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Does social media usage matter?

An analysis of online practices and digital media perceptions of communication practitioners in Europe

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Abstract

A key aspect for understanding and explaining online communication is the micro level of communication practitioners' social media usage and their general attitudes toward digital platforms. This paper investigates how public relations practitioner's personal and professional use of social media is related to their perceptions of social media. A quantitative methodology was applied to perform this research. A population of 2,710 professionals from 43 European countries working on different hierarchical levels both in communication departments and agencies across Europe were surveyed as part of a larger transnational online survey. Results show that practitioners with a high level of usage of social media give more importance to social media channels, influence of social media on internal and external stakeholders and relevance of key gatekeepers and stakeholders along with a better self-estimation of competences. Issues about diverse levels of overestimation of social media use, application and importance in the professional arena are also debated.

Keywords: Social media; professional use; personal use; gatekeepers; third person effect.

1. Introduction

The incorporation of social media and online platforms into communication strategies of organizations has been intensively discussed during the last years. The focus of research shifted from normative propositions like the promise of more symmetrical and

dialogical communication approaches (e.g., Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Wilcox, 2006; Duhé, 2012; Wright, 1998, 2001) to rational arguments about benefits, limits and structural prerequisites of online strategies (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Zerfass & Pleil, 2012) to empirical studies on online practices in various regions of the world (Wright & Hinson, 2009, 2012; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Verhoeven, Zerfass, & Tench, 2011).

The introduction of Web 2.0 technology and social media has dramatically impacted and transformed the day-to-day activities of public relations practitioners, who need to master digital tools for timely, accurate and effective communication (Taylor & Perry, 2005). There are various theoretical perspectives on individual acceptance of new technologies which mostly stem from the ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003)¹.

As Diffusion of Innovations Theory states, the rate of adoption of any change follows an S-shaped curve (Rogers, 1995), starting slowly and, if the innovation is considered by members of a social system to be useful, begins to accelerate. This theory helps frame questions of adoption of social media by public relations practitioners by underscoring the importance of attributes of the innovations, the communication channels involved in diffusion, the decision processes of adopters over time, and the social systems in which adopters live and work (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012; Savery, 2005)

Although it has been widely recognized that the speed at which new technology has been adopted by organizations and considerable research has focused on the specific use of a single platform (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Porter, Trammel, Chung, & Kim, 2007; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011), more knowledge is required about the professional use of social media tools in public relations in diverse regions of the world through empirical and cross-cultural studies. There is a lack of previous research which is related to professional and private use of social media by public relations practitioners with their perception of social media. This paper focuses on these relations with the

¹ The main models employed for research on technology adoption are: The Theory of Reasoned Action (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989), the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 1995), the Multipurpose Information Appliances Adoption Model (Hong & Tam, 2006), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

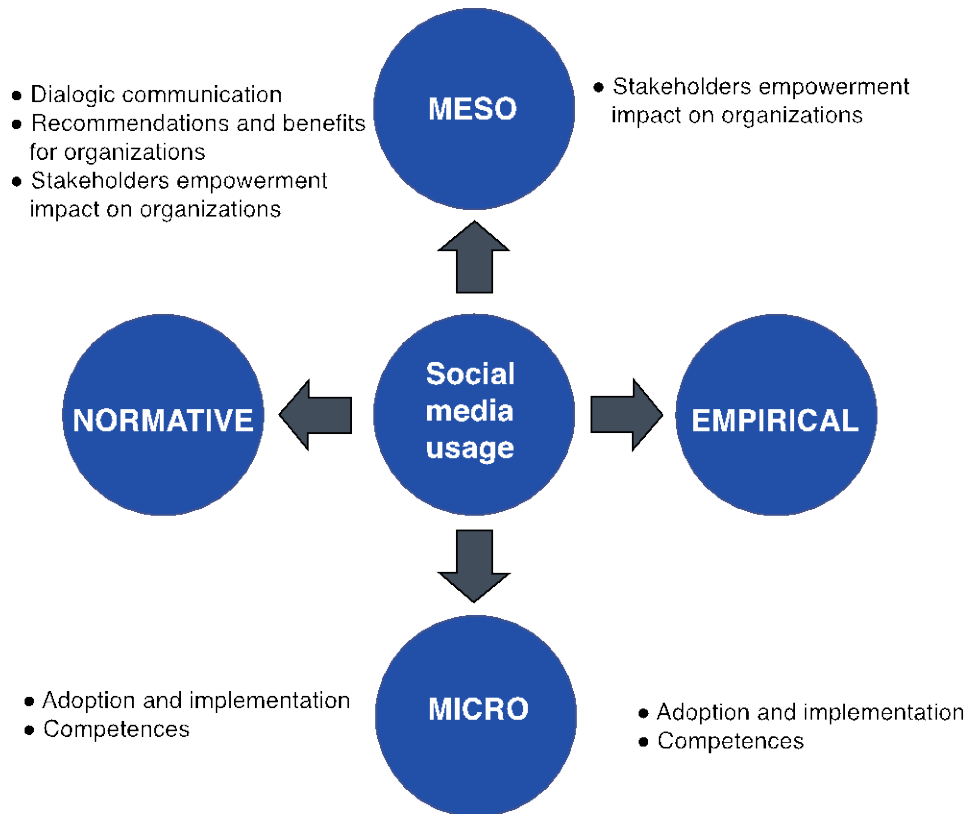
perception of influence of social media, self-evaluation of competences and importance of gatekeepers and social media tools.

2. Social media use and digital competences

Following the approach of new institutionalism applied to communication management and public relations (Zerfass, 2009; Sandhu, 2009), most of the research about social media in communication management has been approached from a meso-level perspective. The meso-level is above the individual and below the general societal system and allows studying organizations in a broad perspective. This level has been mainly studied from normative perspectives and produced rational arguments about benefits and recommendations for the optimal use of new media and tools and for managing the impact on organization of empowered stakeholders.

On the other hand, micro-level analysis is mostly concerned with individual and group actions (Sandhu, 2009: 82) and permits researchers a deeper understanding of social media use from the perspective of practitioners. Normative and empirical research has been conducted in this micro-level in two principal areas of focus: professional adoption of social media and competences to use them successfully.

Figure 1: Overview of literature about social media usage in communication management



2.1 Meso-level approach

So far, one of the main debates about social media in communication management has been to do with how organizations are implementing social media and taking advantage of its numerous opportunities. According to Robson and James (2013), the explosion of new studies in the past years have predominantly been US-based and undertaken with large corporations with sizeable communication departments (eg. Avery et al., 2010; Curtis et al., 2010; DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Porter, Sallot, Cameron, & Shamp, 2001; Sweetser, Avery, Lariscy, & Howes, 2009; Waters, Canfield, Foster, & Hardy, 2011).

From the normative approach, despite some authors assertions that organizations are not still fully utilizing the interactive potential of the Internet to build and maintain organization-public relationships and practitioners are poorly using the dialogic tools (Kent, 2013; Lee, Gil de Zúñiga, Coleman, & Johnson, 2014; MacAllister-Spooner, 2009; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012), most researchers highlight the positive impacts of social media for organizational communication (Holtz & Havens, 2009). Emerging technologies, advances in social media, and new communication platforms represent powerful tools for enhancing public participation (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton,

2012), communicating directly with the publics, bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004; Wright & Hinson, 2009), ‘repairing’ the reputation and preventing potential boycotts in crisis situations (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011), achieving higher organizational credibility (Yang & Lim, 2009), creating instantly available avenues through which to disseminate messages and reach particular audiences (Avery et al., 2010) and even empowering practitioners by improving their productivity and managing issues better (Sallot et al., 2004).

Presenting an alternative argument critical academics like Kent (2013) affirm that so much of what passes as social media research in public relations is just marketing and advertising in disguise and believes that most of the social media technologies that were supposed to connect people to others have largely had just the opposite effect, but scholars have mostly ignored the negatives aspects. Robson and Sutherland (2012), state that although the literature indicates that practitioners are demonstrating awareness and knowledge of social media and its principles, organizations generally fail to make efficient and effective use of the potential for two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue. Along the same line, previous studies have demonstrated that neither traditional online tools such as corporate websites nor social networks have been employed to their full dialogic potential (e.g. Bortree & Seltzer 2009; Park & Reber, 2008) and there is a gap in what the field is saying about the potential of social media and the evidence provided to prove the argument (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

Furthermore, a significant portion of the research conducted so far has attempted to provide recommendations to practitioners on how to take advantage of new technologies to help organizations to build relationships, solve problems, and to enact socially responsible goals. Rational arguments and suggestions include: to engage in direct and open conversation with publics, addressing the needs, concerns, and interests of publics while disseminating organizational information (Men & Tsai, 2012); to provide an easy-to-use interface for their stakeholders, keep visitors on the site, encourage users to return, engage in dialogic communication (Li & Bernoff, 2011; McCorkindale & Morgoch, 2013); to establish clear rules to encourage and facilitate participation (Kent, 2013); and to balance between participation involving openness and community and effectiveness in representing organizational objectives (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In short, authenticity, transparency, dialogue, sharing and giving control are some of the ‘social rules’ that social media requires (Rodríguez, 2006).

2.2 Micro-level approach: Use and adoption of social media for the public relations profession

Notwithstanding the increased use of new communication channels and considerable excitement surrounding the potential of interactive tools, significant gaps remain in the knowledge of how practitioners are using social media. In Europe, despite the contribution of projects such as the European Public Relations Body of Knowledge (EBOK), the European Communication Monitor (ECM) and the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) programme (Moreno, Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013; Moreno, Zerfass, & Navarro, 2012; Tench et al., 2013; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2004), there is still much to understand about the use of social media by public relations practitioners from a cross-national empirical approach.

Digital communication has been linked to managerial roles for public relations and previous research found that practitioners who used social networking sites and social media tools were more likely to report feeling empowered in their current position, have greater perceived expertise, and feel greater prestige within their organizations (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Porter et al., 2007; Porter & Sallot, 2005; Sallot et al., 2004). Furthermore, Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) concluded that those public relations tweeters who are more influential relative to others in the same group are more likely to see the value of social media for themselves personally.

However, although some research studies offer varying rates of social media use among PR practitioners (e.g. Avery et al., 2010; Barnes, Lescault, & Andonian, 2012; Porter et al., 2001; Robson & James, 2011; Taylor & Perry, 2005; Sweetser et al., 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2012, 2013), it is beyond dispute that public relations professionals have largely embraced social media. Results of the eighth annual survey measuring how social media are being used in public relations practice in the USA (Wright & Hinson, 2013) found that the use of new media has continued to increase every year and at present 99% of practitioners spend part of their average working day on aspects of social media.

Low adoption rates were documented in a study conducted by Eyrych, Padman and Sweetser (2008) that concluded that practitioners are comfortable utilizing more established and institutionalized tools, such as e-mail and the Internet, but are slower to adopt more technologically complicated tools that cater to a niche audience such as text

messaging, social networks, and virtual worlds. Differences between sectors are important, and while some studies show almost universal use among professionals working in high-technology firms (Taylor & Perry, 2005), for example only 17% of health practitioners were using social media in public health information dissemination (Avery et al., 2010).

In their recent research Robson & James (2011, 2013) found practitioners were trailing social media for public relations purposes and felt their organization and the resources available to them prevented a more in-depth, ongoing engagement with social media. Even being part of the dominant coalition, they blamed management for constraining the social media adoption. This conclusion suggests that these professionals may not necessarily have the power to adopt social media and implement a strategic approach, as is suggested in the literature (Eyrich et al., 2008; Curtis et al., 2010).

Examining the relationship between personal and professional use of social media, Robson and James (2011) found that practitioners who use social media in their personal lives and/or for their professional development are likely to gain the necessary knowledge and confidence to use these platforms in their public relations work. “Practitioners may feel that by ‘testing out’ social media in their own lives or on a small-scale they will develop the skills and confidence to address external constraints” (p. 31). This study, the first quantifying the relationship between personal, professional development and public relations use of social media, also provides empirical support for a “natural evolution of adoption” whereby practitioners start by using social media for their own personal purpose, progressing to utilizing social media for their professional development and, finally, they begin to trial social media to achieve their organizations’ (or clients’) public relations objectives.

3. Professional competences for social media

When analyzing the development of specific competencies for modern communication practitioners (Tench et al., 2013), it is essential to consider their use and understanding of technology-driven skills. Literature has revealed the necessity of incorporating online technologies into the public relations education (Curtin & Witherspoon, 1999; Gustafson & Thomsen, 1996) and broader the strategic professional use of the Internet (Curtin & Witherspoon, 1999; Gower & Cho, 2001). Practitioners that are unprepared for social media challenges are likely to face a number of barriers and the potential lack

of social media knowledge and skills is an issue for the profession that has emerged in the last few years (Lariscy et al., 2009; Macnamara, 2010).

In Europe, Theaker (2008, p. 353) found a lack of confidence and training in relation to social media among PR practitioners. This was also explained in a study of European practitioners by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (Zerfass, Sandhu, & Young, 2007), which cited a deficit of “employees with the necessary skills to handle new communication challenges posed by social software” as the major barrier constraining public relations. In 2010 moreover, Macnamara recalls that a number of case studies show that inappropriate and even unethical practices are being adopted in social media, demonstrating that some professionals are using these channels in naive ways.

A recent study by Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) also showed that three-quarters of PR and corporate practitioners in Australia and almost 70 percent of European practitioners claim to have ‘advanced’ or ‘intermediate’ knowledge of social media. However, other findings of these surveys suggest that a number of these claims are over-stated. For instance, a lack of policies and guidelines on social media content, a lack of training and support provided to staff engaged in social media in most organizations and a lack of social media strategies in organizations were found which are inconsistent with the knowledge levels and role claims of PR and corporate communications practitioners. In a previous study, Macnamara (2010) found that public relations practitioners who expressed a “strong commitment to dialogic and Excellence theory” (p.32) may have been reporting what they thought the researcher or others wanted to hear.

Some researchers have also suggested that practitioners can educate themselves by participating in the social media space on a personal level such as catching up with existing friends and family online; or on a professional level, such as networking with colleagues, staying up-to-date with the industry and establishing thought leadership through offering opinion and comment (Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010; Robson & James, 2011). In the same spirit, practitioners interviewed by Tench et al. (2013) in six regions of Europe underlined self-education and experience as the principal means to acquire competences to perform the social media role.

However, adequate knowledge and skills on social media is not enough. Using these tools strategically is one of the main challenges for a public relations practitioner. Most authors point out the importance of collecting data and drawing insights to help create a social media strategy and mention the potential consequences of blindly entering into

the social media arena (DiStaso & MaCorkindale, 2012; Paine, 2011). But, even though most of the suggestions seem obvious, too often practitioners forget about thinking strategically. The most critical academics regret that many professionals spend more time worrying about posting to their organization's social media sites than thinking what their actual strategic communication goal is (Kent, Carr, Husted, & Pop, 2011).

4. Social media use and gatekeeper perceptions

Regarding stakeholders, social media has changed the landscape for communications and empowered publics, who are able to post, share and republish information easily and quickly (Guth & Marsh, 2011; Kent, 2008; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Segev, Villar, & Fiske, 2012; Smith, 2011). This forces organizations to build and maintain positive relationships with active consumers as well as with bloggers, community managers and other gatekeepers on the social web.

The tendency to establish relationships with influencers stems from the assumption that they are opinion leaders who can use their online platforms to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviours of their audiences. In this sense, several researches showed that citizens perceive social media as a credible source of information, free from the organizational, marketing and economic imperatives faced by traditional journalism (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kioussis, 2001).

In the conversation age, companies need to listen to, and engage with, a wider range of stakeholders in order to be successful. There are new and powerful influencers across every channel (e.g. bloggers, employees or consumer enthusiasts) with whom organizations must engage in real-time conversation (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012). However, according to Wright and Hinson (2013) only 43 percent of the organizations are conducting any measurement involving blogs, social or other emerging media and most of this research focuses upon communication outcomes such as the amount of information being disseminated. Less than a third of this measurement focuses upon communication outcomes such as the impact these messages have on the formation, change and reinforcement of attitudes, opinions and behaviours. These results point to the fact that the performance of public relations practitioners to communicate with stakeholders in the social media arena could be more based on normative assumptions and their own perceptions of social media. This question brings forward a debated issue: the overestimation of social media by public relations professionals in three different

ways: overestimation of their competences to deal with social media (Macnamara, 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012); overestimation of the importance of social media adoption (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011); and overestimation of the influence of social media. Moreover a third party effect could be considered if professionals estimate that social media has a lesser influence on themselves than on internal and external stakeholders. Third party effect theory (Davison, 1996) explains that people tend to overestimate the influence of media on the attitudes and behaviours of others and to underestimate the same influence on themselves.

These approaches analyse social media communications from the organizational and stakeholder perspectives on a meso level and they can only shed light on and explain some aspects of the digital sphere at large. A key aspect for understanding and explaining online communication is the micro level of communication practitioners' social media usage and their general attitudes toward digital platforms.

The purpose of this paper is to improve the knowledge of the micro-level analysis of social media in communication management from an empirical approach across Europe. Concretely this paper aims to contribute to under explored topics: the relations between private and professional use with the perception of influence of social media, self-evaluation of competences and the importance of gatekeepers and social media tools.

5. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of this research is to investigate how public relations practitioner's personal and professional use of social media is related to their evaluation of a) their own digital competencies b) the relevance of gatekeepers on the social web, c) the impact and importance of social media. The paper focuses on five research questions derived from a literature review and previous studies; each of them is supplemented by several hypotheses:

- **RQ1.** To what extent are social media platforms used by communication professionals for private and professional reasons?
- **RQ2.** Does private and professional social media use correlate with the digital competencies of communication professionals?
- **RQ3.** Does more frequent social media usage have an impact on communication professionals' perceptions about the relevance of social media content on stakeholders and professionals themselves (third party effects)?

- **RQ4.** Does more frequent social media usage have an impact on communication professionals' perceptions about the relevance of digital gatekeepers?
- **RQ5.** Does more frequent social media usage have an impact on communication professionals' perceptions about the importance of social media tools for strategic communication?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were generated after the literature review:

- **H1a.** The majority of PR practitioners have adopted social media for private and professional use, with divergences regarding age.
- **H1b.** Professional and private use is associated with each other.
- **H2.** Higher usage correlates with more confidence about one's own level of social media competence.
- **H3a.** More frequent users report a greater influence of social media on internal and external stakeholders.
- **H3b.** More frequent users report a greater influence of social media on their own perception of stakeholders and other organizations.
- **H3c.** Practitioners report a greater influence of social media on stakeholders than on themselves (third party effect).
- **H4a.** More frequent users perceive more often that consumers on the social web are relevant gatekeepers for their organizations.
- **H4b.** More frequent users perceive more often that employees who are very active on the social web are relevant gatekeepers for their organizations.
- **H4c.** More frequent use correlates with the perceived adequacy of organizational strategies and instruments for communicating with new gatekeepers on the social web.
- **H5.** More frequent users rate social media tools more important than professionals with a lower use.

6. Methodology

A quantitative methodology was applied to perform this research. A population of professionals working on different hierarchical levels both in communication departments and agencies across Europe were surveyed in spring 2013 as part of the annual ECM. The final sample included 2,710 participants from 43 European countries. Data were analysed with SPSS for descriptive and analytical purposes.

A pre-test with 36 practitioners in 13 European countries was held before the English language survey was launched in March 2013 and was online for four weeks. A personal invitation was sent to 30,000+ professionals throughout Europe via e-mail based on a database provided by the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) and additional invitations were distributed through national branch associations and networks. 4,808 respondents started the survey and 2,802 of them completed it. The evaluation is then based on 2,710 fully completed replies by participants that were clearly identified as part of the population, being communication professionals in Europe.

The demographics showed that 43.2 per cent of the respondents held a position as communication manager or as CEO of a communication consultancy. 28.4 per cent were responsible for a single communication discipline or were unit leaders and 22.5 per cent were team members or consultants. 58.3 per cent of the professionals interviewed have more than ten years of experience in communication management, 58 per cent of them are female and the average age is 40.9 years. A vast majority (92.8 per cent) of the respondents had an academic degree from a professional bachelor to a doctorate. Almost three out of four worked in communication departments in organizations (joint stock companies, 26.2 per cent; private companies, 18.9 per cent; government-owned, public sector, political organizations, 16.3 per cent; non-profit organizations, associations, 13.4 per cent), and 25.2 per cent of the respondents were communication consultants working freelance or for agencies and consultancies.

For the statistical analysis the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for descriptive and analytical purposes. The results have been statistically tested with, depending on the variable, Pearson's chi-square tests (χ^2), Spearman's rank correlation tests (ρ), Kendall's rank correlation (tau b), Cramér's V, and independent samples T-tests.

7. Results

7.1. The use of social media platforms for private and professional reasons

The empirical study shows that European public relations practitioners have mostly incorporated social media and use them daily both for private (65.2%, N=2710) and professional (55%, N=2710) reasons. Regarding social media use, 65.2 per cent (N=2710) of respondents reported daily use in their private life and then 55% at work (N=2710). In fact, only 4.6 per cent of those surveyed said they had never used these

digital communication tools. There was an increase of 9.1% from the private daily use of social media compared with the 2011 survey (Zerfass et al., 2011), although in these two years there was only a tenth of a percent reduction in the number of professionals who never use these digital tools in their private life (See Table 1).

Table 1. Use of social media for private and professional reasons.

<i>Use of social media</i>	<i>Private reasons</i>	<i>Professional reasons</i>
Daily	65.2%*	55.0%**
Several times per week	19.4%*	27.2%**
Less than once or once a week	10.8%*	13.2%**
Never	4.6%*	4.6%**
Total	100.0%*	100.0%**

* significant differences ((Kendall rank correlation, $p \leq 0.05$, $\tau = 0.033$)

**highly significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.01$, Cramers $V = 0.141$, $\tau = 0.203$)

Another debated area in society generally and in strategic communication practice specifically is the differences in behaviour across demographic age groups when it comes to social media usage. The findings demonstrate inevitable differences between practitioners from different age groups for private ($X^2=162.433$, $p \leq 0.01$, $\tau=-0.203$) and professional use ($X^2=17.362$, $p > 0.05$, $t=-0.033$). For example, twice as many practitioners under the age of 30 use social media privately on a daily basis (85%, $N=2710$) compared with the over 60s age group (42.9%). However, there are surprisingly small differences for the professional usage. Every second professional in every age group uses social media daily, and only those in their twenties report more intense usage patterns (64.1%). Over fifties practitioners have a stronger usage of social media for professional reasons (54%), while over fifties professional usage is stronger than private usage (46.5%).

A positive association between private use and professional use ($X^2= 446.824$, $p \leq .001$, $t(2710) = 0.318$) is confirmed for all users. As observed in Table 2 practitioners who report lower professional use also show lower private use.

Table 2. Association between professional and private social media use.

	Private use of social media use					
		Never	Less than once or once a week	Several times per week	Daily	Total
Never		24.8%	9.2%	3.6%	2.7%	4.6%
Less than once or once a week		33.6%	28.3%	14.5%	8.8%	13.2%
Several times per week		22.4%	35.8%	40.6%	22.1%	27.2%
Daily		19.2%	26.6%	41.3%	66.3%	55.0%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

7.2. Private and professional social media use correlate with the digital competencies of communication professionals

Practitioners display rather moderate capabilities when it comes to their skills and knowledge of social media in a professional context. The highest responses for the understanding and application of social media were for delivering messages via the social web (53.5%) and for knowing about social media trends (50.9%) and developing social media strategies (44%). On the flip side the weaker areas of the respondents' competencies were knowledge about the legal framework for social media (31.5%) and initiating web-based dialogues with stakeholders (29.2%). Both fall below the mean scores for capabilities.

As expected, social media skills correlate positively with both private and professional use of the digital tools ($p < 0.001$). However, respondents who report higher professional use are also better at assessing their social media skills, especially delivering messages via the social web ($p < 0.001$: $\tau = 0.331$), knowing about social media trends ($p < 0.001$: $\tau = -0.3281$), and developing social media strategies ($p < 0.001$: $\tau = -0.326$). It is interesting to note that a significant percentage of practitioners that never use social media in their professional life reported having high skills in knowing social media trends (25.6%), delivering messages via the social web (24.8%) or knowing how to avoid risks and handle crises on the social web (20%) (See Table 3).

Table 3. Highly rated social media skills and professional/private use

Highly rated social media skills	Daily professional use	Daily private use	Never professional use	Never private use
Delivering messages via the social web	66.7%	60.5%	24.8%	30.4%
Knowing about social media trends	63%	56.9%	25.6%	30.4%
Developing social media strategies	57.4%	48.4%	14.4%	29.6%
Evaluating social media activities	50%	44.3%	16.8%	24.8%
Knowing how to avoid risks and handle crises on the social web	49.2%	42.3%	20%	20%
Setting up social media platforms	48.1%	41.2%	10.4%	16.8%
Managing online communities	47.7%	40.1%	15.2%	16%
Knowing the legal framework for social media	38.2%	33.5%	19.2%	23.2%
Initiating web-based dialogues with stakeholders	38.8%	33.5%	9.6%	13.6 %

Percentages: respondents rating high their capabilities (4 or 5 on a five-point scale).

Means: importance on a five-point scale, ranging from “very low” to “very high”

When comparing the findings from the 2013 survey with results from the ECM 2011, the two areas where European practitioners demonstrate the highest increase in capabilities are related to operational aspects like delivering messages via the social web (+11%), setting up social media platforms (+4.2%) or managing online communities (+3.5%). Strategic skills, i.e. for strategy development (+1.3%) and trend analysis (-2.9%), have grown to a lesser extent or are even diminishing.

7.3 The impact of social media usage on communication professionals' perceptions about the relevance of social media content on stakeholders and professionals themselves

The majority of communication professionals in Europe strongly agree that social media influence the perceptions of organizations. Almost three quarters (72.5%) of the practitioners strongly agree that social media content changes the perceptions of external stakeholders about the organization, 57 per cent perceive this to be true for employees and 61 per cent strongly agree that monitoring social media changes their own perception of stakeholders and other organizations. There are weak but significant correlations between the use of social media by communication professionals themselves (professional as well as private) and the perceived influence of social media on perception changes (see Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation between professional and private use with perceptions about the relevance of social media content on stakeholders and professionals themselves.

	Professional use of social media	Private use of social media
Social media content changes the perceptions of external stakeholders about my organization	r = 0.245	r = 0.154
Social media content changes the perceptions of employees about my organization	r = 0.168	r = 0.106
Monitoring social media changes my own perception of stakeholders and other organization.	r = 0.212	r = 0.135

A third person effect can be found between self-influence (M = 3.61, SD = 0.927) and influence on external stakeholders (M = 3.77, SD = 0.964). Although most practitioners believes that monitoring social media changes their own perceptions about stakeholders and organizations, with regard to internal stakeholders, the third effect cannot be confirmed (see Table 5.).

Table 5: Third person effect

	M	SD
Social media content changes the perceptions of external stakeholders about my organization	3.77	0.964
Social media content changes the perceptions of employees about my organization	3.47	1.013
Monitoring social media changes my own perception of stakeholders and other organization.	3.61	0.927

Scale 1-5

When comparing by organizational type, it is consultancies and agencies that place a high value on the extent of the influence of social media on external (77.6%) and internal (61.1%) stakeholders compared with private, joint stock, governmental and non-profit organizations. Age also correlates positively with the perception of the influence on external stakeholders ($p \leq 0.01$, $r = -0.054$). Practitioners under the age of 39 believe more in social media channels ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.963$) compared with the over 60s group ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.067$). However, there are not significant differences between countries.

7.4. The impact of social media usage on communication professionals' perceptions about the relevance of digital gatekeepers

The majority of the professionals think of employees, consumers, bloggers and online community managers as relevant gatekeepers for their organization. Employees who are very active on social media are perceived as the most important (58.1%), followed by consumers who raise their voice on social media (53.2%), and bloggers and online community managers (51.4%). It is also interesting to note that relating with type of organization, consultancies and agencies place more value on employees as relevant gatekeepers (64%.7) than governmental organizations (48.9%), non-profit (58.7%), joint stock (54.8%) and private companies (61.3%).

Younger professionals see consumers (on a 5 point scale $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.083$, $t(2710) = -0.037$, $p < .005$) and employees ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.075$, $t(2710) = -0.052$, $p < .001$) as more relevant for the organization than the over 60's age group.

Social media use correlates weakly but positively with the perception of the importance of gatekeepers, especially professional use. Practitioners who reported a stronger use of social media perceived employees ($r= 0.185$, $p < 0.01$), consumers ($r= 0.151$, $p < 0.01$) and bloggers ($r= 0.179$, $p < 0.01$) as relevant gatekeepers. The use in the private sphere is also related to the perception of the gatekeepers, but to a lesser extent (see table 6).

Table 6. Social media, perceptions and gatekeepers

	Professional use of social media	Private use of social media
Bloggers and online community managers are relevant gatekeepers for my organization	$r = 0.179$	$r = 0.130$
Consumers who raise their voice on the social web are relevant gatekeepers for my organization	$r = 0.151$	$r = 0.126$
Employees who are very active on the social web are relevant gatekeepers for my organization	$r = 0.185$	$r = 0.116$
My organization has developed adequate strategies and instruments to communicate with new gatekeepers on the social web	$r = 0.281$	$r = 0.080$

Pearson product-moment correlation, $p \leq 0.01$.

However, adequate communication strategies and instruments to deal with new gatekeepers on the social web are underdeveloped. Only 37.7 per cent of the European professionals state that their organization has developed adequate policies. Governmental organizations are very critical about the success of their social media strategies and only 29% consider them to have been adequate. There are weak but significant correlations between the use of social media by communication practitioners for professional ($r= -0.281$, $p \leq 0.01$) as well as private ($r= -0.080$, $p \leq 0.01$) reasons and the perceived development of instrument and strategies for communicating with new gatekeepers on the social media web.

7.5. *The perceived importance of social media tools*

The five most important social media communication tools for European professionals are social networks or online communities (73.1%), online videos (66.9%), mobile applications like apps or mobile webs (59.1%), micro blogs (54.5%), and photo sharing

(47.5%). The list is almost the same as the previous year (Zerfass et al., 2012: 64), with the exception of photo sharing applications, which have displaced weblogs and entered the top 5 for the first time. However, there are significant differences in importance for some channels across Europe. For example, weblogs are highly appreciated in Romania (53.2%), Spain (51.8%), the United Kingdom (45.6%), Finland (45.6%) and Germany (44.9%). Photo sharing plays a major role in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, compared to many Northern and Western European countries. For all social media there is a gap between the perceived importance by communication professionals and the actual implementation of the platforms by their organization. This gap is biggest for mobile applications (30.2%), online communities (21.3%) and online video (20.7%). Implementing mobile media therefore continues to be the key challenge for strategic communication.

The hypothesis on the relationship between the strongest use of the social media and the perceived importance of tools, especially related to professional use is also confirmed ($p < 0.001$). Results show that practitioners with a high level of usage of social media give more importance to social media channels, but wikis both for professional use ($X^2=19.855, p > 0.005$) and private use ($X^2=8.968, p > 0.005$) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Professional and private usage and social media perceived importance of social media tools

	Daily		Several times per week		Less than once or once a week		Never	
	Prof. use	Private use	Prof. use	Private use	Prof. use	Private use	Prof. use	Private use
Online communities	81.6%	77.1%	67.9%	71.0%	57.1%	62.8%	47.0%	48.7%
Online videos	69.9%	67.8%	66.6%	66.9%	57.9%	66.6%	57.5%	54.7%
Mobile apps	63.1%	61.2%	57.5%	59.6%	47.3%	53.5%	54.8%	40.7%
Microblogs	62.8%	58.8%	47.7%	50.2%	39.2%	42.7%	36.0%	38.2%
Photo sharing	53.0%	50.9%	44.8%	43.7%	33.3%	38.3%	36.9%	35.3%
Weblogs	46.3%	41.3%	32.2%	36.6%	21.7%	27.6%	27.3%	33.0%
Slide Sharing	30.7%	31.0%	29.6%	32.1%	31.5%	26.9%	29.1%	23.9%
Location-	34.7%	33.8%	30.9%	32.2%	26.8%	26.3%	25.7%	23.4%

based services								
Social bookmarks	24.9%	21.7%	15.6%	19.7%	14.0%	15.3%	18.0%	15.1%
Mash-ups	13.1%	11.1%	7.8%	9.8%	5.1%	8.1%	6.1%	6.9%

Percentages: respondents rating high level of importance (4 or 5 on a five-point scale) and use of social media.

Means: importance on a five -point scale, ranging from “very low” to “very high”.

The perceived importance of social media is not growing anymore if we compare the current results to previous years, indicating that social media indeed are merging in the media mix of organizations. This is the first time the topic has shown no future growth since it was first introduced in the ECM in 2008 (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2008).

8. Discussion

Results from this research confirm all the proposed hypotheses but the third party effect. Regarding the adoption of social media by European communication management practitioners the results confirm earlier studies of high levels of usage. However, with regard to the debate about differences in behaviour across demographic age groups and social media usage, in Europe every two practitioners use social media daily, and only those in their twenties report more intense usage patterns. Moreover these divergences are underlined in private use. It could be pointed out that concerning professional use, the divergences in age are progressively diminishing, as stated by Sallot, Porter and Acosta-Alzuru (2004). Private and professional usage significantly correlate. In every age group, practitioners who have a stronger private use of social media have a stronger professional use as well. Nevertheless, data don't seem to confirm the thesis of natural evolution of adoption that states that professional use comes later than private use. Results also show that practitioners who are over fifty have a stronger professional than personal use of social media. This does suggest that adoption has been primarily forced or encouraged by professional requirements.

Stronger use correlates with more confidence about their social media competences. The ECM 2013 data showed that practitioners display rather moderate capabilities when it comes to their skills and knowledge of social media in a professional context. In fact,

this result supports recent qualitative studies of senior practitioners in Europe and North America (DiStaso et al., 2011; Tench et al. 2013: 56-57). When comparing with results from the ECM 2011 (Zerfass et al., 2011), the two areas where European practitioners demonstrate the highest increase in capabilities are related to operational aspects like delivering messages via the social web and setting up social media platforms. Strategic skills, i.e. for strategy development and trend analysis, have grown to a lesser extent or are even diminishing. There is a clear operational rather than strategic orientation of social media. Using social media strategically continues to be one of the main challenges for the profession (DiStaso & MacCorkindale, 2012; Paine, 2011; Lee & Bernoff, 2011) and for European public relations practitioners. Moreover, is it necessary to take into account the mentioned self-overestimation of practitioners' knowledge in the field (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012), which means that real implementation of a strategic orientation could be adopted even less in real life. Social media have to be discussed as an integral part of communication management (Duhé, 2012; Zerfass & Pleil, 2012; Tench & Yeomans, 2013).

When comparing the relationship between usage and influence of social media, it is also confirmed that stronger usage and perception of influence go together. On the one hand stronger users perceive a higher influence of relevant gatekeepers for their organization. They perceive that consumers and employees who are very active on the social web are more relevant gatekeepers for their organizations. They are also better at evaluating the strategies and instruments developed by their organizations to communicate with new gatekeepers on the social web. On the other hand, stronger users estimate greater influence of social media both on internal and external stakeholders. Nevertheless, regarding the third party effect, practitioners in Europe don't tend to underestimate the influence of social media on their own attitudes and behaviours. They report a high level of influence of social media on their perceptions about organizations and stakeholder and as such a third party effect can be confirmed as they perceive a stronger influence on external stakeholders.

Finally, stronger users of social media attribute more importance on the diverse range of social media tools. Considering this point it is relevant that a longitudinal analysis of ECM data has confirmed a deep gap between implementation and perceived importance of social media (Zerfass et al., 2011), we can say that stronger users have a higher level of overestimation.

8.1. Conclusions and limitations

This paper sheds light on the use of social media in communication management in Europe from cross-national empirical research and contributes to the studies that explore the profession from the micro level as conceptualized by new institutionalism (Sandhu, 2008). It has proven that practitioners and especially stronger users have the perception that social media tools, stakeholders and gatekeepers are very important for the communication function and for their organizations, but the majority of practitioners consider that the right strategies and instruments are not being used and therefore some challenging issues emerge for future research. For example is there a public relations social media bubble? Do professionals inflate their use of social media because of their positive perceptions about the tools? And if importance of social tools and competences are overestimated, and there are no real strategic orientations for the professional use of social media, could practitioners be acting based on false assumptions about influence from and over stakeholders and gatekeepers as well? These issues need to be approached with more research both with practitioners and stakeholders, bringing new insights into the micro-level and the meso-level.

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