

Public Relations in Singapore: The Love-Hate Relationship With Social Media

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Bachelor of Communication (Public Relations)

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations with Honours at Murdoch University, 2012.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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ABSTRACT

The growth of social media has undoubtedly impacted upon public relations practice even in non-liberal societies. In December 2011, operators of Singapore's metro train system, the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit (SMRT) Corporation, suffered a reputational crisis that led to the eventual resignation of its Chief Executive Officer as a result of social media. A series of logistic faults were reported on social media platforms by affected commuters through the use of mobile media technologies as the situations unfolded. This case is pivotal, as one of several in Singapore's recent history that has conclusively indicated a strategic and professional value to social media in public relations in a society typically known for its restrictive, non-liberal stance.

This dissertation is a multidisciplinary investigation that relates to Grunig and Hunt's oft-unattainable, two-way symmetrical communication model. The impact of new media technologies will be analysed through crisis communication, a facet of public relations where social media can potentially be the most influential driving force.

Acknowledging that existing data is not substantial enough to accurately support this thesis, it employs a qualitative research design backed by practitioner interviews in order to extract relevant and insightful accounts of industry perceptions regarding the practical utilisation of social media tools amongst professionals. As a result, this study represents the ongoing changes and evolutions being made to public relations as social media continues to evolve.

In this thesis, I propose that social media has influenced the scope of public relations and organisational frameworks currently in Singapore, giving rise to a generation of empowered audiences, who need to be treated with far more caution and respect than ever before. Within this, I also highlight how the rise of the digital era has actually resulted in increased attention to the field of public relations. The SMRT crisis will be used as a key case study to illustrate the ongoing changes. The ultimate aim of this thesis is to examine how social media has impacted on public relations and crisis communication in an authoritarian context.

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