

## **Public relations at the crossroads: the need to reclaim core public relations competencies in digital communication**

### **Purpose:**

Using the theoretical lens of social capital, this paper provides insight into senior public relations (PR) professionals' views on and attitudes towards digital communication in Singapore and Perth, Western Australia and explores the fundamental question of public relations' purpose.

### **Design/methodology/approach:**

Drawing on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and in particular his notion of social capital, this exploratory study is based on the critical analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with senior PR professionals in Singapore and Perth, Western Australia

### **Findings:**

PR professionals concur with assumptions made in the extant literature regarding the potential of digital media for public relations, despite broad agreement that the fundamentals of good communication have not changed. At its core public relations is about counselling, relationships and the building of social capital. Hence, digital tools and platforms are typically being referred to as merely an extension of the public relations toolkit. However, as illustrated within the context of influencer engagement, public relations has increasingly adopted advertising-led models and is moved away from its core business of developing strategic relationships and goodwill, hence contributing to the convergence of previously distinct communication functions.

### **Originality/value:**

This paper is believed to be one of the first to look at the theory of social capital related to public relations within a digital context. Further, it takes a holistic view of public relations professionals' views on working with digital media in two geographical locations that have been under-represented in scholarly work in the field of public relations. While much of the extant literature has focused on the benefits of social media for public relations, this paper takes a critical look at current challenges, including the rise of social media influencers. The paper contributes to theory relevant to social capital as it looks at the convergence of the professions relevant to digital disruption and argues for public relations claiming its distinctive attributes.

### **Keywords:**

Digital communication, social capital, convergence, social media, public relations, influencers, Australia, Singapore, South-East Asia.

### **Type:**

Research paper

## **Introduction**

Digital communication is now an accepted and assumed part of everyday life and hence a crucial ingredient of the professional communicator's toolkit. This paper provides insight into senior PR professionals' views on and attitudes towards digital communication in Western Australia and Singapore, with a particular focus on its contributions to the public relations function and discipline.

This study is part of a longitudinal project investigating public relations professionals' attitudes towards digital communication. When this project first commenced in 2010 in Western Australia, the focus was very much on *Web2.0* and what was then labelled 'new' media. However, over the course of the past years the terminology and focus has very much shifted towards digital technologies. In contrast to the emphasis in the extant scholarly literature, which appears to be on social media and networks, and their impact on communicators and their audience (Wright and Hinson, 2017), this project set out to examine online and digital communication in a more holistic way. Within the context of this study 'digital' is framed as both the online technologies and platforms that have shaped communication over the past decade, including commonly accepted tools such as email, micro blogging platforms, as well as digital devices, such as tablets and mobile phones.

The aim of this study is to provide a first-hand insight into Singapore and West Australian based PR professionals' perceptions of and attitudes towards digital technologies, including associated challenges and their implication for the future of the profession, using a social capital lens. In doing so, it makes a significant contribution to PR theory, by conceptualising digital communication within a public relations context. It further more adds to the understanding of international public relations practice, by providing insight into two less examined cultural context, (Western) Australia and Singapore. Most importantly, this study raises significant questions for the practice of public relations, in particular in relation to its unique perspective and contribution within an increasingly converged (digital) communication space.

### **Public relations practice in Singapore and Western Australia**

Although public relations is a global practice (Curtin and Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009), scholarly literature examining new, digital or online technologies has been characterised by a prevailing US focus. Despite its location, the Australian PR industry appears to be predominantly inward looking (Wolf, 2016). Benchmarking (studies) tend to focus on western contexts, in particular the United Kingdom and the United States of America (see e.g. Macnamara, 2016), with limited attention being paid to the wider region. Globally, there is the need for more cross-cultural benchmarking studies to further enhance the PR body of knowledge, in particular in relation to the attitude toward and adaption to new digital technologies. Responding to calls for a renewed focus on culture and more qualitative approaches in PR scholarship (L'Etang, 2011; Pal and Dutta, 2008) this study explores consultants' perceptions of digital communication in two countries. Western Australia's capital Perth and Singapore have previously been the focus of comparative studies into attitudes to new technologies (Fitch, 2009; Fitch, 2009b) and intercultural competence (Fitch, 2012). Perth, located on the west coast of Australia, is the country's fourth most populated city with approximately two million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The vast majority of West Australian public relations professionals are located in the State's capital city, which is also where the vast majority of consultancies are based. Singapore, located on the southern tip of the Asian continent, is home to around 5.6 million people (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2017). Both are multicultural, highly globalised cities. They are also close business partners and hosts of multiple cross-national PR educational programs. Their relative geographical proximity is particularly noteworthy. Both cities are located in the same time zone. Furthermore, at 3900 kilometres

and approximately five hours travel by plane, the distance between Perth and Singapore is only marginally further than the one between Perth and Sydney, on the east coast of Australia (3300 kilometres, 4:10 hours), which in addition attracts a two or three hour time difference.

Singapore and Australia are both described as a highly developed and successful free-market economies (CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) 2018). They are both prosperous nations, with high internet and mobile phone penetration. Both locations have a relatively high rate of internet usage, with 85% of Australians and 82.5% of Singaporeans accessing the internet regularly in 2016 (Internet Live Stats, 2016).

Given that consumers are embracing digital technology in both countries in ever increasing numbers, it is critical to assess public relations' practitioners' views on digital communication. Public relations is a mature industry in both nations, with both having a professional body representing practitioners. The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) was formed in 1949 and the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (IPRS) was established in 1970. According to its website, the PRIA represents and provides professional support and recognition to over 4,000 practitioners and more than 100 consultancies nationwide. In Singapore, the IPRS has, again according to its website, 300 active members. One of the few (now dated) studies focusing on public relations practice in Singapore found that 45.5% of practitioners' time was spent on what the public relations literature terms "managerial" work and 54.5% on "technical" work (Lim et al., 2005). Meanwhile, the most recent study into the state of the PR industry in Australia found that PR practitioners primarily relied on online tools for the promotion of products and services and media relations, but less for strategic research and benchmarking purposes. An earlier version of this nationwide study found that *Web 2.0* appeared to be an extremely low priority for Australian public relations, highlighting a continued reliance on print and print production (de Bussy and Wolf, 2009).

## **Literature review**

New technologies have captured the attention of public relations scholars for over three decades, although the focus has shifted over time from usability studies, examining the mechanics of a particular medium, to perception studies, as detailed in Duhe's (2015) review of communication technology research published over 34 years in six public relations journals. Within this context new technologies have been hailed as potential rejuvenators of public relations (PR2.0), power equalisers and revivers of democracy (Kent, 2013).

One of the biggest recommendations of the Excellence Study (Grunig, 1992) was that there should be a distinct separation between communication functions – such as marketing, advertising and public relations - in the organisational context. However, the past decade has been marked by an increased level of convergence of communication roles and responsibilities, in particular within the context of PR and marketing communication (Hutton, 1996; Hutton, 2010). Public relations has broadened its sphere of activity towards traditional marketing areas (Hutton, 1996; Hutton, 2010). However, simultaneously

traditional PR concepts such as 'social responsibility', 'license to operate' and trust are increasingly being integrated in marketing (communication) (Zerfass and Dühning, 2012). The rise of digital tools and technologies has arguably resulted in an increased level of convergence between these traditionally nominally distinctive professions, as well as journalism, into roles that are now simply labelled *digital*, or *social* (Zerfass and Dühning, 2012). A study by Wright and Hinson (2017) found that while the majority of respondents felt social media should be the responsibility of a communication and PR department, the emergence of specialised departments has lowered the actual percentage of PR coordinated social activity.

### *Opportunities for public relations in the digital sphere*

The deliberate, planned and sustained effort to build relationships with an organisation's diverse range of stakeholders is at the core of public relations practice. In contrast to marketing or advertising, the focus is less on direct revenue or a specific product or service, but on the consistent management of communication channels and (an organisation's) reputation. Hence, public relations efforts may be seen as a long-term investment. Digital tools and platforms are performing an increased role in supporting these efforts. Indeed, much of the extant public relations literature argues that social media has irrevocably reshaped public relations practice for the positive (see e.g. Allagui and Breslow, 2016; DiStaso et al., 2011; DiStaso and Corkindale, 2012). Further, most contemporary research within public relations is guided by the assumption that social media is a tool for relationship building. The 'engagement' potential, and dialogic qualities of social media, it has been argued, make it a natural fit for public relations (Allagui and Breslow, 2016; Paek et al., 2013; Wright and Hinson, 2017).

However, these arguments appear to be predominantly based on single case studies and conceptual papers. PR scholarship lacks a holistic approach to digital, failing to critically examine online engagement and its shortcomings (Valentini, 2015). Instead, the focus has been on the use of individual platforms (Kim, 2016) and in particular their use as media relations "tools" (see e.g. Wright & Hinson's (2017) longitudinal study), with negligent study of Digital Social Media (DSM) stakeholders and publics (Verčič et al., 2015), and a secondary focus on sales (see e.g. Charest et al., 2016). While most studies have been positive, a number of challenges have been noted within the context of digital communication, such as the need for ongoing monitoring and related resource implications, the expectation of fast response rates and "loss of [message] control" (Macnamara, 2010b), as well as associated ethical challenges, as PR professionals adapt to new, in particular influencer dominated, communication models (Toledano and Avidar, 2016). Charest et al. (2016) refer to the integration of influencers as "the most significant trend in the evolution of [digital communication]" (p. 536), although they acknowledge the limited alignment with and integration into communication strategy.

Throughout the literature, *dialogue* continues to be perceived largely as a process, rather than a product or outcome (Kent and Taylor, 1998). In the words of Kent (2013): "The medium has come to matter more than the message" (p.338). There remains a lack of empirical data on the ways in which public relations practitioners are *utilising* digital media and how these are *influencing or changing* PR practice,

as originally observed by Macnamara (2010b; 2010a). Power differentials between organisations and publics have not been given appropriate attention and there are significant limitations to viewing social media purely as a tool for relationship building (Kennedy and Sommerfeldt, 2015). In a recent study Charest et al. (2016) discovered that companies would reject interactivity if it was likely to decrease their power or control over relationships with customers. Overall, the perceived need to forge “onwards into uncharted territory” appears to be “driven by trial and error, informal discourses and emerging industry practices to create new forms of social media regulation and etiquette” (Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2015: p. 349). It hence may be argued that PR professionals and scholars have become too preoccupied by new technologies and the perceived urgency to embrace emerging tools that they have regressed from the “role as organization–public relationship builders and counsellors, to marketers, advertisers, and strategic communicators” (Kent, 2013: p.341), hence further contributing to the level of convergence across previously distinctive roles and disciplines.

### *The role of social capital in public relations*

Given its focus on relationship building and two-way engagement with a broad range of publics or stakeholders, the development of social capital arguably lies at the heart of public relations practice (Ihlen, 2005). Social capital signifies much more than connections and memberships in a group. It is a sociological concept that refers to the intangible, relational assets that emerge from social interactions. The French sociologist Bourdieu defines social capital in more detail as

“those actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of...relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1997: , p.51).

This definition implies that social capital has two components: the size of an individual's network and what Van Deth (2008) refers to as “accumulated wealth” (p. 150), i.e. the volume of the capital, namely. the sum of the resources, tangible or virtual, that the other parts of the network have, and which an individual agent, group or organisation can effectively mobilise (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Social capital accrues as a result of conscious and unconscious investment strategy, involving exchanges of, for example, time, messages, concern, services, or gifts (Ihlen, 2005). Hence, it is a long term investment with a focus on building goodwill, with limited to no short-term return on investment, and hence arguably mirrors the values and strengths of public relations.

It is however important to note that different types of capital are valued depending on the field that PR professionals, the organisations they represent or their clients operate in. According to Bourdieu, society is made up of many different fields (or “champs” in French), such as education, art, health, business or religion. While fields can overlap, each is characterised by a limited amount of capital or power, which is unevenly shared between the different actors or players (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Ihlen, 2009). Hence, fields – and ultimately society – are characterised by constant conflict and competition, as individual actors seek to maintain or increase their relative share of symbolic and material resources,

which will allow them to position themselves and ultimately further their own interests (Bourdieu, 1991). Certain types of (social) capital may be held in higher regard in some fields, than in others. For example, an extensive network and close relationships with fashion bloggers may be considered as valuable in the beauty or lifestyle sector, whilst close contacts with decision makers and politicians would be particularly emphasised within the field of lobbying.

Kennan and Hazleton (2006) argue that “public relations practitioners are those with the capacity to cultivate, maintain and expend social capital on behalf of their organization” (p. 325). Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2011) go a step further, in referring to the fostering of social capital as “public relations’ *raison d’être* because it creates and maintains collaborative relationships between an organization and its publics” (p. 199). Despite an increased focus on social capital in PR scholarship (see e.g. Dodd et al., 2015; Edwards, 2009; Ihlen, 2005; Kennan and Hazleton, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Willis, 2012), its role and potential within the context of digital communication is yet to be examined. If the dialogic qualities of digital - and in particular social media - are a natural fit for public relations, then it should enable its practitioners to achieve their core goals more effectively, i.e. increase public relations’ (departments’) capacity to build social capital. This proposition will be further examined in this paper, in particular within the context of increased convergence between communication functions.

### **Study justification**

Duhé (2015) argues that despite the enthusiasm surrounding the potential of digital tools and platforms for public relations, the emergence of new technologies is nothing new, as “public relations scholars and practitioners have grappled with adjusting to new media since the dawn of practice” (p. 153). However, the challenge to deal with digital/social/mobile media in particular remains among the top three concerns in practice (Zerfass et al., 2017), thereby emphasising the need for further critical investigation of the practitioner perspective. Furthermore, due to the prevailing focus on single case studies and conceptual papers, there appears to be a lack of insight into the consultancy perspective. Only 2.6% of the studies in Verčič, et al.’s (2015) systematic literature review of Digital Social Media (DSM) examined digital through a consultancy lens. Most importantly, scholarly insights lack a holistic approach to and critical analysis of the impact ‘digital’ has on public relations practice, beyond the prevailing focus on individual technologies and platforms, and in particular social media. While social capital theory has been applied in the public relations realm (see e.g. Dodd et al., 2015; Edwards, 2009; Ihlen, 2005; Kennan and Hazleton, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Willis, 2012), it has not been fully examined relating to the rise of digital and its impact on practice.

### **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to examine PR practitioner perspective of and attitudes toward digital technologies through a social capital lens. The focus of this research is on senior communicators in consultancies, as these are the professionals that clients turn to for current and timely advice. Consultants have the advantage of working across a range of accounts and clients and therefore can be assumed to have a more holistic understanding of the challenges and benefits associated with digital

technologies, new tools and platforms across different types of publics and communication briefs. They can hence also be assumed to be under pressure to remain up to date with new technologies. The majority of these assumed 'experts' are members of their respective professional industry body, either via individual and/or organisational membership arrangements and should therefore arguably be committed to both professional development and ethical practice by virtue of their membership.

This exploratory study takes a qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews with 12 senior PR professionals in Singapore and 19 in Perth, Western Australia. Participants were either Managing Directors (or equivalent), or leads of either the public relations department or digital portfolio. The Perth interviewees were all employees of consultancies and members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) registered consultancy group. The Singaporean interviewees were recruited via a contact at the Institute of PR Singapore (IPRS). As mentioned, this study is part of a longitudinal project, tracking attitudes towards digital communication (in Australia). The research questions guiding this particular stage of the project were:

RQ1: How and to what extent are digital tools and platforms integrated in public relations practice in a) Western Australia and b) Singapore? (including perceived associated challenges and opportunities)

RQ2: Given the emphasis on the engagement potential and dialogic qualities of digital and social tools in the extant literature, to what extent are these being utilised to support traditional public relations capabilities?

The 29 individual interviews with a total of 31 practitioners that this paper is based on were conducted in early to mid-2017. Interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face at the participants' offices by the two authors (individually and occasionally together. Due to preference and availability reasons, a small number of interviews took place in coffee shops and by phone/WhatsApp). A handheld MP3 recorder was used to record all interviews.

The qualitative research approach was guided by the underlying principle of gaining rich, in depth insights (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Interviews ranged in length from 27 to 93 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and consequently independently coded by the two researchers in NVivo 11, based on an inductive thematic analysis approach. To protect participants' identity, names have been changed to pseudonyms, followed by either A (Australia) or S (Singapore) to indicate their location.

## **Findings**

The industries represented and their respective geographical location make both the Western Australian and Singaporean public relations industry unique. However, they are also surprisingly similar in terms of the deep embeddedness of digital technology in contemporary communication, as well as the perceived associated challenges. Most importantly, participants in both locations acknowledge that the fundamentals of professional communication have not changed as a result of new technologies,

although approaches to influencer engagement somewhat challenge this claim, as will be discussed in more detail over the following paragraphs.

Answering RQ1, findings indicate that digital technologies are now perceived as the norm for public relations practitioners. During the early stages of the longitudinal project some Perth-based consultancies were heavily investing in dedicated digital departments and the recruitment of overseas expertise. However, digital technologies and associated capabilities are no longer singled out as a stand-alone focus, but are instead deeply embedded:

It's almost a must. Simply because we're in an era where technology is part of everything we do. .... I like to say technology is a necessary evil. I think where technology is concerned, communication cannot happen without technology. You'll never get the numbers and reach with traditional media. It takes too long. (Mandy S.)

This applies to campaigns of all sizes and across sectors and industries

Most of our communication is done online these days, in some way, shape, or form. We still engage in a bit of old school communications; we still like a hard copy invitation, and we still like doing a few of those kinds of things. .... I can't imagine a campaign without having a digital component, these days. (Candice A.)

However, despite the overwhelming endorsement of digital communication by PR professionals in Singapore and Australia, not everyone feels comfortable in the online space. A level of reluctance, or "reservation", appears to remain, which participants attribute largely to a lack of available and relevant training. Furthermore, there remains the fear of being exposed to criticism and the risk of being 'trolled'. Despite the Singaporean government being praised by participants for being progressive and facilitating access to new technologies, a number of interviewees singled out Singaporean public servants as being overly cautious online, as "many of them [are] old school. They are not engaging. They are just pushing information." And "they are so fearful that they can't retract [information once issued online]" (Roger S.). As noted in earlier studies (see e.g. Charest et al., 2016), the desire to maintain full message control appears to be a key factor when considering interactivity across locations, followed by resource considerations. Roger S. explains further: "They don't think they can run around the clock...or maybe they don't want their comms team to wake up around the clock [in response to message alerts and arising issues]".

However, despite reluctance by some clients to embrace social media, online monitoring and social listening are recognised as core responsibilities of public relations professionals, irrespective of the level of a client's online engagement:

"We've still got some clients that are really social media nervous so that's where we will do the monitoring/listening thing" (Laura A.).

Social listening is being embraced across accounts and client organisations. A number of practitioners also discussed how they perceived it as their responsibility to educate clients about the merits of online



communication and tools, by slowly introducing them to the digital sphere via social listening summaries, relevant case studies and tailored proposals.

Overall, participants are very positive about the future of public relations. The consensus appears to be that new communication tools and platforms are providing new opportunities for communicators. Changes in technology, increased user friendliness, lower price points and accessibility are enabling communicators to generate content in-house, without having to draw on the expertise of external specialists:

Due to budget constraints and manpower, we actually go out there and do it ourselves. We just use our own mobile phones and go and get content that it is a little bit more raw for Instastories just to create this more familiar feel for people. It's like looking at something their friend would post. (Lavinia S.)

### *Singapore-Perth comparison*

Despite commonalities, as outlined above, the PR industry in Perth, Western Australia and Singapore, are both unique in terms of their strengths and challenges. Whilst the Australian communication industry appears to be very much inward looking (Wolf, 2016), Singapore's PR professionals are connected throughout the wider (South-East) Asian region, which can be attributed at least partially to the country's geographic location. Participants in Singapore made frequent references to other cultures and the international context, in particular in relation to the availability of digital platforms, communication challenges and client expectations.

Perth is one of the most isolated metropolitan areas in the world (Fatovich and Jacobs, 2009; Houghton, 1990), and the Perth communication industry has a strong focus on mining and infrastructure based clients. The nation's fast moving consumer good (FMCG) accounts tend to be serviced by consultancies – or network headquarters – based on the east coast of the country. Western Australia may be the country's largest State, but its communication expertise is very much concentrated in Perth. This is illustrated by the sample in this study: although the authors originally set out to focus on public relations in Western Australia, only one participant was located outside metropolitan Perth, approximately 2.5 hours to the South, a location that had been chosen more for lifestyle reasons than business opportunities. Participants feel that they have to be “all-rounders” (or rather a “jack of all trades” (Benita A.; Laura A.; Mary A.; Margret A.), as perceivably the market does not provide sufficient scope to specialise. In contrast, the Singaporean communication industry is diverse and busy due to Singapore's position as a regional hub for various sectors and industries (Manjur, 2015). Here, digital appears to be particularly associated with creativity, entertainment, i.e. an opportunity to “be less formal and have more fun” (Agnes S.), and stakeholder engagement.

You don't quite get that with traditional media like television and radio, so besides being a source of entertainment, [digital] is also a source of feedback. So it is very important for us to maintain our digital platforms and make sure everything is up to date so then we engage our audience better. (Lavinia S.)

In this context, digital appears to be particularly associated with reaching younger audiences. New technologies and social media provide an opportunity to be less conventional.

As Australia is struggling with slow internet speeds (Whitley, 2017) and continued criticism of its national broadband network (Murphy, 2017), the Singaporean government has invested heavily in information technology and internet speeds (Corcoran, 2017). Ironically, despite the government's reluctance to endorse a liberal domestic (print) media (Lee, 2010), the growth of digital technologies and social media in particular has significantly impacted on public relations practices even in non-liberal societies like Singapore (Wei-Loong, 2012). For cultural reasons, government departments may be still keen on controlling messages and hence handling digital communication internally, but even the Prime Minister is highly visible and very active on Facebook and Instagram. The perception is that "He is willing to try a lot of things although he is in his 60s" (Roger, S.) and that sets the tone for the rest of the country, to the extent that the Ministry of Finance recently enlisted a group of young Instagram influencers to promote its latest budget (see e.g. Seow (2018)). The consensus appears to be that

Singapore is very progressive in the sense we are abreast of all the changes that have happened in terms of communications. All brands, all good brands and organisations will have an online presence. (Mandip S.)

This is not necessarily the case in (Western) Australia, due to the type of clients represented by study participants. However, the absence of an outward facing online (especially social) presence does not signify a lack of strategically used digital tools, which reportedly may be limited to internal audiences or are specifically used for recruitment purposes.

### *The basics haven't changed*

Despite the apparent excitement about new digital tools and associated opportunities for communicators, findings illustrate that the basics of public relations have not changed.

Personally I feel the whole PR skills and core comms [sic] skills are still important for PR professionals. One of the things we need to make sure to realise, we cannot actually be swept by the bells and whistles, we need to realise we need to take a step back, look beyond the bells and whistles, the glitz and the glamorous tools and all that and realise these are just tools. At the end of everything the core skills in ensuring that the company's reputation, the company's values still are key in the midst of all these changes. (Pei Ling S.)

And, you know, for me, the traditional is still really important, because at the end of the day, you need to be a strong strategist, and a strong writer to also be able to know how to handle a digital and social media campaign. (Fee, A.)

Traditional PR skills are still valid. The principles are still valid - it's simply applying them to this new technology. The skills...the strategies haven't changed. (Bhavya S.)

Hereby participants illustrate that the dialogic qualities of digital and social tools do not only *support* traditional public relations capabilities (RQ2), as implied in the literature, but have furthermore become

an essential part of it. Perth-based participants in particular referred to digital communication and social media platforms as “part of the buffet” (Mary A.) or “part of the toolbox” (Jeff A.). However, this ‘toolbox’ appears to be rather limited, with a focus on Facebook, Instagram and some video sharing content (predominantly YouTube). WhatsApp is perceived as a crucial tool for Singaporean communicators, especially in an effort to engage across the region, but is notably virtually non-existent in Australia.

At the core of public relations practice remain relationships and relationship building. This most importantly includes client relationships.

Look it [the communication landscape] has changed a lot but what hasn’t changed is the need for effective relationship development....And public relations is all about relationship development. (Margret A.)

I guess my core philosophy is that ultimately communications is really a tool for relationships and whether you need a relationship with somebody in order to form a commercial relationship to sell them a product or a service or whether it be a relationship in order to achieve some objective. (Jeff A.)

One relationship that received particular attention was the relationship organisations have with influencers, and their relationship with followers in return, which interestingly challenges some of the earlier statements. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper

### *The rise of the influencer*

The rise of influencers has emerged as a key theme from this study, which arguably characterises the evolution of the communication industry and associated complexities. Within this context we define an influencer as an “individual who has the power to substantially influence the behaviour or opinion of others, often due to perceived superior power, wealth, social status, expertise or intellect” (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2011: p.33), although the focus of this paper will be in particular on social media influencers. Social media influencers can be defined as “every-day, ordinary internet users who accumulate a large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blogs or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015). The dynamics of influencer engagement present major challenges to even the most experienced public relations professionals, due to the rapid rise of individual influencers, changing business models and only slowly evolving best practice approaches to the evaluation of influencer engagement.

Globally, the influencer space remains largely unregulated. In a first, the United Arab Emirates has recently announced licensing for influencers (Dajani, 2018). However, based on transparency guidelines introduced by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) in 2017 influencers are merely encouraged to include #ad or #spon to disclose posts paid for by a brand (Purtill, 2017), following the issuing of similar, non-enforceable guidelines by the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS) nine months earlier (Leck, 2016). Regulatory approaches are very much focused on

paid for content, with limited to no applicability to 'contra' deals and partnerships. This approach has its weaknesses as it ignores the different types of "sponsored" content, ranging from collaborations between influencers and brands around an issue, product or service, to payment in the form of exclusive experiences, travel or gifts and eventually paid for arrangements. Hence, current guidelines do not currently capture, or even recognise, what would be traditional PR-influencer partnerships, with a focus on collaboration and long-term relationship building.

Current regulation also fails to distinguish between authors of the content, i.e. arrangements where influencers maintain creative freedom and the ability to voice an honest opinion or review and those where social media personalities are provided with a carefully crafted, often non-negotiable, script (cash for comment). The lines appear to be blurring, resulting in the influencer sphere becoming increasingly difficult for communicators and audiences to navigate. The resulting confusion may explain why participants attributed greater level of credibility to traditional media:

Social media is good because it gives volume and huge numbers. Whereas traditional media give you credibility. (Amy S)

Reportedly, Perth-based public relations professionals have traditionally largely focused on the cultivation of "authentic" relationships. The influencer model endorsed by most local PR professionals remains largely relationship building and value creation focused, which is a resource intensive approach built on the alignment of brand values and key messages.

We don't often pay for bloggers. It's just not something we ethically feel is right..... bloggers are looking for is to be part of the process. So they don't want you just to pitch the idea and that's it. They actually want a relationship. (Alan, A)

My personal experience from working with a lot of influencers is that influencers want to be taken on a journey with you. (Elaine, A)

. We're very lucky - very, very fortunate at the moment. We are not doing a lot of sponsored posts. We've got a lot of success out there with a lot of bloggers and influencers, but we tend to do it the old fashioned way, which is the good old relationship building. We do a lot of engagement with our bloggers and influencers through events. (Sally, A.)

However, longitudinal data suggests a slow trend towards a paid endorsement model. For example, due to its geographical location and absence of FMC accounts, Perth has only recently seen the opening of its first dedicated influencer agency, which does however promise to match influencers with brands for a fee. In contrast, Singapore has been home to a broad range of agencies that promise brand the opportunity to "leverage on the opinion leaders and their influence to reach out to a larger market via their social media channels" (<http://starngage.com/>).

Perth-based participants differentiated between “every day Australians passionate about an issue” or pursued their online profile predominantly as a hobby to those who had cultivated a professional profile for business reasons, which often appears to coincide with an existing (media) profile. The two categories equally apply in Singapore, where communicators differentiated between opportunity and profit-driven influencers:

Influencers can be paid in cash, in kind or it could be some form of barter. What we need to ensure it's a win-win situation. For influencers who are paid in kind it's a sort of way of endorsing them, also a way for them to grow their fan base so it works both ways. (Pei Ling, S.)

This is their bread and butter so critically this is a business to them. There are other influencers who have more reach but they're just passionate about these things. So these are the ones we cultivate the relationship with whereas on the other hand we actually pay them. (Agnes, S.)

However, the Singaporean market is further segmented and advanced, with reference to tiers: micro, macro and mega influencers (Pei Ling, S.), ranging from every day Singaporeans to celebrities. These categories in turn determine the type and level of ‘compensation’ or fee, recognising that “of course there are influencers that you can pay to write a review for you” (Vincent S.) However, both countries are still a long way behind the United States, where reportedly “you can pay \$75,000 for one tweet from a B-lister (Fee A.).

Influencer marketing is a bit of a challenge. If you really want to form that authentic relationship you need to start building the relationship before you even ask them to endorse a product or write a review for you. So you need to... if you really want to form a relationship then that is the way... but of course there are the other influencers that you can pay to write a review for you. (Agnes S.)

The latter appears to be the model that is increasingly being favoured, with a rapid rise in influencer agencies. Findings indicate that there has been a marked shift from a focus on engagement and relationship building, to an advertising model. As interest and stakes in influencer marketing increase, the focus shifts from collaborative content creation and a level of creative freedom for influencers, to very specific briefs and even scripts that are supplied to influencers, hence further blurring the lines between traditionally separate communication functions, such as PR, marketing and in particular advertising.

If you ask me, local corporations how much are they into it? Sad to say they see online as marketing, not so much from a PR perspective. It is sales. (Roger S.)

Yes, we do use quite a fair bit of influencers for various clients. It could be influencers or key opinion leaders we have in the market. One thing we realise is that using influencers has become very commoditised in recent years and it's so expensive. It's so expensive. There are times where... and some of these influencers are not very, very credible. (Pei Ling S.)

Measurement and evaluation approaches reportedly reflect this increased emphasis on advertising-led models, illustrated by a continued focus on advertising equivalent value (AVEs) and vanity metrics, i.e.

basic statistics capturing the number of followers, likes, as well as the number of comment and shares. On their own, they provide a wealth of data, but fail to deliver a comprehensive insight into the level of engagement, impact and long term success of communication efforts. Across both locations there appears to be recognition that the public relations industry is still “getting its head around how to evaluate digital” (Bhavya, S.).

## **Discussion**

Public relations professionals in Singapore and Western Australia appear to be exceptionally optimistic about the future of their profession. Findings of this cross-national study indicate that despite the digital media induced increase in communication channels, the basics of excellent public relations practice have arguably not changed, although communicators may be under increased pressure to create and curate content, in order to communicate across a broader range of platforms to reach increasingly fragmented audiences. Within this context, social listening has increased in importance, as has visual communication. However, participants argue that core PR skills such as writing, storytelling and – arguably most importantly – relationship management remain at the heart of public relations practice.

The recent rise of influencers and influencer marketing arguably illustrates the challenges the public relations industry is facing in a continuously evolving digital landscape, and raises the question of whether public relations professionals indeed embrace the potential of digital media as part of their ever expanding ‘tool kit’. Indeed, findings concurred with Charest et al.’s (2016) work, as the desire for message control appears to restrict the use of dialogic features and increasingly promotes the adoption of advertising models.

If fostering social capital is public relations’ *raison d’être* (Sommerfeldt and Taylor, 2011), the dialogic qualities of digital – and in particular social media – are a natural fit for public relations. Within this context, influencer engagement exemplifies core characteristics of public relations, i.e. the need to build meaningful relationships between organisations and influencers; between influencers and their own followers; and ultimately, between an organisation and various stakeholder groups. Hence, authentic influencer engagement has the potential to add a further level of authenticity to organisation-stakeholder engagement, by drawing and further building on an individuals’ existing capital, within what Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) refers to as a particular field. For example, a fitness blogger may assist a healthcare fund in repositioning itself as a trusted community partner, with a holistic health and wellness focus. A travel writer and/or freelance photo journalists may collaborate – and even take the lead on – content that promotes a destination, as well as grow credibility and engagement with their own followers. In doing so, the fitness blogger and travel writer utilise their existing (social) capital within the respective fields of leisure/fitness and travel. However, the collaborative nature of the arrangement also enables the respective, contracting PR departments to grow their own social capital over time. Nevertheless, based on the findings, public relations practitioners appear to be increasingly drawn to adopt an advertising-led model to influencer engagement, characterised by a focus on sponsored posts and often readily supplied copy. Rather than focus on a communication campaign in its totality, build engagement over time and invite co-created content, the advertising model is essentially based on a

price per post, and is often calculated based on the number of existing followers an influencer may have. This approach may facilitate access to an influencer's existing social capital (in the form of nodes within their extant network and pre-existing recognition) within their respective field, but fails to embrace the relationship building capabilities of public relations. It hence fails to embrace and capitalise on the second component of social capital, i.e. the sum of the resources, tangible or virtual, that the other elements of the network have, and which an individual agent, group of organisation can effectively *mobilise* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Findings suggests that the desire for message control and fast return on investment have replaced traditional long-term, strategy driven initiatives to build goodwill, which lie at the heart of public relations practice. Two decades on, Kent and Taylor's (1998) observation that dialogue continues to be perceived largely as a process, rather than a product or outcome, holds true. Hence, PR practitioners have arguably largely failed to embrace the dialogic qualities of digital and social media, undermining their own capacity not only to build social capital, but to achieve core goals. Borrowing from (Kent, 2013): The medium – and in particular the influencer – has come to matter more than the message.

In Sarah Hall's second edition of *Future Proofing*, Scott Guthrie argues that influencer relations "represent a huge business opportunity and should be part of every PR practitioner's toolkit" (Guthrie, 2016: p.184). However, he also warns that "if PR practitioners do not embrace, evolve and push influencer relations forward other marketing disciplines will" (p.188). The commercialisation of the influencer space has arguably already happened in Singapore, and to a lesser extent in Perth, Western Australia, illustrated by the growing dominance of an advertising model. As predicted by Kent (2013), public relations professionals have increasingly regressed from their role as relationship builders to marketers and advertisers. This trend does not only under-value the potential of public relations, it furthermore contributes to the convergence of once distinct communication functions. The authors argue that influencer marketing and sponsored posts do not equal influencer *engagement*. In a world of increasingly cynical, fragmented and disenchanting audiences, with influencer trust being at an all-time low (Edelman, 2018), public relations is presented with the opportunity to set itself apart from other, related communication disciplines, by drawing on its social capital building capabilities.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides an insight into Singapore and Perth (Western Australia)-based public relations professionals' perceptions of and attitudes towards digital communication. Disparities between the two locations are arguably largely due to the type and range of industries present in each country, as well as Singapore's investment in digital infrastructure.

Digital tools and platforms have been hailed as a potential rejuvenator of public relations (Kent, 2013). Study participants were overwhelmingly positive about the future of public relations. New technologies and increasingly fragmented audiences may present challenges for PR professionals; however, the core premises and capabilities of public relations practice have arguably not changed. Nonetheless, a focus on message control and short-term return on investment suggests the discipline may lack the

professional maturity to maximise the potential of digital communication, illustrated by an advertising-led approach to influencer engagement, which fails to embrace the dialogic capabilities and hence the true potential of digital communication.

Influencer engagement arguably presents an opportunity to reclaim a space for public relations in the digital-social domain, based on authenticity, engagement and relationships, i.e. strategic investment in the social capital building capabilities that public relations is traditionally known for. However, rather than embrace its dialogic features, there appears to be a trend towards vanity metrics and sponsored posts. This perceived urgency to embrace existing, advertising-led models, has seen PR professionals regress from relationship builders to marketers and advertisers, hence further contributed to the convergence of once distinct communication functions in the digital sphere. Having learned from and reflected on early approaches to digital and in particular social media engagement, the public relations industry now finds itself at a crossroads, where it is forced to decide if it seeks to further contribute to the convergence of previously distinct communication functions, or if it instead sets out to reclaim core public relations competencies by truly embedding *digital* in its toolkit..

Insights gained as part of this study are limited to two particular geographical contexts and a consultancy perspective on digital communication. Findings can therefore not be generalised beyond this particular context. Future research should examine PR professionals' use of and attitudes towards digital communication in other, non US, and in particular non English speaking contexts. Furthermore, empirical insights into different models of influencer communication, including audience attitudes, perceived credibility and notions of authenticity would be valuable in informing and strengthening public relations efforts in the digital – and in particular influencer - space.

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