



Does social media usage matter? An analysis of online practices and digital media perceptions of communication practitioners in Europe



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ABSTRACT

A key aspect for understanding and explaining online communication is the micro level of communication practitioners' social media usage and their general attitudes towards digital platforms. This paper investigates how public relations practitioner's personal and professional use of social media is related to their perceptions of social media. A quantitative methodology was applied to perform this research. A population of 2710 professionals from 43 European countries working on different hierarchical levels both in communication departments and agencies across Europe were surveyed as part of a larger transnational online survey. Results show that practitioners with a high level of usage of social media give more importance to social media channels, influence of social media on internal and external stakeholders and relevance of key gatekeepers and stakeholders along with a better self-estimation of competences. Issues about diverse levels of overestimation of social media use, application and importance in the professional arena are also debated.

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1. Introduction

The incorporation of social media and online platforms into communication strategies of organizations has been intensively discussed during the last years. The focus of research shifted from normative propositions like the promise of more symmetrical and dialogical communication approaches (e.g., Duhé, 2012; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Wilcox, 2006; Wright, 1998, 2001) to rational arguments about benefits, limits and structural prerequisites of online strategies (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Zerfass & Pleil, 2012) to empirical studies on online practices in various regions of the world (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2009, 2012).

The introduction of Web 2.0 technology and social media has dramatically impacted and transformed the day-to-day activities of public relations practitioners, who need to master digital tools for timely, accurate and effective communication

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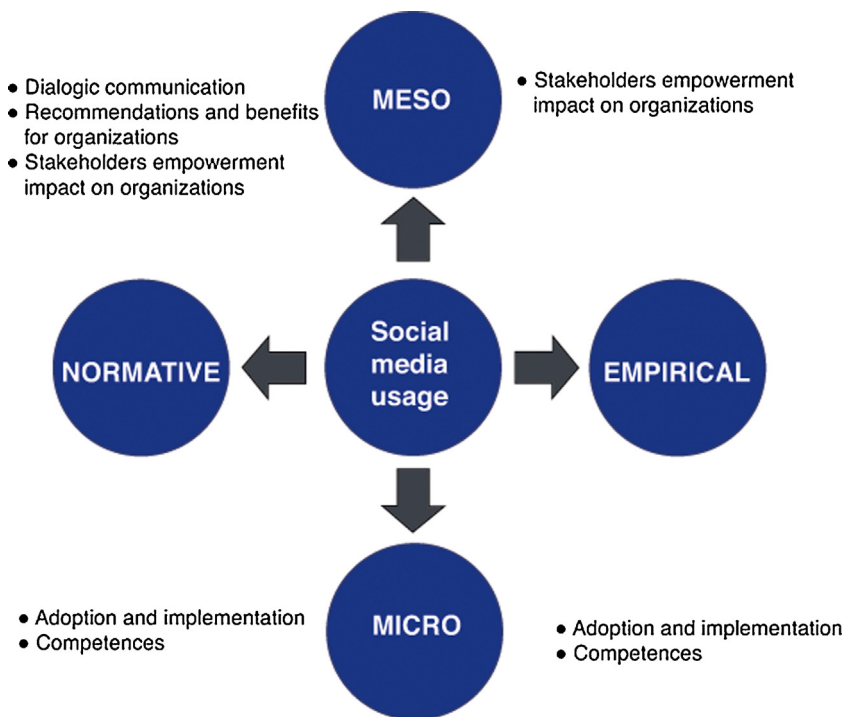


Fig. 1. Overview of literature about social media usage in communication management.

(Taylor & Perry, 2005). There are various theoretical perspectives on individual acceptance of new technologies which mostly stem from the ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003).⁴

As diffusion of innovations theory states, the rate of adoption of any change follows an S-shaped curve (Rogers, 1995), starting slowly and, if the innovation is considered by members of a social system to be useful, begins to accelerate. This theory helps frame questions of adoption of social media by public relations practitioners by underscoring the importance of attributes of the innovations, the communication channels involved in diffusion, the decision processes of adopters over time, and the social systems in which adopters live and work (Kelleher & Sweeter, 2012; Savery, 2005).

Although it has been widely recognized that the speed at which new technology has been adopted by organizations and considerable research has focused on the specific use of a single platform (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Porter, Trammel, Chung, & Kim, 2007; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011), more knowledge is required about the professional use of social media tools in public relations in diverse regions of the world through empirical and cross-cultural studies. There is a lack of previous research which is related to professional and private use of social media by public relations practitioners with their perception of social media. This paper focuses on these relations with the perception of influence of social media, self-evaluation of competences and importance of gatekeepers and social media tools.

2. Social media use and digital competences

Following the approach of new institutionalism applied to communication management and public relations (Sandhu, 2009; Zerfass, 2009), most of the research about social media in communication management has been approached from a meso-level perspective. The meso-level is above the individual and below the general societal system and allows studying organizations in a broad perspective. This level has been mainly studied from normative perspectives and produced rational arguments about benefits and recommendations for the optimal use of new media and tools and for managing the impact on organization of empowered stakeholders.

On the other hand, micro-level analysis is mostly concerned with individual and group actions (Sandhu, 2009: 82) and permits researchers a deeper understanding of social media use from the perspective of practitioners. Normative and empirical research has been conducted in this micro-level in two principal areas of focus: professional adoption of social media and competences to use them successfully (Fig. 1).

⁴ The main models employed for research on technology adoption are: The Theory of Reasoned Action (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989), the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 1995), the Multipurpose Information Appliances Adoption Model (Hong & Tam, 2006), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

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