

PUTTING THE SOCIAL BACK IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A LONGITUDINAL, META-ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the state of social media theory and research by conducting a longitudinal, meta-analysis of public relations research about social media. The current study examines the most recent four years of *Public Relations Review*, extending a 2011 study that examined social media articles in *Public Relations Review* from 1998–2011. The essay considers three topics: a brief review of the history of social media technology, a report of data from the longitudinal, meta-analysis, and a discussion about the inconsistency between social media potential and social media practice. The essay also offers public relations professionals and scholars suggestions for moving forward in this research area.

INTRODUCTION

Today, nearly every business, non-profit and service organization has a social media strategy that contributes to their public relations, advertising, and marketing goals. Social media have emerged as tools to communicate with consumers, publics, and audiences. The business disciplines of advertising, marketing, and public relations have embraced social media, and the academic study in these three areas has also turned its attention to social media. Pick up almost any advertising, marketing, or public relations journal and you will find articles about social media.

In our efforts to be able to make claims about social media as communication tools of value for clients and stakeholders, we have lost sight of what social media was intended to do—connect people. Facebook was not invented to sell tacos or make it easier for Wal-Mart to reach customers—although that has clearly emerged as one of its strengths. Facebook was invented to make it easier for people to connect with others and share in other people’s lives. Twitter, which was originally described as a micro-blog, quickly morphed into a tool for marketing, advertising, and branding. If blogging is a tool capable of providing substantive commentary, Twitter, as a “micro-blog,” cannot provide the depth of analysis possible by its predecessor. All social media were initially envisioned as a way for like-minded people to come together and share, but many social media quickly transformed from social tools to sales tools.

New communication technologies are neither good nor bad: they are what people use them for. Early studies from Heath (1998), Coombs (1998), Esrock and Leichty (1998), Kent and Taylor (1998), and others examined the potential of the Internet to level the playing field. Scholars were optimistic that the Internet could provide access to citizens and activists, and communicate more effectively via dialogue and interactive communication channels. Indeed, the early rhetoric of the Internet described a place of equalized power and access to information for everyone. In the 2000s, politicians, educators, and community leaders all wanted to get on board the Internet train before it left the station. They hoped the Internet could provide information and the foundation for relationships in communities and society. Today, public relations, marketing, and advertising academicians and professionals are still at the train station hoping that social media will provide value for organizations. However, the authors of this article believe that public relations, marketing, and advertising should not *all* be standing on the *same platform* taking the *same trip*. The route that public relations takes in this journey should be different than where advertisers and marketers plan to travel. Each business discipline should take a unique route in its use and study of social media because each discipline has different goals for organization–public communication and relationships.

This paper examines the state of social media research by conducting a longitudinal, meta-analysis of public relations research about social media. To better understand the relational aspects of social media, the essay considers three issues. In the first section, we unpack the history of social media technology, providing a framework for how it should be viewed as a social tool capable of meeting the socio emotional needs of users. The second section details a longitudinal, meta-analysis of social media journal articles published in the top journal in public relations. The third section discusses the inconsistency between social media potential and social media practice, and identifies a way forward for public relations to think about the study and practice of social media.

UNPACKING SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Critical/theoretical research exploring social media is thin. Although dozens of studies have been conducted on particular aspects of social media (described below), and many studies proceed from the assumption that social media are a new phenomenon, as Kent (2010) argues, social media has been around for decades:

[S]peaking about technology in public relations as “new technology” is a misnomer. Most of the “new” technologies that we now regularly use in public relations are well established as communication technologies, with the Internet introduced in the 1960s, e-mail in the 1970s, hypertext in the 1980s, the World Wide Web in 1993, and blogs in 1999. Even concepts such as “social media” are not new. (p. 644)

In the 80s, we had instant messaging capabilities on local area networks. Around this same time (1986), Eric Thomas invented the Listserv (<http://www.lsoft.com/corporate/ericthomas.asp>), nearly 20 years before Facebook (2004), revolutionizing Internet communication. The listserv was one of the first Internet tools that allowed people to time shift their communication, and in

many ways worked like Facebook. Messages were uploaded to the network and only members of the network could see the postings. Some Listservs were not moderated (similar to Facebook and some blogs), and members of the list saw the messages of their friends and colleagues whenever they checked their email. With moderated lists, responses are sent to network moderators and distributed either in bulk or as they came in. Thus, threaded dialogue (as on blogs) and social media appeared decades ago.

Commercial e-mail also emerged in the late 80s (1988) with “MCI Mail” (<http://www.livinginternet.com/e/ei.htm>) and AOL in 1989. Wide area networks like BITNET and USENET also emerged in the late 70s and early 80s, providing access to a wider range of individuals and allowing for person-to-person messaging.

The important point to take away from this brief history is to understand that the phenomenon we now study as social media (which includes blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and hundreds of other tools) has deep roots. Given the age and ubiquity of social media tools (all the old ones still exist), efforts to prove that social media have special value seem misplaced. As McLuhan (1999/1964) explained over fifty years ago, every media has value and new media never simply replace old media but take on new roles and fill different niches. Social media’s strength should lie in its relationship-building capacity, as it incorporates aspects of many other existing mass media tools. Yet, the field of public relations may not be maximizing this potential.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS COMMUNICATION TOOLS: BEYOND THE HYPERBOLE

The phrase *social media* is a relatively new concept in public relations, having only emerged in the last few years. As Kent (2010) explains,

On the most basic level, any interactive communication channel that allows for two-way interaction and feedback could be called a social media (Listservs, e-mail, radio call-in programs, etc.). Shortwave radio, Citizen’s Band (CB) radio, and the telephone are probably the oldest broadcast media that allow for social interaction and networking. (p. 645)

Modern social networks are characterized by the potential for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity (with Facebook, Twitter etc., but not with blogs and lists), a sense of propinquity (brought on by the use of augmented reality, avatars, graphical interfaces, automated messages, etc.), short response times, and the ability to “time shift,” or engage the social network whenever suits each particular member. Thus, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook are considered social media because of the responsiveness of participants and the vastness of networks, as are interactive Listservs, newsgroups, Usenet, and real-time chats like IRC.

The promise of the network society of social media is to build a place where organizations, publics, stakeholders, and stakeseekers could come together to build stable relationships. As Granovetter (1973) suggested of “the strength of weak ties,” and Daft and Lengel (1986) suggested of “media richness,” technologies that allow people to communicate more intimately,

and in a more networked fashion, have the potential to strengthen relationships, foster trust, and keep people informed of events and issues.

Given this “network centric” definition, the way that an academic discipline studies social media will influence what is learned. The very same research questions and methods that help us to draw conclusions can, at the same time, blind us from seeing the whole picture of a phenomenon. The next section provides a longitudinal, meta-analysis of social media research in public relations by examining publications from the largest and oldest public relations journal: *Public Relations Review*.

LONGITUDINAL, META ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE TOP PR JOURNAL

Longitudinal studies are useful because they provide a systematic tool to identify trends in an academic area over time. A meta-analysis is another useful research tool to understand a field. Meta analyses conduct research about a large body of scholarship. A meta-analysis allows scholars to look at bodies of knowledge and look for common themes, questions, methods, and findings. Kuhn (1970) noted that fields of research are dominated by paradigms. Paradigms are powerful in that they identify the questions that can be asked and the methods that can be used to generate knowledge in a field. The value of a meta-analysis is that it allows a researcher to make tacit that which might be hidden. The meta-analysis method generally conducts longitudinal research that allows scholars to study changes over time. Most research provides a snapshot of a phenomenon and the one point in time snapshot limits what we can see. Longitudinal research allows scholars to see new ideas, methods and lines of research providing both a deeper and broader understanding of a body of knowledge.

For this meta-analysis, we examined every article on the topic of social media in *Public Relations Review* (Elsevier). *Public Relations Review* has an impact rating of 0.656, placing it as one of the top communication journals in the world. *Public Relations Review* is also the oldest and largest journal dedicated to the study of public relations. It publishes on average 110 articles in 5 issues per year. *Public Relations Review* has an international readership and is considered the top ranked public relations journal in the SCImago Journal & Country Ranking,¹ and is considered one of the top journals in communication (https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?view_op=top_venues&hl=en&vq=hum_communication).

Method

To conduct the meta-analysis, the authors identified every article published in *Public Relations Review* that considered the key term *social media* in a substantive way. The journal’s home page on the publisher’s website (Elsevier) was used, and “social media” was used as part of a keyword search. Results were then limited to the last four years (2011–2014). The total number of articles over the four-year period included 259 pieces. Articles qualified for the inclusion in the meta-analysis if they met the following criteria²:

- (1) The words *social media* were used throughout the study to describe research conducted or the topic(s) of analysis.
- (2) The words *social media* were specifically used in one or more of the research questions examined in the study, or studied a specific type of social media, such as Facebook, to provide a better understanding of social media use by individuals or groups.
- (3) The literature review or methods section described a type of social media tool (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) that was examined by the author(s) as part of the study conducted.
- (4) The author(s) engaged in criticism or theory building in relation to social media.
- (5) The context was clearly social media. Articles examined must have been actually studying social media, rather than treating it as a medium for obtaining information that had no relevance to social media. Thus, context mattered when examining the articles to see whether they were genuinely studying social media.

Based on the screening criteria, 89 articles comprise the sample. See Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA ARTICLES BY YEAR

Year	Total	Actual # after screening
2015	(98)	41 (42%)
2014	(50)	10 (20%)
2013	(51)	20 (39%)
2012	(60)	18 (30%)
Total	259	89

The meta-analysis method allows scholars to ask a range of questions. This study asked the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are the most common research methods used?

RQ2: What are the most common theories used to guide research?

RQ3: Are there any trends apparent over the last four years in terms of theory and method?

RQ4: Has a body of “social media theory” begun to emerge?

The answers to the four research questions provide the data for the meta-analysis of the field of public relations research on social media.

RESULTS

The descriptives of the articles suggest certain trends in the actual social media studied in the journal. Table 2 reports the data on the appearance of various social media terms in *Public*

Relations Review from their first mention in 1998 to the present. The data that follow focus specifically on the use of the term “social media.”

TABLE 2
TECHNOLOGY TERMS

Topic	PRR 1998–2011	PRR 2012–2015
Social Media	82 (first mention 1998, first study 2008)	260
Twitter	38 (first mention & first study 2008)	137
Blog	88 (first mention 2003, first study 2006)	117
Facebook	33 (first mention 2008, first study 2009)	135
LinkedIn	9 (first mention 2009, first study 2010)	19
Total	250	667

Note: Of the numbers in parentheses, the first number represents when the topic was first mentioned, while the second number represents when the topic was actually discussed in an article or studied.

Research Question 1: Dominant Research Methodologies

RQ1 asked *What are the most common research methods used?* In an earlier study, Kent (2012) found that the most common methods used to study social media included surveys and content analysis. Table 3 presents the data on the theories tested in the 89 articles in this study.

TABLE 3
RESEARCH METHODS USED IN STUDIES

METHOD	Number	2015	2014	2013	2012
Binary Logistic Regression	1			1	
Case Study	8	5	1	1	1
Criticism	10	5	1	1	3
Content Analysis	40	14	4	10	9
Discourse Analysis	1				1
Delphi	1		1		
Experimental	2	1		1	
Focus Group	3	1		1	1
Interviewing	8	3	1	3	1
Survey	25	11	3	5	6
Textual Analysis	1	1			
Thematic Analysis	1	1			
Value Modeling	1			1	
Total	89	42(41)	11(10)	24(20)	22(18)†

Note: More than one method is sometimes employed in articles, so the frequency of methods can exceed the number of articles published (indicated in parentheses). Most scholars do not use multiple methods.

† The numbers in parentheses represent the number of social media articles published in that particular year.

The results show that surveys and content analysis emerged as the most frequently used research methods in public relations research about social media. Indeed, content analysis of social media messages represents 45 percent of all studies conducted over the last four years. Combined, content analyses and surveys represent the methods used in more than 70% of all public relations studies of social media conducted over the last four years.

Research Question 2: Dominant Theories

RQ2 asks, *What are the most common theories used to guide research?* The public relations research on social media is often “theory free.” The most common theory used was to have no theory, with nearly one in four (24%) studies having no guiding theory. Social media use in crisis communication appeared next in 18 percent of all studies, with dialogue and engagement as the next largest theoretical frames. Finally, social media theories, typically in the form of critical and theoretical essays exploring social media concepts represented 8 percent of the studies. OPR was used in 6 percent of the studies.

TABLE 4
THEORIES USED IN STUDIES

	Number	2015	2014	2013	2012
Activism	2	2			
Advocacy	1	2			
Agenda Setting	1	2			
Branding	1			1	
Crisis	16	7	1	5	3
Co-orientation	1	1			
Culture	2	2			
Democracy	1			1	
Dialogue	8	1	1	2	4
Engagement	9	3	1	3	2
Empowerment	1	1			
Framing	2	1		1	
Gender	1	1			
Health	1			1	
History	2				2
Interpersonal Communication	1	1			
Leadership	1				1
Media Uses	2	2			
NO THEORY	21	11	5	3	2
OPR	5	3		2	
Org. Learning Theory	1	1			
Persuasion	1				1
Political	1			1	
Relationship	1				1
Reputation	1	1			
Role Theory	1	1			
Situational Theory	1	1			
Social Identity Theory	1	1			
Social Media	7	2	2	3	
Social Networking	1				1
Symmetrical	2		1		1
Transparency	1				1
Trust	2	1		1	
Total	89*	37(41)	6(10)	21(20)	17(18)†

* More than one theory is sometimes employed in articles, so the numbers by year do not add up to 89.

‡ The no theory numbers are excluded from the totals below.

† The numbers in parentheses are the total number of articles published that were on social media in that particular year.

About half of the studies applied a mainstream public relations theory (Crisis, Dialogue, Engagement, OPR) to the study of social media and, as mentioned, 24 percent of the articles

contained no theory. Of the remaining studies, about one in four applied a novel, or uncommon public relations theory to inform their inquiry (Branding, Empowerment, Political, Reputation, Role Theory, Social Identity). We do see an interesting shift in theories in social media. For the last two decades, the field of public relations has replicated studies using symmetrical, co orientation, and situational theory of publics (STP) in many different contexts. These theories are no longer dominating the field and are rarely being used to study social media.

Research Question 3: Emerging Trends

RQ3 asks, *Are there any trends apparent over the last four years in terms of theory and method?* The review of 89 articles over four years made several trends evident. First, it appears that public relations researchers are not viewing social media as persuasive communication tools. Only one study in four years has explored persuasion (Waters, Amarkhil, Bruun, & Mathisen, 2012), a concept that would seem to be central to the way that public relations' practice views social media as part of its communication strategy. Second, scholars are not applying interpersonal communication theories to social media. Only two articles (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Men & Tsai, 2012) looked at social media through an interpersonal lens. Third, there is a notable lack of any studies using social network analysis, a tool that is also uniquely suited to making sense out of data rooted in relational networks.

Research Question 4: Social Media Theory Generation in Public Relations

RQ4 asks, *Has a body of "social media theory" begun to emerge?* The answer to RQ4 is no. As the data above suggest, only a small number of articles even critique or criticize social media—both in the formal "theory building" sense and in the critical "point out flaws and try to improve" sense. As Kuhn (1970) has argued, most researchers do "mop up work" where they explore the boundaries of a theory in a variety of contexts. This type of research makes the theory more robust.

The closest that social media research has come to generating new theories can be seen in the various studies of dialogic social media with have included a broad range of contexts including smartphones (Avidar, Ariel, Malka, & Levy, 2015), health (Hether, 2014), dialogue and social media criticism (Kent, 2013; McAllister, 2012), presidential debates (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013), academic social media use (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012), and engagement (Wigley & Lewis, 2012). Dialogic theory applied to social media probably comes closest to building social media theory because dialogue was reintroduced to the field as a theory that informed relationships made possible through new technology (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).

Social media, like television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other media, have their own content and design features. They have their own *telos* that makes them unique. The next sections discuss the research findings in more detail with suggestions for putting the "social" back in the study of public relations and social media.

DISCUSSION

One of the benefits of conducting a meta analysis is the opportunity to look at all of the research that has been conducted in an area and draw some conclusions from the body of knowledge. Of the more than 400 articles published over the last four years in *Public Relations Review*, about one in four examined social media. Given the diversity of possible research topics in public relations, and the abundance of social media research, we believe that social media comprises a dominant topic in the literature. There is enough literature to be able to state what we know, how we know it and what these academic findings mean for the practice of public relations. The first question, then, is where are the theory development articles?

Where is the Theory Development?

Our findings suggest that public relations researchers treat social media as if it were a channel. The dominant research line exploring social media use in crisis is devoted to testing and refining *crisis theories*. Social media are just the *channel* for an organization's crisis communication.

This trend is troubling. The development of theory should be a guiding principle in any field, but social media research (with 24% of the articles having no theory at all) seems to be an area where theory free research is possible. As Ferguson (1984) argued three decades ago:

Within any area of theory development one of the first steps must be development of conceptual definitions that allow the members of the research community to communicate with one another. This too is applicable to the development of theories of public relationships. (p. 22)

The current research on social media has not lived up to this thirty-year-old call. The number of scholars who have looked at social media critically—not assuming that social media are inherently great but trying to understand how to actually use them effectively—is quite small (Carim & Warwick, 2013; Kent, 2013; Kent & Saffer, 2014; Kent & Taylor, 2016; Valentini, 2015; Yang & Kent, 2014; Yoo & Kim, 2013), and largely revolves around the work of a few scholars.

An additional question asks, “Why are studies of social media persuasion and interpersonal communication so rare?” Social media provide a unique blending of interpersonal, mass, and group communication contexts. Moreover, social media play a central role in socialization and identity formation among youth and are used by politicians and organizations as persuasive tools. The study of these dimensions of social media tools and message seems timely.

Another theoretical issue worth noting would be the tremendous role played by social media in individual's interpersonal lives that include issues such as surveillance, bullying, friendship, health (depression, happiness), natural disaster responses, etc. (Kent & Saffer, 2014). There are

hundreds of genuinely relevant aspects of social media that transcend their use as informational channels. But, our meta-analysis suggests that these aspects have been ignored in the journal's research over the last decade.

Where is the Methodological Diversity?

The data considering social media research methodologies point to a number of interesting observations about public relations research in social media. First, one must ask, "Why are there so few experimental studies?" One explanation, of course, is that there is very little actual social media theory in public relations to be tested in experiments. But this just begs the question. As a relatively understudied medium, social media seems to be a prime context for experimental research. Experimental studies have the potential for exploring an assortment of rhetorical and persuasive concepts—such as issues of trust, relationship building, as well as aspects that seem so much a part of social media that we take them for granted: message length, tone, imagery, rhetorical tactics, the use of informational graphics, video (few have studied any of the visual social media like YouTube or Pinterest), and aspects of threaded dialogue. The aspects of social media that make them unique go beyond their mere use as carriers of information and publicity/advertising/marketing content, but also include interpersonal, group, and rhetorical features. Yet, scholars typically treat social media as a channel for messages.

A second methodological issue would be to ask "Why so little criticism of social media?" Where are the critics? Social media are filled with personal and organizational risks in terms of self-disclosure, employment issues, discrimination, and identity. Social media are an area of the public relations field that are probably most in need of ethical interrogation (cf., Kent & Saffer, 2014) in terms of surveillance, exploitation of personal information, and limited media literacy skills among users. There are dozens of ethical and theoretical issues that still need to be explored in social media. Our meta analysis suggests that no one is taking up the call.

A final methodological issue concerns big data. As noted above, social network analysis (SNA) has played almost no role in methods of studying social media. Given the enormous potential of SNA research for explaining relationships, and how and why people use their social networks, this absence is surprising. Additionally, judging by the previous scholarship, public relations professionals and scholars seem to have little understanding of the potential of big data to be used, or abused, by organizations.

The Importance of Qualitative Research and Theory Building

Almost half a century ago, John Waite Bowers (1968) in his essay "The Prescientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism" argued "Science is the search for relationships between antecedents and consequents. It attempts to explain (that is, enable predictions about) things and events in terms of other things and events" (p. 128). Bowers explained the importance of posing and testing hypotheses, and the scientific method. Bowers was actually arguing that criticism was useful for

identifying issues and developing hypotheses, which were then placed within the purview of the scientist to test. Although Bowers' disparaging essay about the nature of rhetoric and science, or qualitative vs. quantitative research if you like, has been attacked over the years, the gist of his argument about the nature of science rings true.

To advance a body of ideas, scholars need to have questions about the *phenomenon*. As Kuhn (1970) has suggested, science requires scholars to test a particular paradigm. Formative research asks questions, defines concepts, and explores relationships. It is not until a science is "mature" that scholars occupy their time doing "mop up work" (1970, p. 24). We believe that the majority of the social media scholarship that exists in public relations assumes, explicitly or implicitly, that social media is already part of an existing paradigm or body of scholarship. Our meta-analysis results dispute this assumption.

Much of the current public relations scholarship that considers social media view social media as tools or channels. Social media researchers ignore the interactional, mediated, co-creational, and relationships, and instead count "the number of tweets," or "the length of social media posts." Researchers have asked college students, practitioners, and consumers about their perceptions of organizations without studying the actual social relationships with each other and with organizations. What we see is a body of articles that have neglected to study the "social" in social media.

CONCLUSION: PUTTING THE SOCIAL BACK IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to move social media research forward as an area of study in public relations, scholars need to shift their focus to understanding the social phenomenon itself. We need studies, for example, about how to motivate users to take action via social media, understanding what kinds of language are most effective (metaphorical, ideographic, identificational, bold, agreeable, scandalous, etc.), what kind of symbolism works best (video/still, risqué, parody, user generated, tables, etc.), and what kind of people are seen as more credible in social media spaces. We should be exploring ways of building relationships via social media.

For public relations research to advance in an age of technology, we need to stop focusing on the technology itself and start asking questions about public relations theory and communication. A number of excellent research projects have been conducted by organizations like PEW Internet and American Life Project (<http://www.pewinternet.org>), and the Berkman Center for Internet and Society (<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu>), which give us insight into the demographic and psychographics of internet users, and yet we ignore such data and continue to ask journalists their opinions of Facebook and Twitter, or survey teens about how they use social media, when abundant secondary data exists on these topics. Our research needs to be more sophisticated, both critically and rhetorically, building and testing theory, as well as empirically and scientifically posing and testing hypotheses about social media. Surveys and content analyses, although interesting and easy to conduct, are not taking us very far. We need to do more.

As long as we continue to treat social media like just another information dissemination channel, we will make no progress toward putting the social back in social media. This process begins not by assuming that social media are “easy,” and “great tools for sharing information” but rather as sophisticated communication tools, capable of being used with subtlety and restraint; capable of being used persuasively, as part of informational and persuasive campaigns; and capable of being used in genuine relationship-building.

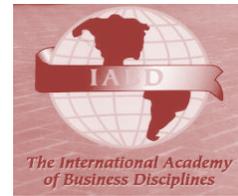
NOTES

- 1 The SCImago Journal & Country Rank is a portal that includes the journals and country scientific indicators developed from the information contained in the Scopus database (<http://www.elsevier.com>). These indicators can be used to assess and analyze scientific domains.
- 2 The authors included “articles in press” that had not yet been assigned to an issue. These articles are online and available for review and thus constitute part of the body of knowledge in public relations.

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