CONTEXTUALISING THE ADOPTION OF MODERN DIGITAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC RELATION PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Digital media is seen as a powerful business communication tools rapidly evolving and everyone needs to adapt to these changes brought about by the internet so that they will not be left behind. The paper borrows from the diffusion of innovation theory (DIT) and technology acceptance model (TAM) constructs, along with concepts of trust, digital media and social support to build up an interdisciplinary model. Paradoxically, the increase in the availability of new digital media technologies makes public relations practitioners’ duties more complicated. Therefore, this paper explores how the presence and abundance of modern new digital influences the practices of public relations.

Key words: Adoption, Digital Media, Implications, Public Relation Practice.


1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate websites, chartrooms, email customer care facilities and e-news release distribution are now viewed as standard principles of public relations practice (Barnard, Fletcher & Steyn, 2016). Many public relations specialists are facing serious issues with the effect of using new media, and particularly the World Wide Web Internet. Research has demonstrated that professionals have not completely grasped new (digital) media, are poorly prepared to do and have a fear of the technology (Ewoh, 2013; Capriotti, 2017). Anybody with a computer connected to the Internet can distribute data for potential worldwide utilization and plainly the web is changing numerous parts of advertising exploration and practice' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Gregory, 2015). The Internet gives public relations specialists an interesting open door to gather data, screen general conclusion on issues, and take part in direct exchange with their publics about an assortment of issues (Capriotti, 2017).
Digital media is also the creative convergence of digital arts, science, technology and business for expression, communication, social interaction and education”. In Nigeria, ‘hate speech’ and ‘fake news’ are increasingly taking dominance of social media conversations and are becoming issues of great concern to the government and many other stakeholders. Attempts to regulate social media usage through legislative intervention have received push backs and massive resistance from the populace. Individuals who engage on social networks come from different backgrounds and have different levels of education or understanding of the issues in their conversations. Sometimes, their contributions drift from the subject to attacks on each other or concerned stakeholders, thereby denigrating the space, the quality of the interactions and the reputation of others (Capriotti, 2017; Gregory, 2015; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007). Phillips (2017) acknowledged that some practitioners abuse the function of digital media by using it for personal benefit instead of for building and maintaining relationships with the public, and thus makes the public to assume that they are thoughtless and uncaring about the organization-public relationship.

Phillips & Young (2009) and van Ruler (2015) further argues that this has brought about increased in demands for a more social and interactive approach to public relations messaging. The #OccupyNigeria and the #Bringbackourgirls protests powered mainly by the social media networks are examples of recent campaigns whose objectives became distorted as a result of uncensored and incoherent messages coming from their protagonists. Managing the social media and the fluidity of information, especially during crisis, is a nightmare for PR people (Nelson, Kehinde, Oyero, Williams & Soola, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Supporting this argument, Momoh (2015) opined that articulating appropriate response strategies to the multiplicity of viewpoints concerning their clients that are pushed through the social media is a time and resource vampire for PR practitioners in Nigeria.

Marketers anxiously follow the use of social media by consumers, but not much is known about how it influences the consumers’ buying intention. Many studies focus on consumer behaviour in the online shopping environment, but without consideration of the effects of the internet on the different phases of consumers’ buying intention (Darley et al., 2010). This research explores how the presence and abundance of modern new digital influences the practices of public relations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Media

Digital Media offers various open doors for advertising specialists to communicate with people in general while embracing new types of technologies and incorporating them into their regular day-to-day existences. These advances in technologies have encountered far-reaching use among advertising specialists and columnists (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Macnamara, 2010). As more types of web-based social networking rise, it is helpful for advertising experts to see how to utilize these devices as they identify with their employments. Specifically, experts working for philanthropic associations can profit by embracing social media due to their regularly constrained financial assets (Ngozi, Malachy, Christy, Ngozi and Prince, 2016). Accordingly, numerous offices built up an electronic nearness on the web by building up a site or utilizing diverse social media platforms to mirror their capacities in managing new technologies. In like manner, the present review researches the impact of advertising organizations’ electronic nearness on their associations with customers.
2.2. Digital Public Relations Adoption in Western World

Extant literature have shown that developed/western countries displayed a high rate of digital media technologies development and use. These Western countries encourage, motivate, and support the development of digital media technologies in unlimited areas of livelihood (Moya, 2014). For example, social network sites are encouraged, used, and justified in the United States through public relations in (a) social, (b) economic, (c) political, (d) religious, and (e) security innovations and developments (Momoh, 2015; Tiarhan, 2019). Limitations applied to the use of social network sites are laid out in maintaining the integrity of individual privacy and safety. Adding to that, Taylor and Kent (2010) stated that the importance of social network sites was overrated. Also, there is no cap on social network sites’ development and use (Go & You, 2016; Gordon & Berhow, 2009).

The effectiveness of social network sites as a communication tool has increased their value for the public relations field (Oyero, Oyesomi, Abioye, Ajiboye & Kayode-Adedeji, 2018; Alanazi, 2013; Hussain, 2011; Moya, 2014), which made public relations practitioners claim that social network sites are becoming an important part of public relations practices (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Go & You, 2016). Although there are some later adopters among public relations practitioners who do not integrate digital media technologies as soon as they occur (Avidar, 2009; Khajeheian & Mirahmadi, 2015), many have highlighted the necessity of keeping up with new digital media technologies (Agozzino, 2015).

2.3. Digital Public Relations Adoption in Africa

Globally, digital media use among public relations practitioners is increasing (van Ruler, 2015; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Moya, 2014) in developing nations (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Khajeheian & Mirahmadi, 2015), and particularly among Africans’ media and public relations industry (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2011; Alsalem, 2010; Al-Sumait, 2014; Dashi & Mesbah, 2015). In the last few years, it is clear that the internet has influenced and changed many aspects of African lives.

In fact, a recent study, which sampled 9,500 people in selected countries in Africa, reported that 61% of the selected population in Africa uses new digital media technologies. For instance, 57% of those using new digital media technologies are active Facebook users (“Internet World Statistics,” 2017). By implication, this implies that the African nation is fast adopting new digital media technologies, for example, social network sites, for use in public relations practices and functions (Gaither & Al-Kandari, 2014; van Ruler, 2015).

2.4. Digital Public Relations Adoption in Nigeria

Nigeria, an African country on the Gulf of Guinea, has many natural landmarks and wildlife reserves. Nigeria being a multicultural society, the relationship between its people has become more complicated. According to Momoh (2015), the need for public relations is positively correlated with the complexity of human relations. In other words, people need to utilize public relations practices more when their relationships with others becomes more complicated.

As a developing country, Nigeria’s public relations practitioners have been found in the past to be slow in adopting new communication technologies (Wilcox & Reber, 2016). Although Nigeria ranks among the highest in Africa in terms of new digital media consumers (Al-Sumait, 2014; Salem, 2017), and has a high rate of internet access at 68% (“Internet World Statistics,” 2017). Yet most studies found that public relations use of social network sites in Nigeria was and is still limited to one-way communication (Agozzino, 2015; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012).
Organizations in Nigeria are basically defined by their ownership. There are three main organization sectors in Nigeria: public, private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Public relations practices differ among sectors (Go & You, 2016). Accordingly, these sector differences have been found to be associated with factors, attributes, and levels of intentions of public relations practitioners to adopt new digital media technologies (Al-Shohaib, Frederick, Al-Kandari, & Dorsher, 2010; Briones et al., 2011; Go & You, 2016; Wilcox & Reber, 2016).

3. THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATIONS
To answer these questions, the study borrows from diffusion of innovation theory (DIT) and technology acceptance model (TAM) constructs, along with concepts of trust, digital media and social support to build up an interdisciplinary model. The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of social media and how they can influence the consumer’s intention to buy and impact on a user’s trust in a social commerce environment. The diffusion of innovation theory was founded to boost the sales of new technological innovations. Nonetheless, scholars have utilized the diffusion of innovation theory to examine public relations practitioners’ willingness to adopt novel communication technologies to increase the efficiency of public relations (Moya, 2014; Sharif, 2003). The diffusion of innovation provided a wider range for examining adoption of innovative technologies. The law of diffusion of innovation used for understanding the status of adoption of new digital media technologies hinges on the diffusion of innovation models. The theory postulated that any innovation advancement could not be successfully adopted without social acceptance and behavioral change (Cunningham, 2014; Rogers, 2003). Lastly, the model details how adoption trends for new technology are patterned.

4. THE EFFECT OF NEW DIGITAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS
Digital media technologies have influenced public relations in various ways. For example, scholars assured that the new communication technologies have supported public relations by increasing the practitioners’ abilities to reach a larger number of audiences, besides creating better relations with their internal and external public, without the need for media gatekeepers (Eyrich et al., 2008; Hussain, 2011; Wilcox & Reber, 2016). Others contend that the implementation of digital technologies is limiting the power of public relations by transferring the power of generating information to the public (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

Nevertheless, digital technologies are also challenging public relations specialists in many ways. For instance, technology increases the cost and budget needed, because of the need for improving and developing public relations practitioners’ skills to utilize these new digital technologies (Al-Shohaib et al., 2010; Al-Yasin, 2013; Briones et al., 2011). In other words, utilizing new digital technologies is associated with the increase of training and the time of training, plus the cost of getting the new digital technologies (Al-Shohaib et al., 2010; Al-Yasin, 2013; Hussain, 2011; Sharif, 2003). The main role of public relations practitioners is to build a relationship with their internal and external public (Al-Shohaib, Al-Kandari, & Abdulrahim, 2009; Hussain, 2011).

The most effective way to build a relationship with the public is to implement Grunig’s (1991) public relations models. Grunig (1991) considered that adopting a two-way communication between public relations and its public is better than the traditional one-way communication model. A two-way communication feature serves to decrease the gap between organizations and their publics (Alanazi, 2013). The internet was the first innovation that
increased the interaction communication between public relations and the public (Kirat, 2007).

Digital media can be categorized into five categories based on their features of serving public relations. For example, there are some new digital media technologies that are more text oriented, such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Twitter (Doyle, 2016; Okorie, Amodu, Oyedepo, Usaini & Kayode-Adedeji, 2018). Moreover, visual-based new digital media is another category that includes: Instagram, Snapchat, Vimeo, Periscope, YouTube (Chandler & Munday, 2016). The call based category would include new digital media technologies such as Viber, Line, Tango, and FaceTime. The multi-feature category would include Facebook, LinkedIn, Yammer, and other applications (apps). Finally, the old digital media category contains digital media that have been out for more than 20 years, such as websites, email, text messages, and fax.

5. PUBLIC RELATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY
Many scholars have concluded that new digital media technologies are seen as beneficial for public relations tasks (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Briones et al., 2011; Hussain, 2011; Moya, 2014); this study also supports that. Public relations have been to some degree re-evaluated in the 21st century. The Internet has made it simple to put out a message and in the meantime, has made it difficult to be listened.

In reality, the recent public relations conference held in Africa concluded that the public relations field in Nigeria is still developing and needs to benefit more from implementing new digital media technologies (“Digital Public Relations Conference,” 2016). Hence, the problem was that the lateness of public relations practitioners in Nigeria in adopting new digital media technologies creates a lag in communication technology updates when compared with Western new digital media usage level and subsequent effects (Eyrich et al., 2008; Kirat, 2005).

Many public relations practitioners mentioned in this study, strongly depends on the adoption of their audiences for their adoption decision. The implication of this for public relations practitioners is that they should keep an eye on which digital media technologies are more adopted by their targeted audiences, so they reach them more effectively.

PR staff may utilize the organization site to speak with the general population, buyers and individuals from other media outlets. Sites can be utilized to present a business or item, giving both the data and the item customization that numerous advanced buyers have generally expected. PR staff can oversee most components of the new media blend by containing the components in the site pages of an organization's website.

6. INEVITABILITY OF DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS ADOPTION IN NIGERIA
The emergence of digital media did not necessarily disrupt the role of PR in managing the image of businesses nor did it reduce its capacity to perform the duties outline above. On the contrary, it opened up greater opportunities for public relations to meet its core obligations. In the past, PR people were limited to a few channels in the mainstream media (TV, radio and printed media), dominated and controlled by big companies with deep pockets. To get their messages across, they had to either wait for a good opportunity or increase their budget. The social media have completely changed all that. Some practitioners believe that the advent of social media is one of the most exciting things that have happened to public relations so far. PR staff may utilize the organization site to speak with the general population, buyers and individuals from other media outlets. Sites can be utilized to present a business or item, giving both the data and the item customization that numerous advanced buyers have generally
expected. PR staff can oversee most components of the new media blend by containing the components in the site pages of an organization's website.

7. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The adoption of digital means of communication is systematically changing the way PR is practiced. Digital media has accelerated and intensified the way public relations practitioners communicate and relate with many internal and external publics. The implication is that the development of new digital media technologies is rapidly intensifying for the purpose of simplifying public relations practitioners’ duties in many nations. Paradoxically, the increase in the availability of new digital media technologies makes public relations practitioners’ duties more complicated. Although it might be a challenge to practitioners to keep up with the changing technologies but with proper education in the field they may catch up with the system, increase their knowledge and reduce public relations costs.

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