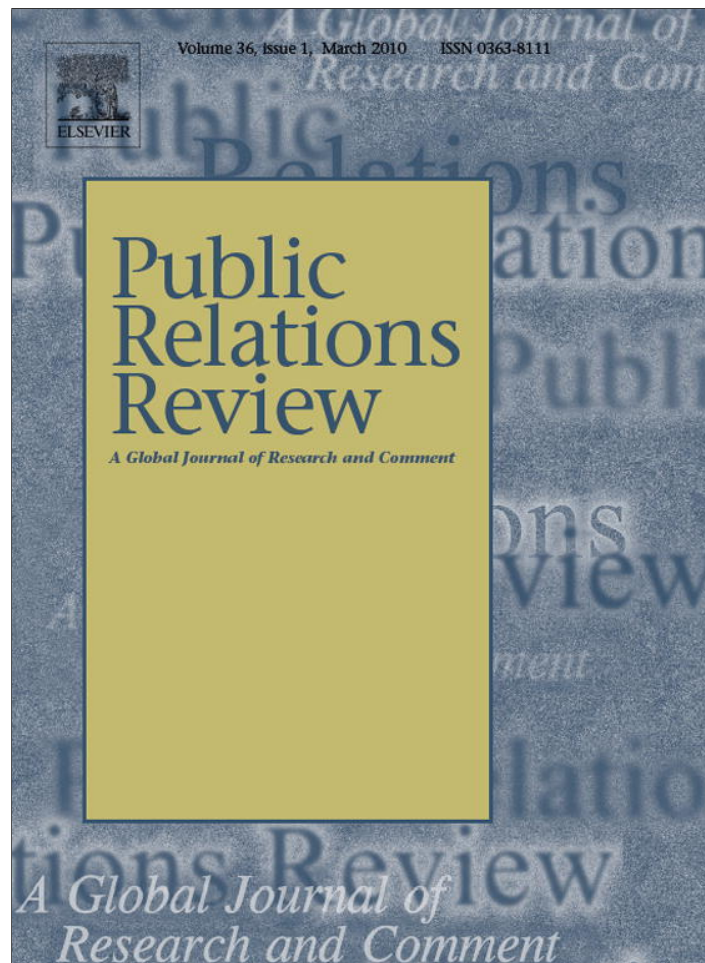


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## Public Relations Review



Research in Brief

Adoption of social media for public relations by nonprofit organizations<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This survey of nonprofit public relations practitioners ( $N=409$ ) applied the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Findings indicate that women consider social media to be beneficial, whereas men exhibit more confidence in actively utilizing social media. Organizations with specified public relations departments were more likely to adopt social media. Positive correlations between UTAUT factors and credibility indicated a greater likelihood to adopt social media.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media offers numerous opportunities for public relations practitioners to interact with the public while adopting new forms of technology and integrating them into their everyday lives. These advances in technology have experienced widespread use among public relations practitioners and journalists (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009). As more forms of social media emerge, it is beneficial for public relations practitioners to understand how to use these tools as they relate to their jobs. In particular, practitioners working for nonprofit organizations can benefit from adopting social media due to their often-limited monetary resources (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to find out how nonprofit public relations practitioners are adopting social media tools and if they view them as credible. Through an online survey of nonprofit public relations practitioners, we employed the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003) to examine the practitioners' use of social media and investigated their familiarity with social media, their level of participation in communication technologies, their behaviors concerning new media communication outlets, and their tendencies to adopt these tools.

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## 2. Methods

Using an online survey, we employed the UTAUT to explain adoption and organizational use of social media. With items addressing the UTAUT factors, the survey measured social media adoption and its relation to *performance expectancy*, *effort expectancy*, *social influence*, *facilitating conditions*, *voluntariness of use*, *self-efficacy*, and *anxiety* (Venkatesh et al., 2003). UTAUT questions were presented as statements to which participants indicated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale.

The survey also employed a credibility scale based on Johnson and Kaye's (2004) media credibility items to determine how credible respondents feel toward social media. Respondents answered questions on a five-point Likert scale to describe degree of fairness, accuracy, and depth of social media. In addition to exploring the current use of social media, we were interested in whether public relations professionals find such tools reliable.

A list of nonprofit organizations was systematically garnered from Forbes, National Charity Seal Program, Accredited Charity Directory (through the Better Business Bureau), and the Charity Navigator (independent charity evaluator online). Once the organizational names were culled from these lists, we visited Web sites to extensively search for all employees related to public relations or public relations type duties. An e-mail invitation was sent to 2043 deliverable addresses in 2008. A total of 409 usable responses were received, making the response rate 20%. This response rate is inline with other published Web surveys dealing with the public relations industry.

## 3. Results

Of the respondents ( $N=409$ ), nearly all ( $n=404$ ) indicated that they used some form of social media compared to only 5 who indicated that they did not use any of the 18 forms of social media that were specified in the survey. The average number of social media tools used by one practitioner was 4.99 ( $SD=2.82$ ). Of the 18 types of social media, the following frequencies were most reported: 97.8% ( $n=400$ ) used e-mail, 54.5% ( $n=223$ ) used social networks, 51.1% ( $n=209$ ) used video sharing, and 48.4% ( $n=198$ ) used blogs. Other forms of social media such as instant messaging ( $n=55$ ; 13.4%), photo sharing ( $n=111$ ; 27.1%), text messaging ( $n=51$ ; 12.5%), and wikis ( $n=74$ ; 18.1%), among others.

Of the participants who self-reported demographic information, 71.00% ( $n=245$ ) were female and 29.9% ( $n=100$ ) were male. The average age of participants in our study who indicated their age was 39.75 years old ( $SD=11.59$ ).

Consistent with previous uses of UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), we conducted a factor analysis of the 34-item UTAUT scale. Traditionally, UTAUT yields nine factors. A principle axis components factor analysis (varimax rotation) resulted in eight factors in our study. We named our eight factors based on the UTAUT factor most present. The 8-factor solution explained 68.7% of the variance. Factor 1, *performance expectancy and attitudes*, includes 7 items about increasing productivity and being useful, among other items ( $\alpha=.84$ ). Factor 2, *social influence*, contained 7 items gauging apprehension and the influences felt in regard to social media adoption ( $\alpha=.89$ ). Factor 3, *effort expectancy*, measured ease of use with 3 items ( $\alpha=.87$ ). Factor 4, *behavioral intention*, includes 3 items that look at future adoption likelihood ( $\alpha=.96$ ). Factor 5, *facilitating conditions*, examines the resources and knowledge the organization measured through 4 items ( $\alpha=.72$ ). Factor 6, *voluntariness of use*, included 2 items looking at whether use of social media was required ( $\alpha=.82$ ). Factor 7, *anxiety*, gauged one's hesitancy toward social media with 2 items ( $\alpha=.70$ ). Factor 8, *self-efficacy*, included 4 items measuring how well social media one could use social media without assistance (outside the organization) ( $\alpha=.65$ ).

The credibility items were summed into a single index. Cronbach's alpha for the credibility index was moderate ( $\alpha=.75$ ), and was similar to that found in other studies using the same items.

### 3.1. Are there differences in the adoption of social media based on gender?

A series of independent sample *t*-tests with each UTAUT factor comparing males and females was performed. Three factors yielded statistically significant differences based on gender. In factor one, *performance expectancy and attitudes*, females ( $M=.11$ ,  $SD=.94$ ) scored higher than males ( $M=-.24$ ,  $SD=.82$ ),  $t=.74$ ,  $p\leq.01$ . In contrast, in the next two factors the reverse was true regarding the adoption of social media. In factor two, *social influence*, females ( $M=-.07$ ,  $SD=.96$ ) scored lower than males ( $M=.18$ ,  $SD=.71$ ),  $t=8.67$ ,  $p\leq.01$ . In factor five, *facilitating conditions*, females ( $M=-.06$ ,  $SD=.90$ ) scored lower than males ( $M=.18$ ,  $SD=.74$ )  $t=4.25$ ,  $p\leq.05$ .

### 3.2. Does adoption of social media vary based on whether the organization has a public relations department?

We performed a series of independent sample *t*-tests with each UTAUT factor comparing whether the organization has a public relations department. One factor yielded statistically significant differences. In factor five, *facilitating conditions*, organizations with public relations departments ( $M=.09$ ,  $SD=.83$ ) were more likely to adopt social media practices than those without public relations departments ( $M=-.17$ ,  $SD=.92$ ),  $t=3.64$ ,  $p\leq.01$ .

### 3.3. Is there a relationship between the UTAUT factors and credibility?

Correlations revealed several statistically significant relationships. Credibility and factor 1 had a moderate relationship, while credibility and factors 5, 6, and 8 had positive weak relationships. Credibility correlated with factor 1, *performance*

expectancy and attitudes ( $r = .43$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ); factor 5, *facilitating conditions* ( $r = .15$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ); factor 6, *voluntariness* ( $r = .13$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ); and, factor 8, *self-efficacy* ( $r = .15$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that social media tools are becoming beneficial methods of communication for public relations practitioners in the nonprofit sector. Organizations with defined public relations departments are more likely to adopt social media technologies and use them to achieve their organizational goals. In addition, public relations practitioners are more likely to use social media tools if they find them credible. Social media techniques will become more abundant as public relations practitioners become mindful of their effectiveness in regards to reaching target audiences, promoting a specific cause, and further developing communication strategies.

Because UTAUT has not previously been applied to the use of social media in public relations, this study lays the groundwork for future research in this area. It would be beneficial for practitioners to better understand the adoption of social media in major corporations' internal public relations departments and public relations agencies, which represent clients in the entertainment, sports, political, and tourism industries. As social media expands, it is essential for public relations practitioners to recognize the resourcefulness of these tools and take advantage of every available opportunity to effectively reach their publics.

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