



Get to Know Public Relations Practitioners and Their Way Before and During Covid-19

Abdul Rauf Ridzuan*, Siti Sarah Jamil, Syed Haikal Arid Syed Johan **, Noraini Adilla Mohd Diah**, Fatin Nur Alaina Mohd Sobri****

**(Corresponding Author) Faculty of Communication and Media studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia*

E-mail: abdulrauf@uitm.edu.my

*** Faculty of Communication and Media studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia*

Article Info

Article history:

Received: 20 March 2021

Accepted: 8 May 2021

Published: 2 June 2021

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33102/jcico.m.vol1no1.6>

ABSTRACT

Since 2020, the widespread of a virus named Covid-19 or more commonly known as Corona, has been happening and has caused many disturbances in peoples' lives. Of course, this is also applicable to people who are working. It affects many working people as they now have to face the Movement Control Order (MCO). The MCO restricts people from moving to places as it is trying to avoid gathering people that could potentially spread the virus even faster. Since we are researching Public Relations Practitioners, we are trying to see how this pandemic will affect how they work during the pandemic. We theorize that there was a significant change in the way Public Practitioners work before and during Covid-19. Therefore, we have interviewed many Public Relations practitioners to see if what we theorize was true. We pose multiple questions about how this pandemic has affected their work as public relations practitioners. We theorize that the MCO especially has left a significant impact in their career as the MCO would restrict things such as moving around from place to place to meet clients. Standard of Procedures was also established to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, and its content forbids a gathering of people. People need to commit to social distancing as well as there needs to be a set amount of people allowed in one confined place. Because of all of this, we theorize that Public Relations practitioners are now learning to conduct meetings with clients and other employees virtually. Whether through Skype, Google Meet, or Zoom, all of those factors may result in them having to reschedule their whole plan for the year.

Keywords: Public Relations, COVID-19, Media, Standard of Procedure, Social Distance

INTRODUCTION

Public Relations is a process function to bring about a result. It involves numerous definite and important aspects beyond media coverage, including research and analysis, policy information, programming, communication, feedback from multiple public, such as investors or any stakeholder. Other than that, Public Relations use two-way communication to gain input and gain public opinion for the betterment of the organization and gain mutual understanding. Public Relations practitioners operate on two aspects: advisers to individual clients and technicians who produce and disseminate messages in multiple media channels (Pearson Education Limited, 2014).

As you all are aware, most parts of the world right now are in lockdown. The cause of the lockdown is a virus called Covid-19. For those who are still not aware, Covid-19 is why everyone is being held up inside their houses currently. The virus itself is a virus that can spread very rapidly through physical human contact. The infection begins when someone infected comes in close contact with someone who is not infected. The virus itself spreads through liquid particles from the infected person. For example, the virus targets the respiratory system of the infected. The severe symptoms include difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, pains, pressure in the chest area, and loss of speech or movement.

Now, you might be thinking about how these two topics can be related to each other. Well, ever since the pandemic started, many people have lost their jobs because of it. Approximately 10 million people have lost their jobs worldwide since the start of April 2020. As you may have guessed, public relations practitioners are also being affected by this since they are also part of the workforce.

Public Relations is something that can be related to the media agency. To do that, they must make the public understand. The role of a Public Relations practitioner is significant as they have to interact with the public and make the people understand that public opinions are influential to the organization.

The role of public relations in a current predicament is more critical to the public. The public needs to know the recent updates and the newly launched products such as CTOS Data System supplying credit card, electronic-know-your-customer (EKYC) and loan. Therefore, this article discusses public relations practitioner and their work before and during Covid-19.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Malaysia announced its first Covid-19 cases on January, 25 involving three China tourists who had entered Malaysia via Johor from Singapore on Jan 23 (*Diyana Pfordten and Razak Ahmad* , 2020). As the threat of the Covid-19 is looming to

every citizen, another danger is also just lurking around the corner. But instead of affecting everyone, it affects those who are in the workforce. Since the Pandemic began, a lot of people have lost their jobs because of the pandemic itself. Since it impacts everyone in the workplace, it is assumed that public relations practitioners are also affected. It is proven by Stephen (2020), who stated that the freelance public relations market shut down in the first week of April as agencies and in-house teams reacted to the markets they serve and cut costs. It means that many agencies are limiting the amount of Public Relations practitioner they're hiring so that they won't suffer any huge losses.

The problem that we have analysed is that public relations practitioners are facing working during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the biggest challenge for them, such as communication barriers where they can't work to the total limit. Lisette (2020) mentioned that media publications' resources are being overwhelmed since they need to cover news about Covid-19 first and foremost (para. 12). There are many ways for public relations practitioners to stay in contact with the client. However, the problem occurred when the wifi signal was lost in the middle of the interview, distracting the interviewer.

All in all, Public relation practitioners may not be able to fully organize their team as they were because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but they are still be able to continue doing their work in the meantime. Moreover, everyone is having a hard time during the pandemic, especially the person who works in communication because communication, interaction, and achieving potential goals in the organization and personally are the main problems for business people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covid-19 Affects Public Relations: Annual plans fail to be implemented

This pandemic has significantly impacted product launches and other promotional or media events where the Public Relations team plays an important role for the company to advertise their products to gain public interest and confidence. For example, Lisette (2020) stated that the coronavirus pandemic has caused the community to become increasingly fearful, the stock market in a freefall, the annual plans stalled, and the health care system in excess (para.4).

COVID-19 has changed public relations forever. It is also supported by Cook (2020) that regular marketing campaigns or product launches seem irrelevant nowadays when people focus on life-threatening infections. Thus, it can be seen that COVID-19 has influenced the annual planning of the workforce globally. Thus, it is seen that COVID-19 has affected the yearly planning of the force globally.

The Decline In Marketing Strategy

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the public's thinking towards everything new or unknown is harmful and makes public relations work on advertising ten times harder than usual (Tanusree, 2020, para.7). For example, CTOS Data System has to develop a unique style of delivering messages through news and broadcast release to promote their products to the public to create awareness of their financial state, especially during a pandemic.

Company strategies, goals, and budgets changed drastically.

According to Colleen (2020), due to the pandemic, all the company strategies, goals, and budgets experience drastic changes. They are not prepared and even expect that this pandemic could happen so soon. However, it was found that it is a learning process to handle clients and potential threats to the company and find ways to encounter them.

Managing expectation

As a Public Relation practitioner, we should position ourselves as a trusted advisor from the beginning. The news cycle rushes, and anything can come up at the last minute (Joy, 2020, para. 13). The writer also states that if a client wants an absolute certainty that a piece of content will be published, Public Relations practitioners must consider using owned channels, and it takes times. If there isn't an immediacy to the public relations story, it may be placed on the back burner until a more appropriate time. Public Relations must find the reason why audiences should care and be interested in the story.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a perfect platform for Public Relations practitioners to advertise their products and update their organisation profiles to gain public interest (Bart, 2018). The marketers should use social media demographics as a guide to choose what social media are best for their brands. To show that social media is effective, the writer added a statistic showing that about 60 per cent of Instagram users are between the ages of 18 and 29, making Instagram a natural fit for youth-oriented brands and products (Bart, 2018).

Hence, if Public Relations practitioners use more social media to advertise their product, this would genuinely give them more benefit and gain public interest, opinions, and broad target audiences. For example, Julies Biscuits their advertising and broadcast release are all over social media TikTok.

MEDIA RELATIONS

Business Queensland (2019) states that media strategy mainly focuses on portraying the organization in the media to gain public confidence and interest in their products and organization. For example, Public Relations may use releasing media statements and on-site media tours (para. 3). Hence, the well you treat and build your networking with the media, the more positive coverage on the news your organization will have or what crisis happened in your company.

ADVERTORIALS

It is the most accessible form of advertising your products and organization profiles to seek public interest. It is a form of advertising, but in news stories or reviews in a newspaper; for example, certain pages in our local newspaper continually advertise certain products. Other than that is a Television advertorial (Business Queensland, 2019). It is one of the effective ways to gain public interest and achieve marketing revenue and strategy.

PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY IN PUTTING OUT MESSAGES

Internal Public Relations

As stated by the University of Minnesota in Information Strategies and Communicators, Public Relations works are based not only on their research and surveys but also by the internal employees or department or organisations to do a news release or statements to research the background company briefers.

For example, a Public Relations department has many categories, such as crisis management plans, corporate intelligence reports, and more involving internal employees (Kathleen and Nora, 2015). The public relations practitioner will gain information on the clients need assessment on the annual reports for stakeholders.

News / Broadcast release

Other than Public Relations owned channel such as social media, Public Relation also uses news release to advertise their products and their organization profiles to gain public interest and confidence. The formats are similar to the news report done by journalists, but Public Relations news releases do not cover all stories like news reports. The type of news release is a simple announcement story, advance story, follow-up after an event, and current trend or unfolding crisis (Kathleen and Nora, 2015). It can also be done in broadcast session, where it is done with a voice-over and visual advertising.

Respond to media inquiries

In certain situations, public relations must hold a response letter regarding the media inquiries as they wanted to have a further explanation, facts, and database about the crisis that happened to the company or the events before. Public Relations practitioners must respond to the media quickly to help meet the journalist's deadline. Getting back to a reporter on time is key to maintaining good relationships with the press (Kathleen and Nora, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach with an in-depth interview session with the public relations practitioners via virtual meetings as the Movement Control Order are still firmly implement. Besides, this research uses a *diagnostic research design* to evaluate and understand the cause and effects of the specific topic. It involves identifying issues and solutions by asking the informants additional questions on how they find a solution to the crisis they currently face. It would help us focus more on how Public Relations practitioners work before and during COVID-19. The feedback we get from Public Relations practitioners is from the interviewee's own experience and opinion working before and during the Covid-19. In this research, five researchers are involved in carrying out the research.

A semi-structured interview was used with five essential questions previously developed by the researchers for gaining information; however, the researchers are prepared to take additional information provided by the informants. Six informants were interviewed to gain better knowledge about Public Relations and their way of work before and during Covid-19. For this research, the interviews are conducted approximately 40 minutes. The questions asked are based on their expertise, perception, opinion, experience and thoughts.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research is individual Public Relation practitioner because the focus of the researchers is mainly on Public Relations practitioners interviewed on virtual meetings via Zoom meeting. Unit of analysis is the person that is being analysed in the context of scientific research for the specific topic.

- **Sampling**

In this research, there will be a 6 informants who take part in the investigation. The *purposive sampling* is used for this research to obtain detailed explanation about

How Public Relations practitioner work before and during COVID-19 and the researchers chose the most suitable informants for this study and not randomly select informants from the Public Relations profession. It is crucial to choose the most suitable informants for this study of qualitative research. Researchers chose Public Relations practitioners because it aims to gather their personal experience of the preferences between working before Covid-19 and during Covid-19. They are one of the most affected during the MCO, and because of what they have endured, the researcher is sure they can provide such solid and detailed information about it. The researchers collected six Public Relations practitioners in various fields and categories such as media and publicity, Public Relations communication consultancy, corporate communication, education and marketing. In this research, sampling continues until the information achieves saturation point (Marshall, 1996).

According to the data analysis, a thematic analysis was used in this research, and it is a conceptual research type. We use it to evaluate classifications and current patterns that apply to the results. It describes the details and interacts with a varied topic through explanations (*Ridzuan et al., 2015*). It is more accessible to people that are unfamiliar with the relevant theory in-depth. Researchers also collect the answers from the interviewees, compare them and categorise them according to the preferred questions to identify a certain amount of themes in the topic about public relations practitioners.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1: What are the challenges Public Relations practitioners are facing during this crisis?

- **Social Distancing**

Miss Shalini's challenges as a Public Relations Practitioner during Covid-19 is that the social distancing limits Miss Shalini's company to meet the media, do a press conference, and hold an interview. Sir Zafflie, Madam Jacinta, Miss Afni and Miss Sue also face this same problem. However, they overcame this problem by introducing virtual meetings to hold a meeting between the employees.

- **Blueprint Readjustment**

For Sir Zafflie, his department had to readjust the blueprints for the year because of the pandemic. Things that involve face to face contact mainly was cancelled because of the PKP movement. Madam Jacinta shares the same situation as Sir Zafflie. Most of the public events for her company, such as press conference, interviews and things like such, are cancelled because social distancing is in effect ever since the pandemic broke out of control.

- **Starting a New Business**

However, Miss Sue's company thought this was a great business opportunity and decided to start a new business. However, there is still a challenge, and that also involves how she cannot meet the media face to face, but she later says that it wasn't a big deal since she can still update the media with press releases. Miss Widia also supported it as she told us that her company created Covid-19 insurance just in case people are worried about the bill that might come if they are infected with the Covid-19 virus.

In conclusion, an article titled how to adapt your PR strategy for the Covid-19 outbreak written by Lisette (2020) has predicted that some annual plans will happen. Besides, the blueprints were changed to fit the situation that can satisfy both internal and external clients and stakeholders. The decline of the marketing strategy is accurate. Sir Zafflie supports that the media will prioritize the news for the Covid-19 first before any advertisement. It is also supported by an article titled analysing the impact of COVID-19 on the public relations industry and its significance post the pandemic by Tanusree Gupta (2020). It mentioned that Public Relations work would need to work ten times as hard to advertise their companies. In terms of budget, it was confirmed that their annual plan to be implemented would be deducted. The funding went from 1.6 billion last year to 1.1 billion. It can be attributed to them not having to waste resources by moving around to places and renting places or venues for interviews and press conferences.

RQ 2: Do your work ethic and pattern change during Covid-19? If yes, how? If no, why?

- **Work Ethics Remain**

"Regardless of any situation, a PR practitioner should always keep their integrity." Miss Widia Yana Abdul Rahman said this. Miss Sue Hui Lim also agreed upon this fact as she told us that her work ethic did not change and stays the same even with the pandemic.

- **Work Schedule Becomes Hectic**

The time and place nor situation mattered to them in regards to keeping their professionalism and ethics. Every interviewee also agreed on this as they also admit that Covid-19 didn't change anything about their work ethic. The interviewees also shared the same situation in their work pattern during Covid-19 since it is getting more hectic. All the interviews agree that they have a tighter schedule than before due to incoming inquiries from customers or stakeholders who wish to know more about the companies during the outbreak. Most public relations practitioners have

to deal with many stakeholders or customers who are afraid of losing out on information about certain things.

CONCLUSION REMARKS:

All in all, Most Public Relations practitioners agree that they experience changes in their work pattern, especially during a crisis. Since most of the stakeholders and clients are at unrest to know more about their companies' future, Public Relations practitioners have to entertain any sort of inquiries that the stakeholders might have. They also might need to make more press releases than usual to make sure the public is well informed and that no false rumours are spreading about the companies.

"Even before the pandemic, we also experience a very tight schedule and well planned, but now it is not the same, and during COVID-19, we work like hell. I personally have to work at 4 places which is Crisis Preparedness and Response Center (CPRC) under Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia (KKM), Maktab Keselamatan Negara (MKN), Jabatan Perdana Menteri (JPM), and Jabatan Penyiaran RTM." said Mr Zafie Bin Abdul Jawad.

RQ 3: Since Public Relations uses many media channel, what media channel do you always use?

- **Target Audience**

According to one of our interviewees, Miss Shalini, she said that the media channel they use the most would depend on the target audience. The media channel that they use will go hand in hand with their target audience since the news or press release will reach them more accessible. Madam Nora Nordin also agreed upon this as she said that her press releases are often targeted towards people interested in the contents and, hence, the target audience.

- **All Channels**

Most of the Public Relations Practitioner such as Miss Afni, Sir Zafflie, Miss Sue and Madam Jacinta prefers to use all of the channels to spread information faster and cater to all sorts of the target audience. They are also able to inform their usual stakeholders and customers of updates about their company. It's like hitting two birds with one stone.

Conclusions Remarks

Upon asking, most interviewees admit to using social media as a media channel frequently because it is the easiest one by far to post updates on their current situation. Editorial is something that Miss Widia agreed on using a lot because their company does not usually release press release or updates since most of their planning is considered unimportant to the public. Miss Sue agreed on responding to media inquiries as it can make your company's presence known. In addition, Miss Sue also admitted to using news broadcast and release. Most of the other Public Relations practitioners also use this method, such as Miss Jacinta, Miss Afni and Sir Zafflie. Most of them agreed on using social media as it is the most straightforward and most accessible platform.

RQ 4: How often do your company do press releases in a year?

- **Once a Week**

Miss Sue, Miss Jacinta and Miss Afni do their press release once a week, but the number of press releases can also change per week depending on the external clients. However, Sir Zafflie and Miss Shalini did not comment on this.

- **Less than 10 in a year**

According to Miss Widia, her company does not need to produce regular press releases regularly, as they are aware that the news is not deemed necessary to the public. The press releases need to be published when the project or product is newsworthy. Hence why they usually save up their press releases for something big that their company had planned.

Conclusion Remarks:

Releasing the press release every once a week seems to be a safe spot as it keeps the media and public updated about the current situation in the organization. Though, Miss Widia's Company seems to think that most of the public do not need to know any irrelevant information. They will only release press releases if they feel the content of what happened is essential.

RQ 5: What kind of messaging your company put out to the public to gain public confidence and interest?

- **Keeping The Public Updated**

For Miss Sue, she mentioned that the best way to gain public confidence and interest is by making sure that the public is aware that you're there even in the time of a crisis. You need always keep them updated when your company will do a big

project or if your company decides to something to make sure that the public will always know that you'll keep them updated. Miss Afni also agreed that back in 2014, McDonald's was boycotted because of a halal issue. McDonald managed to gain the public's trust once more by keeping them updated with the truth on all social platforms.

- **Getting Straight To The Facts**

According to Miss Widia, you do not have to engage with the public every single week constantly. She stated that you need to make sure that your message to the public need to be as factual and straight to the point as possible. It can squish any unwanted rumours circling your company. She also mentioned that it is essential to reply as fast as possible but make sure that the reply's contents are sufficient and factual. This view was also shared by Miss Jacinta respectively.

Conclusion Remarks:

In keeping the public updated, Miss Afni and Miss Sue share the same opinion as they need to constantly engage with the people with any social platforms that they can access. It helps them build trust and reputation amongst the public. Meanwhile, in terms of getting straight to the facts, Miss Widia mentioned that it is better to be concise and truthful with the public as possible. Any potential threat that can ruin your organisation's image can be avoided.

Based on the article written by Kathleen and Nora (2020), Public Relations Messages, public relations practitioners should play their part in helping to meet the journalists' deadline in responding to the medias' inquiries of what's happening in the organization or the updates that are important for the public to know. Miss Widia supports this as she mentioned that the Public Relations practitioners should reply to the media as fast and truthful as possible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the Public Relations industry quite heavily. Thus, most Public Relations practitioners need to adapt themselves towards this new type of environment. Such as needing to do most of their work virtually and also they need to adapt to the fact that face to face communications are prohibited in this time of crisis. For example, before the COVID-19 pandemic started, they were able to walk and talk with their colleagues without having to worry about social distancing, while now they would need to communicate with

their colleagues via phone calls. As a result, they can prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The reason why Public Relations industry got impacted so heavily is because the economic stability of not only Malaysia, but the whole world has been challenged by the COVID-19 virus. This is also a great opportunity for Public Relations Practitioners to venture more into what they're able to do. This will enable us to become more efficient. For example, it could help a Public Relations Practitioner shave of time since they do not have to go to the person's place to interview them. The practitioners can use the soft skills that they've accumulated by interviewing them virtually. Overall, this can also prepare for any unexpected crisis that could affect the whole world once more.

REFERENCES

- Adam, A. F. (2019). *Exam-Oriented in Malaysia's Education System*. e-Journal of Media & Society, 1-19.
- Bart, M. (2018). PR Daily: *How to pick the perfect social media channel*. Retrieved November 18, 2018 from <https://www.prdaily.com/how-to-pick-the-perfect-social-media-channel/>
- Business Queensland. (2019). *Public Relations tools and activities*. Retrieved June 19th, 2019, from <https://www.business.qld.gov.au/running-business/marketing-sales/marketing-promotion/pr/tools-activities>
- Collen, O'C. (2020). Crenshaw Communication: COVID-19's Impact on PR, Now and In The Future. Retrieved April 7th, 2020, from <https://crenshawcomm.com/blogs/covid-19s-impact-on-pr-now-and-in-the-future/>
- Joy, K. (2020). Ragan's PR Daily: 3 tough challenges PR pros are facing amid COVID-19 uncertainty. Retrieved September 18th, 2020, from <https://www.prdaily.com/3-tough-challenges-pr-pros-are-face-amid-covid-19-uncertainty/>
- Kathleen, H., Nora, P, University of Minnesota, Information Strategies for Communicators: Public Relations Messages. (October 15, 2015). Retrieved from <https://open.lib.umn.edu/infostrategies/chapter/2-6-public-relations-messages/>

Lisette, P (2020, Dec 31). Ragan's PR Daily: *How to adapt your PR strategy for the COVID-19 outbreak*. Retrieved from <https://www.prdaily.com/how-to-adapt-your-pr-strategy-for-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

Marjorie, C. (2017). Axia Public Relations: 5 ways to manage your expectations for PR results. Retrieved December 21, 2017, from <https://www.axiapr.com/blog/5-ways-to-manage-your-expectations-for-pr-results>

Ridzuan, A.R., Bolong, J., Suyurno, S.S. Mohamad Kamal, R., and Jafri, F. (2015). Developing Sns Factors Structures Towards Constructing Sns Survey Questions, *Journal of Human Capital Development*, 8(2), 25-35.

Stephen Waddington. (2020, May 19). How COVID-19 will impact PR practise and skills [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://wadds.co.uk/blog/2020/5/19/how-covid-19-will-impact-pr-practice-and-skills>

Tanusree, G. (2020, Jun 20th): Analysing the impact of COVID-19 on Public Relations industry and its significance post the pandemic. YourStory.com. Retrieved from <https://yourstory.com/2020/06/analysing-impact-covid-19-public-relations-industry>

Think Public Relations. (2014). London, United Kingdom

Fred, C. (2020, May 1st) Institute for Public Relations: *The profound impact of COVID-19 on activism and PR*. Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/the-profound-impact-of-covid-19-on-activism-and-pr/>