Social Media as a Tool of Public Relations: A Survey of Public Relations Professionals

Executive Summary

The present thesis explores the perception and usage of social media among public relations practitioners. The digital media has caused a revolution in the information and communication technologies sector. The way people communicate in the 21st century is completely different as compared to the previous one. The impact of this major transformation in communication systems can be noticed at all levels in social and business sectors. Apparently, the media and communications disciplines are affected the most. Scholars and professionals across the world have acknowledged this and they are studying these changes to help communication professionals. Professor Donald K. Wright of Boston University, US, has been examining the use of social media in public relations practice for years and has published reports annually. The present study is among the pioneering studies in India on this matter.

In order to achieve the objectives set for the present study, descriptive cross-sectional survey design employing convergent parallel mix-method techniques, also known as triangulation in research. This study has taken India as the universe for research and public relations practitioners as population. Further, the members of four north Indian Chapters of Public Relations Association of India (PRSI) were selected as sample for the study. PRSI, established in 1958, is the oldest and largest public relations associations in India. The society has 30 chapters and 3000 members across the country and therefore, found to be a good representation of the public relations industry in India. Further, using the purposive sampling method, out of 30 PRSI chapters, all the 252 members of four North Indian chapters namely – Chandigarh (35), Delhi (144), Jaipur (41) and Shimla (32), were selected as sample units for the purpose of this study. The study achieved the objectives by identifying representative sample, employing a mix-methodology, achieving triangulation and enhancing the quality of the findings.

The study focussed primarily to investigate the integration of social media into public relations practices. It highlighted the challenges and dilemmas that have arisen with the advent of social media and the benefits of using it for professional purposes. The study provided an insight into the practice of Public Relations in the digital age. In addition, as the study explored the
viewpoint of Public Relations practitioners concerning the use of social media for professional purposes, it also observed the patterns of social media adoption among public relations professionals. The study also helped to understand the shape of public relations closely as a profession and as an Industry after the advent of social media. Until before the dawn of social media, there was just handful of media channels used by PR professionals to disseminate information among target groups. However, today the receivers of information are empowered with social media. There are dozens of communication platforms at their disposal that have turned them into active respondents. In such a scenario, the PR practitioners are burdened with additional responsibilities. Now they need to disseminate information and messages, receive replies/responses and respond. Additionally, they are obliged to be extra vigilant and proactive on social media platforms. Given the immediacy of social media, this task indeed is highly challenging. The present study unravelled the perception of social media on this aspect.

Larger portion of contemporary public relations research focus on to identify and measure the benefits of social media tools for marketing communications activities. The present research explored the perception of public relations professionals regarding the value of social media for public relations. Results have shown that majority of the respondents consider that social media has changed the way public relations industry worked and social media tools maximize the impact of public relations messages. The research also found that Facebook is the most preferred social media tool among public relations professionals and they prefer Facebook to communicate with the young stakeholder groups while WhatsApp and Twitter to communicate with stakeholders belonging to senior age groups. The result also reflected that the young respondents from the age group of 21-30, used Facebook more as compared to the other age groups. The research study also found that the professionals use social media tools for multiple professional purposes including media relations, internal as well as external stakeholder communication, corporate communication, education, training, counselling, event management, CSR, promotional activities and marketing communication activities. The study found that public relations professionals consider social media an economical, affordable, efficient and popular medium and therefore, use social media tools for their professional purposes.

Some of the important findings of the study are mentioned further:-
• It was found that 49% respondents agreed that social media is an appropriate tool for public relations professional purposes.
• It was noted that largest group of the respondents (86 in total) represented government organisations.
• More than half of the respondents (52.7%) agreed that using social media help lowering the expenditure on professional communication activities.
• It was found that majority of the respondents believed that social media has changed the way PR industry used to work.
• It was noted that majority of the respondents believed that social media has changed the way most of the departments in their organisations used to work.
• It was found that 50% of respondents strongly agreed that social media tools helped them to achieve public relations objectives.
• It was noted form the collated data that majority of the respondents believed that social media has benefit to the Public Relations business/services.
• It was also gathered from the tabulated data that majority of the sample believed that people trusted social media more as compared to traditional media.
• It was found that majority of the respondents felt that using social media tools for Public Relations’ purposes was not risky.
• Respondents agreed of using various social media tools for professional purposes.
• It was found that after Facebook, it was Twitter that was used by majority of the respondents.
• It was noted that respondents did not influence their preference of social media tools during a crisis.
• YouTube was found last choice to be used as social media tool for professional use during crisis.
• It was found that age group of PR practitioners did not influence time spend using social media for public relations purposes.
• It was found that majority of the respondents disagreed to the statement that social media tools were complex.
• Young professionals found social media tools user friendly unlike their senior counterparts.

• It was found that there was a difference between the time spent on using social media among males and females respondents.

• It was observed that respondents mentioned that organizations, multinationals, leaders and governments are recognizing the true value of public relations.

• A few respondents mentioned that with social media the quality of content degraded as compared to the content they generated before social media.

• In many cases, public relations professionals mentioned that in rural areas, due to poor internet connectivity, people are not being able to use social media.