ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS FROM THE LENS OF INTERNAL PRACTITIONERS: EVIDENCE FROM JORDAN

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ABSTRACT: *This study explored the benefits and disadvantages of using online PR from the perspectives of university PR practitioners, employing in-depth face-to-face interviews with 22 PR managers from public and private Jordanian universities based on a purposive sampling technique. This research's main objective was to determine what these practitioners felt were the benefits and drawbacks of online PR. The data were analysed using NVivo 12 software to develop themes. The findings showed that the PR practitioners conceptualised online PR as a part of the modern technology revolution, effective and sustainable in this era. They said that online PR offered several benefits like potential cost savings, the ability to spread information, resolve student-related problems, and raise their organisation's visibility. However, they were concerned that online PR could lead to disadvantages like added costs because of the need to hire online experts. Among the recommendations drawn from the results are that strategies and their concomitant tactics must be developed to reach specific publics, qualified employees with the necessary skills must be hired and their skills updated with frequent training, employees must be incentivised to achieve their best performance, organisations should monitor social media to address and solve problems of their key publics, and metrics must be created to measure the impacts of online PR quantitatively.*

KEYWORDS: Online public relations, Advantages, Disadvantages, Practitioners, University, Jordan.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that public relations (PR) play an essential role in any organisation by preserving an intangible image and building beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public communities it serves (Ahmad & Ismail, 2015; Alsharairi, Jamal & Yusof, 2022). PR today utilises ICT to spread messages quickly and affect society's attitudes, and PR activities can utilise various Internet sites through social networks that encompass new media. This utilisation means that the PR profession intervenes in all aspects of life and can reduce the physical barriers between people (Vosoghpour & Jafari, 2016). These methods have placed PR at the forefront of significant challenges in adjusting to the constant drumbeat of news from social media and mobile means of communication. Social media have become critical in PR concerning the ability of organisations to communicate with their publics (Tu, 2017). Thus, social media represent PR's future and have reshaped PR practice (Alamo, 2016; El-Kasim & Idid, 2017). Alyaqoub and Alsharairi (2020) have argued that social media can enrich an organisation by increasing and bettering community relationships and boosting relationship management perspectives in PR practice.

In all sectors, including higher education, the use of social media has become essential. Such concepts as PR, relationship-based marketing, audiences and social networking are vital to higher education communication processes and image management in both the external and internal environments (Alsharairi, Jama l& Yusof, 2022). Using social media in PR activities in higher education is necessary for several reasons. Universities represent the main front of evelry country that seeks an educated population, and young people are the leading target group in universities. Besides, the growing role of PR in the communication strategy of an institution of higher education is the result of, among other things, changes in expectations, especially of the younger generation, the increasingly sceptical approach to classic advertising and changing media technologies that enable participation and provide secure and continuous access to information (Koszembar-Wiklik, 2016).

University practitioners now feel the gravitas of the options they must take regarding new media by a hierarchical flow of communication that intersects with the free-for-all of social media sites like Facebook (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). This process means that PR offices in all universities face tremendous challenges in using social media in their programs and their contact with the key publics, representing mostly young users who are among the first and most significant social media users.

Universities in Jordan face the same challenges in using new technology, the Internet, and social media as other organisations. Even though Jordan has a high penetration rate for the Internet and students at universities are now media savvy, university-based PR practitioners, as do their off-campus colleagues, face numerous challenges in successfully utilising and adopting this new means of communication.

This study explores the overall question: what do university-based PR practitioners feel are the advantages and disadvantages of these new technologies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have investigated the usage of online PR from the practitioner's perspective. For example, Young (2017) studied non-profit human service organisations in the United States that were using social media. The study indicated that these organisations were generally satisfied with social media, used them mostly to promote their organisation and services, and, despite limited resources, these organisations planned to continue using social media in the future. Moreover, Cho, Schweickart and Haase (2014) conducted a content analysis of Facebook pages for 36 United States organisations and found that using online PR was essential to creating two-way communication, interactivity, dialogue, and engagement with publics via social media. In another survey of PR practitioners from different parts of the world, Wright and Hinson (2008) found that the appearance of blogs and social media changed how organisations communicate with external audiences, particularly. The study indicated that blogs and social media had improved contact by allowing organisations to respond to criticism more rapidly (Wright & Hinson, 2008).

Sutherland (2011) made two major findings in the same context, exploring using Facebook to create an online community for PR students in Australia. First, while a Facebook page can enhance the interaction and participation of PR students and PR educators, there is a clear division between the types of information discussed in an online classroom. Facebook was less academic and realistic, and students were more likely to respond to job openings and other news relevant to the community. Second, PR educators were essential in maintaining and increasing community engagement and interaction. Administrators should publish and discuss content regularly for a PR community to succeed on Facebook.

Cortés (2009) argued that the use of online PR has other advantages like building and maintaining a positive image through the use of "the corporate account as an accessory or alternative channel to existing ones to communicate with the press, clients or shareholders employing the publication of company news and activities" (p. 92). Bojei and Abu (2016) have said that social networks are essential in reaching people and can significantly impact firms and organisations. The advantage of social media emphasised by participating enterprises and organisations was that they could express themselves by creating interest and commitment without using a PR company, and social media enabled two-way communication, which can, in turn, stimulate relationships. Finally, one significant advantage is fast communication on social media platforms that keeps companies and organisations closer to the public. Further, Philip (2017) also found that PR practitioners used blogs to gain coverage and build relationships with other organisations and companies. He also said blogs could be used as an interactive medium between an organisation and a mass audience.

Halkia and Komodromos (2016) further explained that in marketing campaigns, PR and marketing practitioners use more blogs, forums and social networks because they can respond to online reviews or criticism of their organisations or customers through blogging. The use of social media can also develop and maintain relations between an agency and its diverse publics during PR marketing campaigns. Practitioners have proposed that the potential of digital media and social networks as new ways of carrying out MPR campaigns can be utilised to effectively manage the company's reputation and broaden public horizons to contact a company in the future.

In addition, Shahid et al. (2018) provided Pakistani PR practitioners a way to connect with various people and develop closer relations. PR practitioners frequently use social media to share information about their activities and campaigns to increase the public's attention to a customer. Also, companies use social media as an external communication tool to reach the target market and an external tool for online branding.

Accordingly, this current study investigates social media usage in the framework of online PR activities from a PR practitioner's perspective in Jordanian universities and when, if, and how these PR practitioners use social media and the building blocks of social media to achieve the PR office functions. Thus, the findings of this study are related to practitioners, policymakers, and academics. This study sought to answer the following research question based on the discussion above.

What are the perceptions of university public relations managers in Jordan about the advantages and disadvantages of online public relations?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Approach Using In-depth Interviews

This current study uses a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews to examine the usage of online PR among university PR practitioners in the selected Jordanian universities. In this, the current study follows the recommendations of many studies that have recommended the in-depth interview method to explore how and why how a PR practitioner utilises online PR and what the obstacles are to its usage (Alasfor, 2016; Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avery, Lariscy & Sweetser, 2010; Bélanger, Bali & Longden, 2014; Briones, Janoske & Paquette, 2013; El-Kasim & Idid, 2016; Gao, 2016; Lee, Sha, Dozier & Sargent, 2015; Macnamara, 2010; McAllister, 2012; Roback, 2017; Robson & James, 2011; Seko, 2012; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2015; Veletsianos, Kimmons, Shaw, Pasquini & Woodward, 2017).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen to collect data from the informants to achieve its objective. This technique allowed the researcher to control the topics and the interview format (Raziskovanja & Naravovarstveni, 2011). Moreover, this method permits a researcher to develop an interview schedule with an inventory of themes and possible questions to ask the interviewee (Broom, 2005; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2008). These interview sessions are arranged in advance using a designated time and location outside of everyday events. Moreover, a semi-structured interview "has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant" (Longhurst, 2003, p.145).

Population

The study focused on online PR practice in Jordan, using university PR managers as a sample. Each university has one manager for its PR activities, and these managers are in the best position to answer the research questions and represent a homogeneous group. Twenty-two managers of the population frame of 31 were interviewed based on the saturation point. This methodology allowed the researcher to obtain comprehensive perceptions and analyse the question to which this current study sought answers.

Jordan has ten public universities established between 1962 and 2005 and 21 private universities established between 1990 and 2015. These universities are spread across the main cities of Jordan; the North: Irbid, Ramtha, Mafraq, Jerash and Ajloun; the South: Karak, Tafila, Madaba, Aqaba, and Ma'an and the Middle Amman, Balqa, Zarqa. Table 1 shows the universities, the year they were established, the year the PR department was established, and the number of practitioners employed.

Table 1: Universities and Their PR departments

Public Universities	City	Year University established	Year PR department established	No. of Practitioners
The University of Jordan	Amman	1962	1973	19
Yarmouk University	Irbid	1976	1976	18
Mu'tah University	Karak	1982	1982	5
JUST	Ramtha	1986	1986	12
The Hashemite University	Zarqa	1992	1995	3
Al-Albayt University	Mafraq	1993	1993	3
Al-Balqa Applied University	Balqa	1997	1997	19
Al-Hussein bin Talal University	Ma'an	1999	1999	7
Al Tafila	Tafila	2005	2005	7
Jordan German University	Amman	2005	2005	2
		Sub-Total Public Universities 95		
Private Universities				
Amman Arab University	Amman	1999	1999	3
Middle East University	Amman	2005	2005	5
Jadara University	Irbid	2005	2005	6
Al-Ahliyya Amman University	Amman	1990	1990	7
Applied Science University	Amman	1992	1992	2
Philadelphia University	Amman	1989	2016	2
Isra University	Amman	1991	1991	4
Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan	Amman	1993	1993	5
Zarqa University	Zarqa	1994	1994	5
Irbid National University	Irbid	1994	1994	2
Jerash University	Jerash	1993	1993	3
Princess Sumaya University for Technology	Amman	1991	1991	6
American University of Madaba	Madaba	2011	2011	4
Ajloun National University	Ajloun	2009	2009	2
Aqaba University of Technology	Aqaba	2015	2015	6
Petra University	Amman	1991	1991	5
The World Islamic Science & Education University	Amman	2008	2008	8
Jordan Academy of Music	Amman	1989	____	_
Ammon Applied University College	Amman	1980	____	_
Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts	Amman	1993	____	_
Arab Open University	Amman	1990	2002	2
		Subtotal Private Universities 77		

Sample

The PR departments range from a medium to a small number of practitioners; quite a few have only one administrative level (a manager and employees), while a few have specialised sections in the PR departments. Thus, to create consistency in the study, the study was directed to only the PR managers. These managers were the most suitable individuals and had the knowledge and experience with social media usage in online PR activities. That is because the PR managers often have many tasks like supervising a staff of PR specialists and helping to clarify the viewpoints of their organisation to its primary audiences through media releases and interviews. Also, they follow the social, economic, and political trends that might affect their organisation ultimately, and they recommend how to enhance the image of their institutions based on those trends.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the PR managers in these universities. The in-depth interviews were conducted with all PR managers in public and private universities for the following reasons. Even though the researcher contacted all the PR managers to seek their participation in the study, the expectation was that some may not agree to be interviewed or that some may have had commitments that would prevent them from participating. Thus, all 31 PR managers were contacted to ensure a higher response rate. Twenty-two of the 31 PR managers were interviewed when the saturation point was reached, and the interview process was terminated. The saturation point is reached when enough data exists to ensure the research questions can be answered (Bowen, 2008). Table 2 lists the 22 informants, their ages and genders.

Table 2. Informants for the Interviews

Informant	Age	Gender
1	53	Male
2	33	Female
3	43	Male
4	45	Male
5	60	Male
6	62	Male
7	52	Male
8	41	Male
9	55	Male
10	48	Male
11	42	Male
12	37	Female
13	55	Male
14	65	Male
15	46	Male
16	32	Male
17	27	Female
18	40	Male
19	29	Female
20	35	Male
21	26	Female
22	45	Female

Data Collection

An in-depth interview was chosen as the data collection method to obtain more extensive data and overcome the limitations inherent in other methods. An in-depth interview technique was selected as a semi-structured interview to provide an opportunity to explore issues in detail and to uncover ideas or experiences that were not anticipated at the outset. One question asked respondents to address the advantages and disadvantages of online public relations.

To facilitate and ensure understanding at all stages of the interview process, the researcher wrote the interview questions in English for submission to this study's supervisors to establish their content for this research. Then, the questions were translated into Arabic, so the interviewees understood them. The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview to quickly compare, compare and analyse the responses of the interviewed 22 managers in-depth and enable the researcher to expand upon the answers presented to explore prominent issues in more detail. The researcher conducted in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews in Arabic with PR managers.

Before the interviews, all managers were given an informed consent form from Universiti Utara Malaysia, which was signed and witnessed. The letter assured them that all information obtained would remain confidential and used for research purposes only and that they would stop the interview at any time. Interviews were held in the manager's office or an interview room, and participants' permission was secured to allow them to speak freely. The first interview was held on June 24, 2018, and the last was conducted on September 13, 2018. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. After completing the recorded interviews, the researcher transcribed the responses verbatim in Arabic and translated them into English. Dr Anjad Mahasneh from the language centre at Al Yarmouk University in Jordan verified the translation.

RESULTS

NVivo divided the advantages and disadvantages of online PR into five groups: potential cost savings, the spread of information, potential added costs, resolving problems, and the organisation's visibility. These were seen as the most critical advantages and disadvantages of online PR. Figure 1 presents the mapping of the findings.
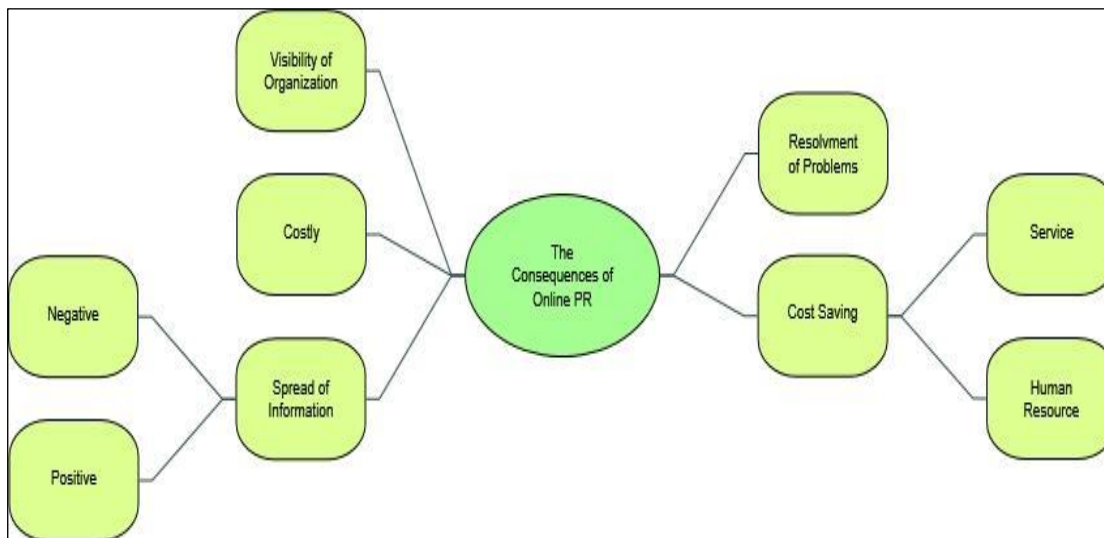
Figure 1: Research Finding of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Online PR

Theme 1: Spread of Information

Based on the data analysis, the spread of information was classified in terms of negative and positive information. Most informants agreed that one essential function of online PR was spreading information, although this information could be spread negative or positive. Negative results included information that came about as a result of negative comments by students or the spread of information by unqualified staff. Among the positive information was the ability to spread information quickly, correct information, and spread good news about the university.

Negative Information

Most informants mentioned that one consequence of online PR was spreading negative information. For example, Informant 16 said, "The other thing is that it does not have any control; anyone can publish any ideas negatively about us."

According to informants, the negative spread of information may be due to students or even unqualified staff. As Informant 14 noted:

One of the negative factors that affect the use of social media in our work is that some students use social media to publish negative things about the university, which harms it, and this puts us in a crisis. Sometimes some mistakes may be written about the university. For example, one time, a student posted on Facebook that the university students were sitting on the ground, and there were no seats for them. This was a maintenance issue, and the instructor asked students to choose between sitting on the ground or postponing the lecture. There was an agreement to take the lecture at its time and sit on the ground. Then, it was published on Facebook that students of the university sit on the ground to take their lectures.' As a result, we were attacked by many parties and our competitors; all that was because social media was used too severely.

Informant 10 highlighted that in a case in which an employee was unqualified to respond and disseminate information, he or she would cause the dissemination of negative information about the university:

If a person is not qualified to respond to the questions in a non-specialised and accurate way, it is negative; all the responses to social media are documented when you publish an announcement or publication. For example, we now have a summer semester, and we have a specific fee, and there is disagreement on the costs of the first semester, and I have designed a publication for the summer and the first semester. I cannot write in this publication that it is valid for a certain period, but if anyone asks me, I tell him that I have published the post for a specific semester, and you can review the history of the post. So, publishing on social media is a very sensitive subject, but it also gives the institution more credibility.

Proper use of PR techniques permitted constructive responses to negative news. As Informant 13 explained:

I do not respond directly, and I do not deny any rumour or accusation because denying according to people becomes assertive, but we use other methods. For example, if information says that a faculty member had fallen and broken his hand, I do not deny the news, but the next day I post a story with his photo. In this case, the audience will ask about the reality of his broken hand. You can explain your position without denying or lying, but in an indirect way. If there is an accusation about the institution, I do not need to refute it directly. But I can ask an official to include the topic in a speech….

Positive Information

Eight informants mentioned the positive effect of spreading information via online PR. For example, Informant 9 said, "If you use social media well, you will achieve many positive results such as greater spread, attractions, university promotion, clarification of subjects, and improving [your] reputation."

Informant 14 gave more details about the positive effects of spreading information about the university, saying:

The positive returns are the ability to use social media to spread the university's name and its reliable and accurate news, to improve the image and reputation of the university, and to attract students. It also has to do with the ranking of the university, although we do not use all channels of social media. Still, we put them on the university website with the hope of using and developing them in the future to reach the largest segment. We are currently putting it as an indicator of the future.

This opinion also was supported by Informant 12:

This helps to be the source of news and others and to assure that what is published on your page is correct and that there is transparency and honesty in publishing. What matters for me is the delivery of the university news to all the media channels. This is one of the most critical factors from the academic media that cares about the university's news in general and the news of higher education and education because we cover the school's news at the university.

This opinion was also supported by Informant 15, who explained the details:

Most of what we do is to cover activities of the university or awareness of messages that the university wants to post. This might be a community service that I want to deliver to the community or promotional messages to attract students. Social media has become an important

channel for the university, especially in the case of promotion, holding seminars, activities, and awards taken by the university. Everything that happens at the university is published on social media, especially on Facebook.

Theme 2: Visibility of the Organisation

Based on the data analysis, the informants believed that online PR could raise the visibility of an organisation. Among the factors related to this were flexibility and the ability to reach a broad audience while communicating its vision. Eight informants considered the visibility of an organisation as a consequence of online PR. Informant 6 said:

Today, social media has become a necessary tool to inform other institutions of what we have as a university, such as activities, projects, experts, and consultants. Social media is playing this role by telling the community of our competencies.

Informant 11 added, "The reliance on the university's use of social media is essential because the information is published as an advertisement, news, and activity that reaches a large number of students."

Informant 3 emphasised the flexibility of social media and its ability to achieve the university objectives, "Social media can be used and supported by children, women, the elderly, and anyone. Thus, the impact of social media will be much higher than any other media to deliver our vision."

Informant 12 referred to the role of social media role in communicating the vision of the university to the public through the students who share the publications:

The students also share these publications, which helps to deliver the information to the most significant 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. Social media usage is widespread both among our students and students from other universities and helps 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 generalise it widely.

Theme 3: Potential Cost Savings

Based on the data analysis, respondents believed that online PR could save service and human resources costs. Using social media was seen as less expensive than paying for placements in newspapers; social media shortened the time spent communicating with key publics because information could be posted immediately, reduced effort and publishing costs and free posting the information on Facebook.

Service

Five informants mentioned that another consequence of online PR was saving the costs of services. Informant 21 said: "Instead of publishing a newspaper advertisement that is worth 4,000 dinars, I now publish it on Facebook for free, and I post it in Arab countries also for free or at a straightforward cost."

Informant 11 mentioned the same idea:

From the positive returns to the use of social media is shortening time and lessening effort and savings in financial expenses. For example, I can deliver the information to 7,000 people in a minute via social media and free of charge, while if I want to design posters and printed paper, it will cost me, and the message may not be reached

Informant 13 explained that the use of social media had become an alternative to traditional means because of its low costs:

In addition to our efforts to preserve the image of the university, we also seek to reduce the costs of advertising and publishing through the use of social media instead of using paper or television ads, and we can publish free of charge through social media pages.

Informant 15 praised the same idea. He mentioned financial returns because of the use of social media:

The consequence of our use of social media is to increase financial returns because social media has provided us with easy and fast tools through which we can reach the most significant number of our audience at the lowest costs. We can attract the most significant number of students from Jordan and all the Arab countries.

Human Resources

Informant 21 mentioned that saving the cost of human resources was another potential advantage of online PR. She said:

The second benefit is that these things do not [entail publishing costs]. Instead of publishing a newspaper advertisement that costs 4,000 dinars, I now post it on Facebook for free, and I publish it in Arab countries also for free or at a straightforward cost.

Theme 4: Resolving Problems

Based on the data analysis, problem solving was an advantage of online PR. Informants noted that they could resolve student problems like registration, address them quickly and professionally, and respond quickly and efficiently to real comments. Five informants mentioned that the problems that face the students and university could be solved through social media. As Informant 8 said, "Some students have problems, and you can solve their problems first before they get worse."

Informant 21 pointed out that social media is a source of awareness about student problems: "Through social media, I can know what happens with my students, and I can solve their problems through their comments and publications and take the reaction at once."

Informant 19 provided more details about how they discovered the problems that face students through the comments:

When we use Facebook, we take real comments, and we, as PR, take care of the issues we had not noticed or known. For example, when a student comes and tells you about the problems with bus schedules and lectures, it is 100% a real complaint. This reaction and feedback are

one of the best things in social media that cannot be obtained anywhere else. It works on the principle of two-way communication between the audience and the university and vice versa.

Informant 11 gave another example of a student's problem and its solution:

Facebook is also used to share all the news posted on the university website and is also a platform to solve the problems of the students directly. For example, if a student writes that the registration was not open for me, and you did not activate the program of withdrawal and extension, we directly solve these problems. We address them and turn them to the concerned parties.

Theme 5: Potential Added Costs

The data analysis showed that added costs were a potential disadvantage of online PR. Although online PR could reduce placement costs, online PR also could produce additional costs, and that was because additional staff with the requisite expertise were required, and prepaid cards to use tools where required. Three informants mentioned that increased cost could also be a consequence of online PR practice.

For instance, Informant 11 said, The social media spokesman serves an additional role in drawing an honourable picture for the institution [which might lead to increased costs]."

Informant 9 also articulated this viewpoint. He explained that the consequence of using social media was a demand for additional staff, which adds another expense to the university. He said:

We have to find a mechanism to deal with things that do not exist now. Employees cannot follow the process of social media, respond and comment, and the current situation does not achieve the minimum to deal with social media. These employees are not enough. Frankly, we may need more than this number. But if we want to bring more employees or specialists in social media, the university will reject this because it is costly, and the university now suffers from financial problems.

Informant 5 noted:

For the dissemination of information and attraction of new students, we should have rapid response, and we should answer anything because when someone sends you a message or a comment, you must respond immediately without delay. If we assume that someone who lives abroad sends a message or a comment and there is no response, then he will think that the responsible person does not want to reply or that there is a state of transcendence. Thus, the speed response is significant. Also, sometimes, we need a prepaid card to sponsor announcements on social media sites, and this card is expensive. The university did not allocate a budget for social media yet.

DISCUSSION

The themes related to the advantages and disadvantages of online PR fell into five groups. Advantages were cost savings, the spread of information, potential added costs, and raising the organisation's visibility; the disadvantage was potential costs related to human resources. Some

informants noted a downside of online PR regarding staff costs and that hiring additional employees with the requisite expertise could be expensive.

Informants noted that information spread via online PR could be either negative or positive. Among the negative factors were misinformation and rumours. They believed they had no control over negative information, but they counter it by explaining the university's position. They also felt that if social media were well used, many positive results could be achieved, such as greater spread, promoting the university, clarifying issues, and improving reputation.

Among the positive returns was the ability to use social media to spread the university's name and reliable and accurate news, improve the image and reputation of the university, and attract students. Informants believed that online PR could be used to raise the visibility of the university. Some believed that social media had become necessary to inform other institutions about university activities, projects, experts, and consultants. They felt that social media played a crucial role in telling the community about the university's competencies and believed that social media had a role in communicating the university's vision to the public through the students who shared the publications.

They believed that social media reduced costs in spreading the message because they were less expensive than other means of communication like newspaper advertising, and social media further shortened the time and reduced effort and financial expenses. Informant 15 noted that "the consequences of the use of social media is to increase financial returns because social media has provided us with easy and fast tools through which we can reach the most significant number of audience at the lowest costs. We can attract the most significant number of students from Jordan and all the Arab countries."

Many believed that the problems of students could be solved through social media. For example, social media can create awareness of student issues. Informant 19 noted that when "we publish on Facebook, we take real comments, and we as PR take care of the issues we did not notice or know. For example, when a student comes and tells you about the problems with bus schedules and lectures, it is 100% a real complaint. This reaction and feedback are one of the best things in social media that cannot be obtained anywhere else. It works on the principle of a two-way communication between the audience and the university and vice versa."

Previous studies have found many consequences of using online PR in organisations. For example, Young (2017) indicated that organisations are generally satisfied with social media and use them primarily to promote their organisation and services; and despite limited resources, these organisations plan to continue using social media in the future. Moreover, Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) and Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) found that using online PR is essential to creating a two-way communication, interactivity, dialogue, and engagement with the public via social media.

The findings of this current study agree with both of these studies. The Jordanian universities studied used online PR to communicate with their key publics, were satisfied with usage, used them for promotional activities and planned to use them in the future. Like Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) and Kelleher and Sweetser (2012) found, this current study found that using online PR was essential to creating two-way communication, interactivity, dialogue, and engagement with publics via social media.

Campbell, Lambright and Wells (2014) and Moreno et al. (2015) confirmed that a high level of usage of social media gives social media channels more importance, promotes the influence of social media on internal and external stakeholders, increases the relevance of key gatekeepers and stakeholders, and permits a better self-estimation of competences. This current study found the same. As Wright and Hinson (2008) noted in their study, social media has changed how organisations communicate, especially with external audiences, and encouraged organisations to respond more quickly to criticisms.

This current study aligned with these findings. Sutherland (2011) explored utilising Facebook to create an online community for PR students and found that a Facebook page can facilitate interaction and engagement between PR university students and educators. In this current study, the informants said that they used Facebook in the same manner. Cortés (2009) argued that online PR has other consequences, like building and maintaining a positive image. Informants in this study made the same case. Bojei and Abu (2016) noted that social media is crucial in reaching out to people and can have a decisive effect on companies and organisations. One of the advantages of social media was the easier communication enabled between the organisation closer to the public. The findings of this current study reflect the same.

This current study aligns with Halkias and Komodromos (2016), who explained that PR and marketing practitioners use more blogs, forums, and social networks because they can respond to online opinions or criticisms. Additionally, this study agreed with Shahid et al. (2018), who found that social media provide PR practitioners with a pathway for communication with a wide range of public as well as how to develop more close relationships.

CONCLUSION

A careful reading of the study's findings may provide guidelines for PR practitioners to follow to develop successful online PR practices at other universities and perhaps in other organisations in the Middle East. These guidelines include: strategies and their concomitant tactics must be developed to reach specific publics; metrics must be created to measure the impacts of online PR; top management must provide organisational support for online PR; qualified employees with the necessary skills must be hired and their skills updated with frequent training; employees must be incentivised to achieve their best performance; organisations should monitor social media carefully and respond quickly to any adverse comments; and organisations should monitor social media to address and solve problems of their key publics.

As with all research, this current study has limitations. First, this study employed a qualitative research approach. Nonetheless, this study can assist in a deeper understanding of social media usage in online PR activities. However, this research is far from the representatives of online PR practice in all Jordanian sectors and organisations. Because this study used a small number of interviews in public and private universities in the context of Jordan at a single moment in time, this study suffers from some inherent biases in qualitative studies.

Additionally, the study is limited in scope because it is qualitative, so generalising the results is impossible. Thus, future studies need to use quantitative methodologies with metrics to make the results generalisable. Nevertheless, the study's results provide initial evidence for how online PR is practised in Jordanian PR departments. Additionally, future studies could consider

other sectors in Jordan and other organisations in the Arab and developed countries and compare these findings. Further studies could also replicate the methodology contained in this study to encompass a larger sample, which may have more generalisable results. Additionally, future studies could be longitudinal.

Second, the current study only examined the point of view of the PR managers in Jordanian universities. As with any study using in-depth interviews, the data gathered only illuminates the interviewees' point of view, which may or may not be representative of the opinions of other PR practitioners. Therefore, future studies are recommended on mid-level employees working in PR departments. Third, qualitative studies are restricted by the researcher's interpretation. Though the researcher did the best to mitigate any bias, a different researcher could have interpreted the interviewees' responses differently. Personal experiences, knowledge and backgrounds undoubtedly impact the understanding of communication phenomena. Thereby, future studies should examine the issues from an external perspective, such as the service recipients, to avoid researcher interference and, consequently, more generalisation results. Also, the study provides a clarion call for developing a media relation strategy and websites that provide adequate information for journalists, reporters, news organisations, and key publics.

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