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ASSESSING PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

BY

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the work presented is the result of my own effort, original research and findings and that no part of it has been presented for another degree or diploma in this University or elsewhere. All references to other people's work have been duly acknowledged. I am therefore to be held responsible for any error that might be detected in this project work.

(Candidate's signature) **DATE**

…………………………………… **………, SEPTERMBER, 2020**

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SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation of this long essay was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of long essays as laid down by the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

(Supervisor's signature) **DATE**

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DR. ALBERT ANANI-BOSSMAN

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to the Almighty God for His direction and His help throughout my life in this Institution and also for inspiring confidence in me to go through with a positive zeal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the Almighty God for aiding me to complete this study successfully. My sincere appreciation also goes to my supervisor, Dr. Albert Anani-Bossman for all the patience and times he had for me throughout my work regardless of his busy schedule. His guidance and pieces of advice were very helpful and contributed tremendously to the completion of this long essay.

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, PR has been playing very important communication roles in society. However, with various studies indicating that social media and other emerging technologies are significantly impacting PR practice, the study was focused on assessing PR practice in the digital era. The study employed the qualitative research method to conduct the study. Resource persons of PR units of three organizations were interviewed for the study. The findings of the study indicate that there has been a shift from traditional ways of performing PR functions with the advent of the digital era. Also, the findings suggested that in order for PR practitioners to stay in touch with reality, they had to adapt to the use of digital tools for effectiveness and efficiency.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

There is no denying the fact that the emergence of new media has transformed communication significantly. According to Argenti and Barnes (2009), the digital revolution and its resultant new media have changed the rules of the game in every part of strategic communication. Many studies (eg. Vrondou and Katsoni, 2017 & Laverty, 2014) affirm this assertion and acclaim new communication media for significantly transforming the ways in which stakeholders are empowered. Consequently, it stands to reason that communication professionals have to become more dynamic than ever in order to survive and avoid the risk of becoming antiquated.

For several decades, scholars have been studying the impact of new technologies on Public Relations (PR) practice (Wright, 2001). With the advent of the online world, not only has the way the mode of communicating changed, but also the communication messages in themselves. The ever-changing preferences and expectations of publics in this era also demand that PR professionals rethink relationships and engagements among other core principles of the profession (Wright and Hinson, 2013). Even more importantly, the emergence of new channels and tools necessitate that those who are preparing to enter the field acquaint themselves with relevant skill set in order to succeed professionally.

In view of this development, the former president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Joseph E. Cohen, underscores the need for continuous learning and adaptability:

> In a media environment where constant change is the norm, and where the role of the PR professional continues to expand and evolve, ongoing professional development will be increasingly essential for PR professionals across all levels of experience (www.extension.harvard.edu).

Anthony D’Angelo, Professor of Practice in PR and PRSA Fellow argues that it will be critical to combine and incorporate the first principles of Public Relationships and organizational communications with the techniques of new technology in order to be prepared for the world of work (Public Relations Society of America, 2019).

Despite the repeated indication that the old skill set alone is no longer sufficient for PR success in the face of the digital revolution, many practitioners are still struggling with the impact of new media (Galloway, 2005). There seems, for that reason, to be a disconnect, if not a mismatch, between academia and industry’s focus on this phenomenon. Even though academia has sought to prepare students for the rapid changes occurring in the digital era and their implications on practice, many in industry claim that academia is unduly theory-oriented and, as such, ill-equips students for the world of work (Alexander, 2004).

In the relatively brief period leading up to modern times, PR has evolved alongside the profession’s changing roles and technological advances. As opposed to the traditional means of communication, there has been a transition into a digital world driven by Web 2.0 which is the collective name used to the describe a second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online. Webopedia (2018) asserts that digitization is essentially focused on enabling people to collaborate and share information online via social media, blogging and web-based communities. This is indispensable to PR in the contemporary era as the fundamental goal of organizations now is to achieve the two-way symmetrical objective of making sure that decisions made by an organization are mutually beneficial to them and their publics. With over 10 million Ghanaians now using the internet (digitalreport.wearesocial.com, 2009), the digital migration of publics is evident as it is influential. Organizations and practitioners therefore risk becoming irrelevant if they fail to adapt (Alexander, 2004).

Consequently, there have been the establishments of many PR firms in Ghana specializing in new media and a corresponding introduction of Digital PR-related course in many universities across the country. Owing to the significant impact of technology on PR pedagogy and industry practice and because existing studies do not fully investigate how academia and industry have adjusted to it, the aim of this study is to throw more light on PR practice in Ghana and juxtapose it with the training of students preparing to enter the field. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how new media technologies are bringing dramatic changes to how PR is practised in Ghana now compared to how it was practiced contemporarily. This will be done with special emphasis placed on assessing PR practice in the digital era.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Various studies like that of DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) indicate that social media and other emerging technologies are significantly impacting PR practice. In the same line of argument, Argenti and Barnes (2009) assert with an example that the digital revolution has affected every aspect of strategic communication to such an extent that corporate websites, email customer response facilities and electronic news release distribution are now viewed as standard aspects of PR practice. Yet, many PR practitioners are struggling with the impact of new media, and especially the Internet (Galloway, 2005). As noted by Alfonso and De Valbuena (2006), many practitioners have a fear of technology and have, therefore, not fully embraced and equipped themselves with the relevant skillset needed for industry practice in modern times.

In January 2019, *We Are Social* and *Hootsuite*, global digital agencies, in an annual report, revealed that more than 10 million Ghanaians use the internet (Kemp, 2020). The figure represents 35% total of the country's population and marks an increase of two million on the figure recorded in January 2017 (Kemp, 2020). This statistic shows how quickly Ghanaians are migrating digitally and underscores the need for organizations to relate with them in like manner. However, organizations lament the challenge of finding graduates who are well-equipped for the workplace; contending that academia does not satisfactorily incorporate industry trends into curricula to furnish students with relevant skill set.

In fact, WARC (2019) notes that the popularity of social media has prompted corporate brands to employ online personalities to endorse these brands and to influence followers' perceptions with their communications. Anani-Bossman (2018) further notes that there is little or no information on how PR is practiced in Ghana and the models used in such practice. In this regard, this study will build on the likes of Anani-Bossman's (2018) work which sought to develop a framework for PR practice which made a case for PR practice in Ghana. As a consequence of these developments, it has become necessary to assess how PR harnesses, copes and adapts to the era of digitalization. This research work therefore seeks to assess PR practice in the digital era with a special focus on how it relates to Ghana.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims assessing the practice of PR in a digital era in Ghana. A major focus of the study is on digital media which is critical to 21st century PR. The study will pay particular attention to changing trends brought about by digital media and ultimately recommend a skillset thereby creating a form of a toolkit for effective PR practice in the digital era. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will pursue these specific objectives:

1. To determine whether there has been a change in the traditional practice of PR

2. To find out which aspects of the PR practice has been affected by the digital era

3. To explore how PR can be practiced effectively in a digital era

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims at answering the main question of assessing PR practice in the digital era. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Has there been a change in the traditional practice of PR?
2. Which aspects of the PR practice has been affected by the digital era?
3. How PR can be practiced effectively in a digital era?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study will seek to explore the focus of PR practice in the face of the digital era to help create a better understanding of where the two meet or differ. That posited, it will be much easier to make recommendations for instance for academia to identify and train students so that they may come into the job market with requisite skillsets and competence which meets industry expectations in Ghana. This study will serve as a reference material for researchers who wish to conduct research in similar regard as a secondary source of information and provide insights to those who aim to equip and position themselves favourably in the workplace. It may also serve as a guiding document for policy makers and PR practitioners in Ghana in the event that they need information on the problem that this research seeks to deal with.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The paper comprises of four chapters, Chapter One will be the introductory part. It will focus on the background of the study, problem statement, research objectives, research questions and the significance of the study. In the second part, Chapter Two, the theoretical grounding of the study will be given. This will comprise of theoretical and conceptual framework and an empirical review. The third Chapter will deal with the research methodology. This will include population, sampling techniques, methods of data collection and the research instruments employed. Also, the data analysis methods will be discussed here. The fourth part, Chapter Four, will provide details on how the study will contribute to research. This will cover the summary of findings conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The study will be built on and discussed within the theoretical context of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory which holds that for an organization to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Developed by E.M. Rogers in 1962, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory is one of the oldest social science theories. It originated in communication to explain how, over time, an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses (or spreads) through a specific population or social system. The end result of this diffusion is that people, as part of a social system, adopt a new idea, behavior, or product. Adoption, according to the theory, means that a person is doing something differently than what they had previously (i.e., purchase or use a new product, perform a new behaviour, etc.). However, the key to adoption is that the person must perceive the idea, behaviour, or product as new or innovative.

The theory posits that adoption does not occur simultaneously in a social system as people go through different processes before ultimately adopting an innovation. When promoting an innovation, there are different strategies used to appeal to the different adopter categories. *Innovators* are those people who want to be the first to try the innovation. They are venturesome and interested in new ideas. These people are very willing to take risks and are often the first to develop new ideas. Very little, if anything, needs to be done to appeal to this population. *Early Adopters* are people who represent opinion leaders. They enjoy leadership roles and embrace change opportunities. They are already aware of the need to change and so are very comfortable adopting new ideas. Strategies to appeal to this population include how-to manuals and information sheets on implementation. They do not need information to convince them to change. The *Early Majority* as well are people who are rarely leaders, but they do adopt new ideas before the average person. That said, they typically need to see evidence that the innovation works before they are willing to adopt it. Strategies to appeal to this population include success stories and evidence of the innovation's effectiveness.

The *Late Majorities* are individuals who are skeptical of change and will only adopt an innovation after it has been tried by the majority. Strategies to appeal to this population include information on how many other people have tried the innovation and have adopted it successfully. The final stage of the categories, the *Laggards* are individuals bound by tradition and very conservative. They are very skeptical of change and are the hardest group to bring on board. Strategies to appeal to this population include statistics, fear appeals and pressure from people in the other adopter groups.

2.1.1.1 Limitations and discussion

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory also has some limitations which are worth noting. Much of the evidence for this theory, including the adopter categories, did not originate in public health and it was not developed to explicitly apply to adoption of new behaviors or health innovations. Also, the theory does not foster a participatory approach to adoption of a public health program. It works better with adoption of behaviors rather than ceasation or prevention of behaviors. Again, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory does not take into account an individual's resources or social support to adopt the new behavior.

In light of these limitations however, the theory is relevant to this study because it has been used successfully in many fields including communication, agriculture, public health, criminal justice among others.

In business, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory is used to accelerate the adoption of important goods or service that typically aims to change the preferences of a social system. For instance, PR practitioners can as well use this to their advantage by positioning their brands as active participants in the communication process. Audiences are more likely to engage with brand messages because they can provide feedback to companies, creating a two-way conversation (Roberts, 2018). This initiative could appeal to customers their range of customers as some might adopt the dynamism immediately while others will do overtime. Moreover, Diffusion of Innovations Theory has a bearing on this study as it provides insight into how, over time, the internet has gained momentum and diffused through the Ghanaian PR landscape.

2.2 OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The term PR lends itself to a variety of definitions because of the vastly different perspectives which scholars have on it. However, among the many competing definitions of PR, James Grunig and Todd Hunt’s 1984 is perhaps the most widely cited which states that Public Relations is the *management of communication between an organization and its publics* (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 4.).

Grunig (2013) claims that the practice of PR has been in existence for quite some time. Grunig explains that the importance of communication with the public and maintenance of positive public image goes back many centuries. Ivy Ledbetter Lee (1877-1934), who is widely regarded as the founder of modern PR (Grunig, 2013), is known for introducing the term ‘PR’ and for pioneering the modern press release - when he used it to distribute the company's news about an accident before reporters received other versions of the story for his client, The Pennsylvania Railroad Company. PR became recognized as a profession in 1903 and Ivy Lee defined it as the actual relationship of the company to the people (Cutlip, 2013).

In 1930, the National Association of Manufacturers in America became the first industry trade association to create a PR department, launching a 13-year campaign to improve the public's attitude towards the business. From 1930-1950, following the Second World War, there was a surge in the number of PR firms. The field was fast developing into a business. Notable agencies including Carl Byoir and Associates (1930), Edelman (1952), and Burson-Marsteller (1953), would become multinational firms, while the largest PR firms such as Edelman (1952), Fleishman Hillard (1946), The Weber Group and Shandwick International (merged in 2001 as Weber Shandwick), and others flourished and expanded their communications scope and markets during the 20th century. As the practice expanded, scholars and practitioners began to define more clearly the function of PR Public as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between and organization and its publics on whom its success or failure depends (Broom, 2009, p.7).

The PRSA defines PR as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. In its Official Statement on PR, PRSA goes on to clarify the functions of PR:

> PR helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.
>
> PR serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, schools, colleges and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective

> relationships with many different audiences or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and other institutions, and with society at large (Public Relations Society of America, 2020).

The managements of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The PR practitioner acts as a counsellor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action (Public Relations Society of America, 2020).

Essentially, the PR field has grown from its less illustrious past to encompass the building of important relationships between an organization and its key publics through its actions and its communication. This perspective defines the field as a management function and offers insight into the roles and responsibilities of PR professionals.

The PRSA’s definition, however, is not perfect: A main weakness of that definition is that it requires PR to bring private and public policies into harmony (Public Relations Society of America, 2020). In reality, however, the relationships an organization has with all of its publics cannot always be balanced. Additionally, that definition obligates us to act in the best interest of both the organization and its publics, which could be logically impossible if those interests are diametrically opposed. A few examples would be class action litigation, boycotts, and oppositional research and lobbying; despite the negative nature of those relationships, they still require PR management and communication.

Asante (2018) notes that the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana has played a key role in ensuring that the PR profession in Ghana is respected and held in high esteem. The profession has moved from the pre-independent era where public relations duties were carried out largely by expatriate information officers to an era where Ghanaians have acquired adequate knowledge and skills to run public relations departments in both Ghanaian and multi-national organisations (Gyan, 1991).

PR practice in Ghana has evolved according to Asante (2018) from being an expatriate duty which was handed over to the local information officers after independence to a full-fledged department in many organisations. After Ghana's independence in 1957, the Information Services Department (ISD) was in charge of providing information, press and public relations services for all government ministries and departments (Gyan, 1991).

Asante (2018) adds that the ISD recruited and trained personnel to perform the role of information officers at the various ministries. Most of these local hires were journalists by profession and therefore had no PR training although they performed PR functions (Gyan, 1991). At that time, PR was practiced mainly at the Ministries and the large multinational companies who had well established PR departments. Practitioners started receiving training when the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) was put up to train PR practitioners and journalists. GIJ become the first school in Ghana to train PR practitioners (Gyan, 1991: Asante, 2018).

In 1972, the Public Relations Association of Ghana (PRAG) was formed by Hermann Alah with a small group of practicing journalists as PR officers. Until then, some PR professionals in Ghana were members of foreign PR associations **(**Atawura, 2010**).** On December 6th 1991, PRAG was re-organized and a new Constitution, Code of Ethics, Code of Professional Standards and Bye-Laws were adopted which transformed it into the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana. Now, having made the progression from one-way communication models in pursuit of a more balanced two-way communication, the practice of PR relies heavily on new media and digital technologies (Baidoo, 2013).

2.2.1 Public Relations Roles

Generally, PR professionals perform a series of interrelated activities. However, research in this area led to the identification of four specific roles by Broom and Smith (Grunig, 1992) namely: The Communication Technician, The Expert Prescriber, The Communication Facilitator and The Problem-Solving Facilitator.

Most PR practitioners begin their professional careers as Communication Technicians. This role requires the execution of strategies with the communication tactics of news releases, employee newsletters, position papers, media placements, web site content, speeches, blogs, and social media messaging and so forth. Practitioners in this role are usually not involved in defining problems and developing solutions, but base their tactics on the technical skill of writing.

The Expert Prescriber's work is akin to the role a doctor performs with a patient: He or she is an authority on a particular industry, problem, or type of PR and is given the primary responsibility to handle this function as a consultant or with little input or participation by other senior members of management.

The Communication Facilitator is a *boundary spanner* who listens to and brokers information between the organization and its key publics. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), the goal of this role is to provide both management and publics the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest.

The Problem-Solving Facilitator collaborates with other managers to define and solve problems. This role requires that the professional, apart from being adept at problem-solving, is a part of the dominant coalition of the organization and has access to other senior managers. The Problem-Solving Facilitator helps other managers understand organizational problems from a PR perspective and enables them to find a solution.

Research on these four roles found that the communication technician role was distinct from the other three roles and that the latter three roles were highly correlated (Dozier and Broom, 1995, p. 3). In other words, an Expert Prescriber was also likely to fulfill the role of the Communication Facilitator and the Problem-Solving Facilitator. To resolve the lack of mutual exclusiveness in the latter three roles, they were combined into one role and designated as managerial roles. The contrast between the communication technician and the communication manager thus explains the responsibilities of PR practitioners within various organizations.

Again, research indicates that practitioners in a predominantly technician role spends the majority of their time writing, producing, and placing communication messages (Broom and Dozier, 1986, p. 37). Typically, those in this role possess a proficiency in the use of language and images. However, technicians are not part of management and therefore does not decide the direction of organizational strategy.

Conversely, the Communication Manager is involved in the strategic thinking of an organization and must be able to conduct research and measurement and share data that informs better decisions for managing relationships with key publics. The communications manager thinks strategically and focuses organizational efforts that contribute to building mutually beneficial relationships that help an organization achieve its bottom-line goals. These efforts are not limited to communication strategies, but include monitoring an organization's external environment, scanning for issues that might impact the organization, and helping an organization adapt to the needs of its stakeholders.

A study (Grunig, 1992) on excellence in the practice of PR found that one of the major predictors of excellence was whether the role of the top PR executive was in a manager role or a technician role. It asserted that those in the management role were much more likely to have a positive impact on the organization's PR practice. Thus, in order for corporate communication to function strategically, the executive in charge of the function must have a place at the decision-making table.

2.2.3 Public Relations Practice in the Digital Era

Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) write that social media could not exist without their users, given that the interactivity characteristics create a community feeling. Roberts (2018) is of the view that a number of characteristics make social media a unique tool for communication and PR practice as a whole. Firstly, social media equips users the ability to be content creators. Roberts (2018) asserts that users can create their own blogs, write a Facebook or Twitter post expressing their thoughts on an issue, or post a video blog ("vlog") about their latest travel adventures on YouTube.

The Internet gives PR practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues. (McAllister and Taylor, 2007) However, much of the academic literature has a general tone of lament that practitioners were simply transferring traditional approaches and models of PR practice to the web and not evolving their practice. With past evidence suggesting that PR practitioners were open to using new technology (Porter and Sallot, 2003), it seems curious that even a traditional mainstay of PR practice like media relations is not taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the web (Alfonso and De Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

In a study of 120 corporate websites from six European countries, the US and Singapore, Alfonso and De Valbuena Miguel (2006) found that the use of Internet tools to build strong and solid relationships with the media is far from ideal. The significant weaknesses detected indicated that these companies may neither have comprehensive, well-designed PR strategies nor sufficient resources to execute them and, further, that any shortcomings in an organization's PR practices were more evident due to the power of the Internet (Alfonso and De Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

Also, Roberts (2018) states that the element of instant and real time communication provided by social media is an essential tool for the PR practice. Even though audiences have to wait a while until scheduled news broadcasts to receive information because reporters and media outlets can bring the news directly to social media platforms. Additionally, organizations can easily share and post news content on their networks. Social media also foster a sense of interconnectedness and community by bringing people across the globe together online.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

There have been diverse studies which examine the impact of the digital revolution on PR practice across many professional fields however Nagai et al's (2019) on Public Relations in the Digital Era with the Ghana Institute of Journalism found that there was some level of mismatch in the expectations the market expected of students. This in some cases was quite minimal because the respondents had had time to learn on the job for a while. James (2007) in another attempt to bring together key findings from across recent literature to enhance overall understanding of current and future challenges posed by new media to PR made the conclusion that new media do offer a way to increase two-way symmetrical communication but that current practice, at least in terms of online press rooms, do not achieve this because they essentially function as one-way asymmetrical communication; focused on the sender-receiver transmission model of communication. Robson and James (2011) makes the bold claim that new technologies are being developed and updated continuously and in themselves pose challenges for PR professionals in terms of keeping abreast of not only what is available but also of what is being planned for release in the future.

2.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework which backs the study as well. From there, the researcher through an empirical review discussed studies related to the study. The next chapter presents the research methodology that was employed by the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design according to Kothari (2008) is a way to systematically solve the research problem. It comprises the various steps that are adopted in studying the problem. There are three (3) research methods namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches (Creswell, 2011). The research design provides a tense for how the research is carried out; it contains an overview of the methods used and the procedures followed and also it contains reasons or justification for choosing specific methods and or procedures.

3.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative techniques according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) involve an interpretive approach to research and include the likes of case studies, interviews, personal experience and observations. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that researchers using qualitative techniques intend to understand the phenomena under study in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This opinion is supported by Grbic (2007) who posits that qualitative researchers question the underlying assumptions of positivism and are instead guided by the paradigms of constructivism and/or interpretivism, whereby, it is assumed that no objective knowledge can be generated that is independent of interpretation, therefore the concepts of truth and reality become subjective.

This study will employ the qualitative approach. Creswell and Clark (2011) noted that a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of respondents, and conducted in a natural setting.

3.1 POPULATION

Wimmer and Dominick (2013, p. 85) defines population as a group or class of subjects, variables, concepts or phenomenon. Zikmund and Babin (2013) confirm that a population is a collection of units aimed to be investigated by the research effort. As such, the population of this study will include organizations which have PR units. This population was selected because they would be in the right position to give information that will help actualise the objectives of the study.

3.1.1 Sampling

The study will adopt the non-probability sampling technique because of the qualitative nature of the study. Laerd (2012) indicates that the non-probability sampling represents a group of sampling techniques that help researchers to select units from a population that they are interested in studying. Non-probability sampling is often used because the procedures used to select units for inclusion in a sample are much easier, quicker and cheaper when compared with probability sampling (Laerd, 2012). Also, the researcher will adopt the purposive sampling approach to arrive at a sample for the study. Lavrakas (2014) notes that a purposive sample is a type of nonprobability sample with the main objective to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population (Lavrakas, 2014). In this light, the researcher will select three organizations, Family Health Hospital, Ghana Chamber of Telecommunications and Golden Tulip Hotels as the organizations of study. From these organizations, resource persons from their communication or PR unit will be administered the study's data collection tool.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Jamshed (2014) notes that interviews are the most common format of data collection in qualitative research. While noting that there are many definitions of interviews, Kumar (2019) defines an interview as a verbal interchange, often face to face, though the telephone may be used, in which an interviewer tries to elicit information, beliefs or opinions from another person. Any person-to-person interaction, either face to face or otherwise, between two or more individuals with a specific purpose in mind is called an interview (Kumar, 2019). Reeves, McMillan, Kachan, Paradis, Leslie and Kitto (2015) posit that a study applying qualitative interviews holds the potential to give voice to minorities and groups in society that may not be heard elsewhere moreover, one should consider the ethical dimensions of taking up time from interviewees and therefore only include as many participants as needed in the research project and who may have insights or experiences of the phenomenon in question (McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2019). The main methods of data collection in this study will be interviews. The interview will consist of open-ended questions to enable the respondents share their thoughts fully without restrictions.

3.2.1 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection will make use of a semi-structured interview schedule so that the wealth of experience of the resource persons could be used to appreciate the reality of the phenomenon being studied. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are the most frequent qualitative data source in research (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Qualitative research interviews attempt to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

The semi-structured interview according to Magaldi and Berler (2020) is an exploratory interview used most often in the social sciences for qualitative research purposes. While it generally follows a guide or protocol that is devised prior to the interview and is focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds (Magaldi and Berler, 2020). Follow up questions will be asked based on the answers that will be given during the course of the interview. The interviews will most likely be conducted in the premises of the respondents' organizations as a matter of their convenience.

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This section covers considerations regarding the appropriateness of the researcher's behavior towards the research participants. In this regard, participants/respondents will be extensively briefed on what the research is about, how it will affect them, the risks and benefits of participation and the fact that they have the right to decline to participate if they choose to do so. Also, another significant ethical issue that will be considered in this research process is the confidentiality of respondents. To secure the consent of the selected participants, the researcher will relay all important details of the study. In ensuring this, there will be no disclosing of names or personal information in the research. Only relevant details that will help in answering the research questions will be included.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a discussion of findings, a summary and conclusion of the study as well as recommendation of this study. In furthering this course, this chapter discusses the findings of the study by addressing the objectives set.

4.1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

PR scholars such as Gleen, Scott and Allen (2012) see PR as a systematic effort to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics. The aim of the study was to assess PR practice in the digital era. The study then set the following objectives in conducting the study.

The first was to determine whether there has been a change in the traditional practice of PR. Here, Asante (2016) noted that the intellectual body of knowledge of PR has grown significantly over the years both globally and in Ghana; the profession continues to evolve toward establishing itself as a strong discipline. Unfortunately, the growth and development has occurred more quickly in other parts of the world than it has in Ghana (Asante, 2016). Asante (2016) for instance notes that PR as a practice and an academic discipline has received a lot of attention in Ghana and seen significant growth. Sriramesh (2009) affirms this line of argument by noting that PR has transformed in several areas and is gaining ground as a profession.

Addressing the issue of aspects of the PR practice has been affected by the digital era, Pavlik (2007) notes that technology has long influenced how PR practitioners do their work and that once typed on paper and sent via mail or fax, press releases are now produced on a computer and delivered via email. In carrying out the functions of PR for instance, AgilityPR (2020) reports that functions like Media Relations, Guest Relations, Social Media Management, Crisis Management, Corporate Social Relationship, Image and Reputation Management among others, the use of technology has been very significant.

On how PR could be practiced effectively in a digital era, Adjei (2013) asserted that PR has long moved beyond being a mere appendage of the corporate governance structure and has become, increasingly, the fulcrum around which organisational image building and public goodwill revolves. Therefore, *Leighton Interactive* (2020) notes that in order to adapt PR practice into a digital era, the practitioner has to research and **re**define the organization's business goals and objectives to fit into the digital era. The practitioner then has to organize supporting tactics for the PR strategy as well as creating a timeline and instituting an evaluation mechanism which will help measure success (*Leighton Interactive***,** 2020).

4.2 CONTRIBUTION TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

The intention of this section is to portray the originality of the study. The study affirmed the notion that dynamism and innovativeness in PR practice was an essential tool to all organizations. The study also revealed findings which indicate that the innovativeness of PR practitioners to adopt technology even though widely positive has form of negatives. In light of the findings made, I emphasize that although not everyone or business employs the services of PR practitioners, those who do not continue to miss out on the advantages of having specialised and professional resource persons to drive their affairs in the face of competition and unforeseen circumstances such as crisis.

4.3 RECOMMENDATION

With hindsight from the literature reviewed and findings made, the study recommends that all PR practitioners should be dynamic and innovative by adapt to working in the digital era. Also, as much as this study is advocating for the adoption of the new trend PR practice, IPR Ghana must for instance put in place policies which will make the adoption of tech-savvy PR practices the new norm in order to raise the standard of PR practice in Ghana. This policy can be directed towards stakeholders like training institutions as well as corporate organizations. Future studies should be conducted across the lines of other aspects of the PR practice and how the digital era has affected its practice. This can be in the case of assessing specific PR functions like Media Relations, Crisis Management among others. This can also help examine the conclusions made by this paper as well as possibly coming up with of multiple perspectives.

4.4 CONCLUSION

Over the years, Dornyo and Adiku (2015) note that PR has been playing very important communication roles in society. Businesses all over the world have been using such PR tools as publicity, sponsorship, event management as well as image and identity buildings to promote their products and services (Dornyo and Adiku, 2015). However, with various studies such as Wright and Hinson (2014) and DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) indicating that social media and other emerging technologies are significantly impacting PR practice, the study was focused on assessing PR practice in the digital era. The study found out that there has been a shift from traditional ways of performing PR functions with the advent of the digital era. In sum, the findings suggest that in order for PR practitioners to stay in touch with reality, they have to adapt to the use of digital tools for effectiveness and efficiency.

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