of questions that they might encounter.

Upon obtaining the participants' consent by accepting a consent form, the interview proceeded by asking a set of general questions with the intention of fostering an atmosphere of comfort for the participants. Following that, questions of a more focused kind relating to the implementation of public relations strategies and the perspectives of public relations professionals on online public relations were addressed. Using open-ended interview questions, the researcher was able to go deeply into the subject matter and get extensive information regarding the perspectives of the participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The interviews were conducted in the Arabic language and afterward translated into English, after which they were recorded in a verbatim manner. The researcher, who is a native Arabic speaker and possesses fluency in English, conducted and interpreted the interviews. The researcher took measures to guarantee that there was no disparity between the participants' responses and their English translations. Subsequently, the transcribed interviews underwent a coding process wherein terms and concise phrases were employed to precisely record the participants' narratives relating to their respective contexts and perspectives (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The codes underwent a process of reorganizing based on a theme analysis approach, resulting in their categorization into different thematic groups. Ultimately, a single and distinct theme emerged, reflecting the perspective of public relations practitioners regarding the essence of public relations strategies and their understanding of online public relations. Thus, the next part addressed this theme.

2. Findings

Based on the data analysis, the conceptualization of online PR from the perspectives of PR practitioners in Jordanian universities had two main groups. The first group represented a modern technology revolution and encompassed reaching a broad audience, which includes an internal audience,

an external audience, and an audience of all age ranges IT knowledge, IT facilities, and attached social media. The second group comprised effective and sustainable tools, including interactive and fast, easy, and cheap tools. (Figure 1) maps the research findings on the informants' conceptualization of online PR.
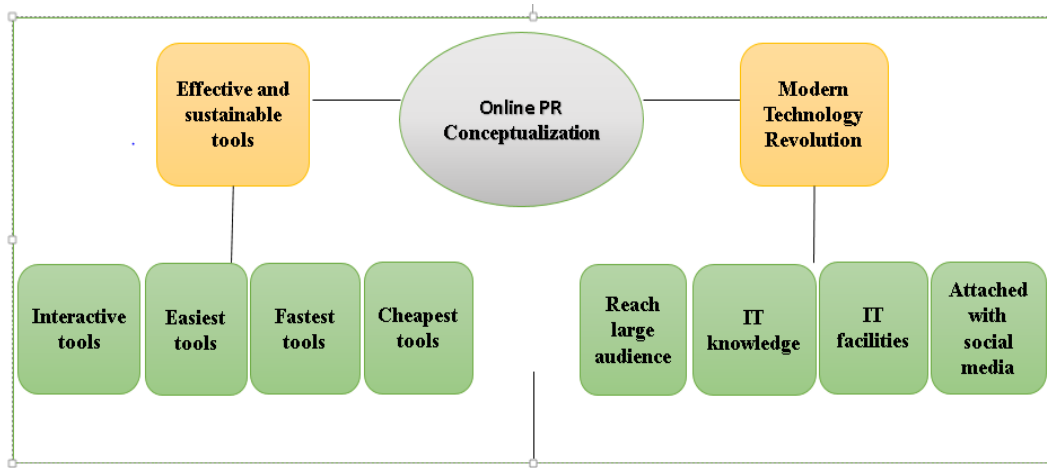
Figure 1. Map the Conceptualization of Online PR

2.1.1. Theme 1. Modern technology revolution

The researcher classified "the modern technology revolution" group. The sub-themes in the group were 1) reaches a broad audience, 2) IT knowledge, 3) IT facilities, and 4) being attached to social media. Modern technology and its tools like social media platforms permit reaching a wide-ranging audience of all ages because of the widespread utilization of the Internet in Jordan. However, doing so requires the appropriate knowledge and facilities like computers and telephones. Most informants agreed that the modern technology revolution included the ability to reach a broad audience, along with social media, IT knowledge and IT facilities.

2.1.2. Ability to reach a large audience

According to practitioners in Jordanian universities, social media seeks to reach three sorts of an audience as a part of the concept of the modern technology revolution. Most informants said that the modern technology revolution could reach large target audiences, including an internal audience, an external audience, and an audience of all ages.

2.1.2.1. Internal audience

Eight informants thought that social media sought to reach a sizable internal audience because social media were considered to be part of the modern technology revolution. For example, Informant 1 said, "Social media through websites is a current technological window to enhance the direct and quick mental image for the internal community of the institution." Informant 13 also stated, "The fact that social media now is a revolution of modern media. This comes from the concept that communication with the internal audience depends on many institutions on social media."

Informant 18 supported this idea, talking about the role of social media in delivering a message to local society, "One of the positive returns in using social media in our work is the ability to deliver the message to a large group of people in the local community."

Informant 6 explained in more detail why social media tools have become essential to communicate with an internal audience:

> Today, social media has become a necessary need for all institutions and state departments in Jordan and globally for a number of reasons. It informs the local community about the institutions and their role and achievements and, in addition, informs other institutions of what we have as a university, such as activities, projects, experts, and consultants. Social media are playing this role by telling the community about our competencies.

2.1.2.2. External audience

Eight informants said that social media could reach a broad external audience. Informant 18 said:"Facebook is used to disseminate the university news and to transfer the information about the unified yearly registrations for students to reach all segments of society, especially the youth groups who are vital for us in all the world."

Informant 12 supported this idea; she said:

> We are seeking to access the most significant number of external parties. If you are talking about the Facebook page globally, maybe you cannot enter the site of the university in Iraq or Yemen or England, but the Facebook page reaches more than the official websites of institutions and formal parties, and this helps a lot.

Informant 17 explained how social media tools were chosen to contact external audiences because each audience preferred a different platform. She said:

> The decision to use any means is the result of in-depth study; our university is one of the nine branches in the Arab world, and we had a meeting at headquarters in Kuwait and decided to use the most suitable means of [reaching] each country. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Twitter is number one, and it is an essential thing. But in Jordan, it is not. Each country has its privacy; I am with the decision to study every audience until the adoption of a suitable means. We tried Twitter, but we did not interact with it.

2.1.2.3. All ages of an audience

Five informants said that social media could reach an audience of all ages. For instance, Informant 3 said:

> Now Social Media has become more influential because Social Media does not need a specific age category. The newspaper, for example, is known to be for a class of intellectuals, while social media can be used and followed by a child, a woman, the elderly, or anyone. Thus, the impact of social media will be much greater than any other media.

Informant 12 said:

> We can say now that social media can be used with all age groups, whether adults, children, and the elderly, also educated or uneducated. It has become an available and accessible means to all people. This helps us to communicate with all these groups and inform our messages more comfortably.

2.1.3. Attached with social media

Most Jordanian PR practitioners interviewed agreed that the conceptualization of online PR is attached to social media as a part of the modern technology revolution. Informant 11 said:

> The reliance on the university's use of social media is essential." Informant 13 supported this argument, saying, "PR practitioners must have the ability to communicate on social media sites in general," and Informant 2 noted, "Social media is also considered the most crucial function in the Department of PR in this era." Informant 14 confirmed that "The use of social media is essential. All things are dependent on social media.

2.1.4. IT knowledge

Four informants talked about the conceptualization of online PR in terms of IT knowledge. Informant 13 said, "Practitioners must be an IT specialist."

Informant 23 emphasized the importance of having technical knowledge, saying, "A PR employee must master technological skills. He must know computer technology and Internet technologies."

Informant 4 supported this rationale, saying, "In addition to some courses specialized in computer science and dealing with modern devices and social media programs, and direct and indirect communication."

2.1.5. Facilities

Three informants said that the conceptualization of online PR was related to IT facilities. Informant 15 said:

> I expect PR employees to master the use of the computer to a great extent because social media sites can be used through computers, in addition to knowing the use of telephone devices, which I expect everyone knows how to use.

Informant 5 also supported this idea, saying:

> We can say that the employees involved in administering social media sites must have at least the minimum level of computer skills. You sometimes want to deal with a given site, and you should know the principles to deal with them. When I say a computer, I don't mean the computer device only; I mean Smartphones, laptops, and any other facilities.

2.2. Theme 2. Effective and sustainable tools

Based on the data analysis, the "effective and sustainable tools" group included using interactive, easiest, fastest, and cheapest tools. Most informants reported that the tools were easy to use, fast, cheap and interactive compared to old-time methods like newspapers, and these qualities permitted them to respond to problems rapidly and efficiently.

2.2.1. Easiest tool

Most informants agreed that the conceptualization of online PR was associated with easy usage as an effective and sustainable tool for PR practitioners. Informant 10 said, "It is difficult for the PR practitioners to work without the use of media for the success of its tasks, even at the level of internal communication between the university deans and the councils of deans." Informant 18 supported this point, "One positive factor of using social media is the low cost; in addition, it's considered the easiest way to communicate with everyone." Last, Informant 1 added, "Now, Facebook, WhatsApp, and websites have made it easier for the student and the community to communicate."

Informant 16 noted that social media make promotion easier, "Social media is the spread among people and its easiness; it is affordable and easy to promote; I don't have to wait for the second day to deliver the news like newspapers." Informant 5 also talked about accessibility, "Information is available on social media at any time, and you easily access it."

Informant 21 indicated that online PR tools facilitated attracting students to the university:
"The most crucial goal of the universities, whether governmental or private, is to reach students, so to do that, we must find the easiest way, either by phone or by Facebook or by applying to the university."

2.2.2. Fastest tool

Eleven informants thought online PR was faster, more effective, and more sustainable than traditional tools. Informant 1 said, "Social media is faster than conventional communication such as television and the newspaper," and Informant 3 supported this argument, saying, "One reason for delivering information quickly and effectively is social media." Informant 5 added that social media was useful to quickly convey university news: "We consider social media an excellent way to disseminate news immediately. For example, once a guest leaves, everyone will be informed of his visit, and the news will spread very fast."

Informant 21 accentuated the importance of social media as a source of information for students:

"I go back again and say that the student is the most critical goal, and through social media, a student can know about events faster."

2.2.3. Cheapest tool

Eight informants talked about online PR as an essential tool to communicate with different audiences because the tools of online PR were inexpensive and available to everyone. Informant 4 said:

When we use social media, we can reach the students very quickly. In addition to the low-cost implications, all employees and students have their own devices and accounts. Therefore, it's easy to deal with them because of the widespread social media to a wide range of people.

Informant 17 added, "Low cost is one of the most decisive factors for the use of social media in our work, but only if an administrator knows how to manage and deliver it." Informant 5 added, "The cost is very minimal; it's almost free, so why should I pay a high price while it's almost free."
Finally, Informant 21 said, "Social Media is an effective way to reach the students quickly with less effort and low costs."

2.2.4. Interactive tool

Four informants conceptualized online PR as an interactive tool. For instance, Informant 17 said:

"We can stay in touch with the public 24 hours a day and know what they want and their characteristics and needs."

Informant 12 described how the audience interacts either directly through the university or student pages:

The students also share these publications, which helps to deliver the information to the largest number of people. Some do not have the official page of the university. Still, they have a student page or a page of university students. These are widespread both among our students or students from other universities and help to deliver the news more clearly and faster. Of course, our relationship with some of the websites and the presence of a page also helps to spread the news and to generalize it.

2.3. Discussion

The study found that the conceptualization of online PR from the perspectives of PR practitioners in Jordanian universities had two main groups. The first group represents a modern technology revolution and includes reaching a broad audience, which includes an internal audience, an external audience and an all range of age audience, IT knowledge, IT facilities, and attached with social media. The second group comprises effective and sustainable tools, and it contains interactive tools, the fastest tools, the easiest tools, and the cheapest tools. Regardless, these PR professionals found that social media were a critical function of the PR department because social media were widespread, and most people in Jordan used them.

According to the conceptualization of online PR among the practitioners in Jordanian universities, there are three sorts of audiences that social media seeks to reach as a part of the modern technology revolution concept. These types include an internal audience, an external audience, and an audience of all ages.

To reach these audiences, practitioners used various social media and studied the most suitable means for reaching the selected audience. As a result, they used the most suitable means to reach the external audience of an Arab country. In Jordan, that meant using Facebook; in Saudi Arabia, that meant using Twitter. They also noted that social media could reach a wide range of age groups because people of all ages were habituated to using social media.

Because of the need to use social media, practitioners must be skilled in IT technology and master all related skills. These modern technology-related skills included computer skills and Internet technologies, and the informants expected that members of their PR departments would possess them. They believed that it would be difficult for a practitioner to function without possessing these skills, which allowed them to communicate quickly with audiences at a low cost. Additionally, they reported that social media tools permitted them to interact with target publics like students on a 24-hour basis and build and maintain relationships.

The results of the present study both support and contradict those of earlier studies. This study supports the idea that it frequently takes a long time for members of an organization to comprehend, accept, and then put into practice a new concept (Arabi & Mansur, 2006). Awareness of how important stakeholders obtain and share information is necessary for PR in the online era, as is the ability to impact them at pivotal moments, which necessitates an awareness of the techniques embracing internet-age technologies (Wright & Hinson, 2015). PR practitioners need to enhance their knowledge of new technology and its applications to take into account social and relational challenges, according to Kent and Saffer (2014).

In the context of this current research, only a few informants noted that they had developed a strategy for online technology usage and had developed metrics to assess whether they had used the appropriate means to reach specific publics. While many noted that they used different social media platforms to reach key publics, few analyzed the results to determine whether they had been successful. More work needs to be done in this area to address the need for scientific management to achieve the objectives Grunig (2009) articulated concerning PR as a strategic management task.

The current study's findings partially corroborate those of Bhargava (2010), who revealed that New Zealand's PR professionals lack a thorough understanding of the nature of the online PR idea, its accompanying tools, and the extent to which it is used in actual practice. This is due to the fact that few PR firms employ scientific management and related metrics to evaluate the success of their online PR campaigns. Because of this ignorance, online PR has been used haphazardly with little comprehension of its goals.

The current study also supports Fitch (2009) contention that expertise and technological know-how are necessary for a practitioner to operate effectively in social media. The majority of respondents felt that effective online PR practitioners needed a constantly evolving skill set.

This study confirmed the results of other studies that emphasized practitioners were aware of the idea of online PR and its legitimate applications. Included in this were Saka and Göncü (2017). Despite a sluggish start, they discovered that Turkish PR practitioners have started to recognize the potential of digital communication and have made significant progress in locating and employing the proper digital tools and platforms for effective PR practices. On the other hand, Liptak (2012) showed that PR practitioners fall behind in the usage of social media, primarily because they are unaware of what social media is and how to utilize it efficiently. However, this recent study discovered that all of the Jordanian universities evaluated had online PR practitioners who understood its worth. This might be due to Jordan's extensive use of social media and the Internet for many years.

The results of this study not coincide with Fitch (2009) study, which claimed that practitioners' lack of understanding and fear of using social media was caused by a lack of experience, expertise, and knowledge of the benefits of these tools and how to use them. Practitioners in the current study were both aware of the positive outcomes of these tools and how to utilize them. The judicial system in Jordan was the only notable restriction that was thought to be a roadblock.

The current study seemed to agree with Robson and James (2013), who had asserted in their study that, although PR practitioners in their study were engaged with social media as a function of their PR practice, the majority did not have a strategic approach to their present use or their plans for future use.

Informants in the current agreed with Toledano and Avidar (2016), who looked at the understanding of the practical ethical challenges in PR practitioners' usage of social media. They found that a lack of understanding of ethics had led to significant challenges for PR ethics in social media. The respondents of this current study agreed that knowledge of ethical standards was critical.

This study did not support the findings of Inya (2017), who came to the conclusion that few PR managers in higher education regularly use social media because they are unaware of the importance of backlinks to their websites in the global rankings of their universities. Informants in the current study were aware of the importance of these backlinks and knew how to make use of them.

3. Conclusion

Numerous studies have revealed that the idea of online PR is not well understood by PR professionals. There are a number of causes for practitioners' lack of awareness of online PR, including organizational shortcomings that include the need for the organization to equip practitioners with strategies, policies, plans, and training programs. In this study, the informants noted that their organizations need better strategies, planning and training programs. Therefore, decision-makers should give educational courses about social media to PR practitioners on an ongoing basis to deepen their understanding of the social media concept and the importance of its role in PR work. Because social media is continually changing, and social media tools vary extensively in terms of how they work and to whom they might appeal per platform calls for a different strategy. So, PR practitioners must be familiar with all social media currently in practice.

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