Public Relations on Social Media for Indonesian MSMEs: The Importance, The Role, and The Challenges

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Abstract. Modern public relations have evolved with improvements in social media technologies. PR can be done with low cost and high impact through social media. This should be great advantage for MSMEs. The purpose of this research is to see how far MSMEs in Indonesia understand the importance, the role, and the challenges of con- ducting public relations activities in social media platforms. The methodology is induc-tive qualitative, grounded theory approach, using a series of in-depth interviews with 14 MSMEs owners in various sector from Indonesia. The study found that MSMEs owners thought that PR is very important to implement, but they have an inaccurate understanding of PR. So far, the use of social media that they have considered for PR is limited to conveying information, marketing, and promotion. the role of PR is han- dled by the MSMEs owner and to do PR in social media they face various technical challenges. This research will provide benefits for MSMEs to have better understanding about the importance of PR which they can easily and inexpensively do on social media. This research contributes by expanding the limited body of knowledge about Public Relations for MSMEs, an area that has not been well studied.

Keywords: social media, public relations, micro small medium size enterprises, MSMEs

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public relations (PR) professionals recognized the increased significance of social media as a communication channel. The pandemic led to widespread changes in how people access information, engage with brands, and com- municate with each other [1], [2]. As a result, PR practitioners leveraged social media platforms to navigate the evolving landscape and effectively engage with their target audiences. Moving forward, the lessons learned from this period are likely to shape the future of PR practices, with social media continuing to play a pivotal role in communi- cation strategies [3], [4].

PR professionals and their stakeholders can communicate with one another through social media platforms in a variety of contexts, including education, health, business,

and crisis communication [5]. Since 2006, academics have given the use of social media in public relations more consideration. The use of social media by professionals [6], the quality of online relationships [7], the distinctive features of social media [8], and crisis communication on social media [9] have all been actively investigated by public relations researchers. An whole new area of study in public relations has emerged, known as social media-related public relations research (SMPR) as a result of the wealth of research on public relations communication including social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok [10].

Social media has become an essential component of modern business strategies due to its significant impact on brand building, customer engagement, market reach, and overall business growth [11], [12]. It has become an indispensable tool for businesses in today's digital landscape [13]. Social media is not only about marketing but also playsa vital role in building and managing a business's reputation [14]. It is used by engagingin authentic communication, actively seeking and responding to customer feedback, establishing thought leadership, effectively managing crises, collaborating with influencers, promoting employee advocacy, and being prepared for crisis communication, businesses can shape a positive reputation and build trust with their target audience on social media [15].

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the face of the business sector, including Indonesian MSMEs. The Sea Insights survey shows that as many as 54% of MSME entrepreneur respondents are increasingly adaptive in using social media to increase sales. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for the Economy Airlangga Hartarto previously noted that there were around 301,115 MSMEs that switched to digital platforms during the corona pandemic on 2020 [16].

Larger companies often have dedicated Public Relations (PR) teams and resources to manage their public image and reputation [17], [18]. However, many MSMEs in Indonesia have not fully utilized PR strategies to their advantage. According to newest research about how MSMEs survive the pandemic, the utilization of social media mostly focuses on marketing [19], [20], [21], [22], [23].

MSMEs in Indonesia readily accept the usage of social media to enhance the growth of their businesses. To find out if they have utilized it for PR operations that aim to boost their reputation, a research is required. Based on above background, some specific research questions formed to guide the investigation of this research. Here are some research questions that can be explored:

RQ1.   What is the level of awareness and understanding of social media as aPR tool among Indonesian MSME owners and operators?

RQ2.   What are the perceived benefits and importance of utilizing social me-dia for PR activities by Indonesian MSMEs?

RQ3.   How do Indonesian MSMEs currently utilize social media platformsfor PR purposes?

RQ4.   What are the challenges and obstacles faced by Indonesian MSMEs

inimplementing effective PR strategies on social media platforms?

2   Literature Review

2.1   The Importance, Role, and Challenges of PR for MSMEs
2.1.1.   The Importance

PR is particularly important for MSMEs due to their unique challenges and limited resources. PR is powerful for enhancing credibility and reputation, it helps MSMEs establish credibility and build a positive reputation among their target audience. This is crucial for gaining the trust of customers, investors, partners, and other stakeholders [24], [25], [26].

PR offers MSMEs a cost-effective alternative to traditional advertising and marketing. It enables them to generate publicity, raise awareness, and reach a wider audience without incurring significant advertising costs [27], [28]. PR also help MSMEs increase their visibility and raise brand awareness [29]. By securing media coverage, leveragingsocial media, participating in industry events, and engaging with influencers, MSMEs can ensure their target audience becomes aware of their products or services [30],[31],[32].

Effective PR can help MSMEs attract partnerships, collaborations, and strategic alliances [33]. By showcasing their expertise, thought leadership, and positive reputation, MSMEs can position themselves as valuable partners for larger organizations or industry associations [34]. Furthermore, MSMEs are vulnerable to crises that can damage their reputation and business operations. Having a PR strategy in place enables MSMEs to effectively manage crises, handle media inquiries, and communicate transparently to protect their reputation and maintain stakeholder trust [35].

2.1.2.   The Role

PR can help MSMEs develop strategic communication plans that align with their goals and target audience. They identify key messages, develop compelling narratives, and determine the most effective communication channels [36]. PR also can build and maintain relationships with journalists and media outlets to secure media coverage for MSMEs. This includes drafting press releases, organizing media events, and responding to media inquiries [37].

With PR techniques, MSMEs can create engaging content, such as articles, blog posts, case studies, and social media posts, to tell the story [38]. The story will highlight unique aspects, values, and successes to differentiate the MSME from competitors [39].Those stories manage MSMEs' presence on social media platforms, engaging with fol-lowers, responding to comments, and sharing relevant content [40]. They utilize socialmedia to enhance brand awareness, engage with the target audience, and monitor online conversations.

2.1.3. The Challenges

Limited resource is the main challenges for MSMEs. They often have limited budgets and resources to allocate to PR activities. They may need to be strategic in prioritizing PR initiatives that will yield the greatest impact within their resource constraints. MSMEs may not have dedicated PR teams or professionals in-house, making it challenging to develop and execute effective PR strategies. In such cases, seeking external PR support or training for existing staff can be beneficial [41].

Establishing relationships with journalists and media outlets can be challenging for MSMEs that are relatively unknown. PR professionals must invest time and effort in building these relationships to secure media coverage [42]. PR in the digital age requires MSMEs to stay updated with the latest trends and best practices in social media, online reputation management, and content creation. Adapting to the fast-paced digital landscape can be challenging for MSMEs with limited resources [43].

MSMEs may struggle with measuring the impact of their PR efforts and determining the return on investment. It can be challenging to quantify the impact of increased brand awareness, reputation enhancement, and relationship building resulting from PR activities. Despite these challenges, MSMEs can benefit greatly from strategic PR efforts [44]. This research will explore deeply whether Indonesian MSMEs have better understanding and practice of of the importance, role, and challenges of using social media for PR

2.2 Using Social Media for PR

Social media has become an integral part of modern Public Relations (PR) strategies. It offers numerous opportunities for MSMEs to reach their target audience, engage with stakeholders, and enhance their brand presence. MSMEs can establish a strong presence by creating and maintaining active profiles on relevant social media platforms [45], [46]. This includes popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, depending on the target audience and nature of the business. Consistency in branding, tone, and messaging across platforms helps in building a cohesive brand image [47].

MSMEs can also crafting compelling content in social media by developing high quality content that resonates with their target audience. This includes sharing informative blog posts, industry insights, product updates, behind-the-scenes glimpses, customer success stories, and visually appealing images or videos. Engaging content encourages followers to interact, share, and promote the MSME's brand [48], [49], [50].

Building relationships and engagement can also be done with social media. It provides an opportunity for MSMEs to directly engage with their audience, respond to comments and inquiries, and build relationships. Regularly monitoring and actively participating in conversations demonstrates a commitment to customer service, fosters loyalty, and increases brand affinity [51], [52], 53].

The newest trend in social media is having an influencer partnerships. Collaborating with social media influencers or industry experts who align with the MSME's brand can amplify reach and credibility [54]. Influencers can share product reviews, testimo-nials, or endorse the MSME's offerings to their followers. However, it's crucial to choose influencers whose audience matches the target market and maintain authenticityin these partnerships [55], [56].

Unthinkably, social media can be a powerful tool during times of crisis. MSMEs should have a crisis communication plan in place to address any negative publicity or misin-formation quickly. Promptly responding, acknowledging concerns, and providing transparent and accurate information can help mitigate the impact of a crisis [57], [58].

Lastly, social media listening is important to be the basic of measurement and analytics. MSMEs should actively listen to social media conversations related to their brand, in-dustry, or competitors. Social media monitoring tools can help track mentions, hashtags, and keywords [59]. By analyzing these insights, MSMEs can identify trends,respond to feedback or issues, and gain valuable market intelligence. They could trackand analyze social media metrics to measure the effectiveness of their PR efforts [60]. Key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rates, reach, website traffic, conversions, and sentiment analysis can provide insights into the impact of social media activities [61].

It's important for MSMEs to remember that social media requires consistent effort and dedication. Regularly updating content, engaging with followers, and monitoring the social media landscape are essential for building a successful social media PR strategy [63], [64].

3   Methodology

We conducted an exploratory study with in-depth interviews among MSMEs in greater Jakarta, to produce an in-depth understanding about the importance, role and challenges of using social media for PR purposes. We performed an inductive grounded theory thematic analysis, using open, axial and selective coding [65].

Participants were eligible when they were 18 years or older, are the owners or operators of the MSMEs. The MSMEs fields are services, food and beverages, fashion, health product, and retail. We recruited participants purposively to include a diverse group with people from different cultures and educational levels. They signed informed con-sent to participate prior to the interview. We conducted interviews by zoom meeting for 15-30 minutes. Interviews were conducted between February-July 2023. We devel-oped an interview guide prior to starting the interviews, partly based on our systematic review on importance, role, and challenges of doing PR with Social Media.

Memos from the participants were gathered, then each memo's keywords or codes were

found through analysis. Open codes found in the previous step give statistical occurrence information for each code. However, it is crucial to separate and examine essential groups or categories for analysis in order to draw meaningful derivations and correlations. For a better study summary and consumer experience, the findings are put into a story during the selective coding stage. This process evaluates the codes, categories, affects, etc. for any patterns and identifies any internal dependencies. It aids in combining the results from several categories into a condensed summary [65].

After 14 interviews, thematic saturation, which was defined as little or no changes made to the codes, was reached in all covered research areas [66] and the findings were organised according to the main themes (selective coding).

4   Results and Discussion

4.1.   RQ1: What is the level of awareness and understanding of social media as aPR tool among Indonesian MSME owners and operators?

The MSME owners who participated in this study had a fairly good understanding of what Public Relations meant and its implementation using social media. However, two participants stated that they did not understand at all what was meant by implementing Public Relations on social media "... I don't really understand public relations yet." (Participant 1, DS). There were participants who had heard of it, but could not explain "Have heard of it, but didn't really understand it…" (Participant 7, MR).

There are also MSME owners who answer very precisely and comprehensively. "... this homework is to establish relationships between internal and external parties from the company using various ways, one of which can also be by using social media..." (Participant 2, IA). There are also MSME owners who can explain that PR is responsible for perceptions and opinions. "In a company, PR has the goal of influencing opinions, perceptions and attitudes from the public to the brand and also bridging the brand with its audience..." (Participant 5, AAA). Their answers can be very good because it turns out that they have an educational background that studies public relations specifically (students majoring in public relations and communications).

There are MSME owners who cannot explain the definition of PR or explain the definition that is not quite right, almost all participants cannot distinguish between marketing and PR. There is only one statement that is quite good about the difference between marketing and PR "…PR is more towards branding, marketing is more about how to increase sales. That is the clearest to my knowledge (Participant 2, IA)."

4.2.   RQ2: What are the perceived benefits and importance of utilizing social mediafor PR activities by Indonesian MSMEs?

Participants who stated that PR was important to be carried out through social media. However, because the participants did not really understand the real PR, the importance of PR can only be partially explained "….It is very important because PR also helps, such as overcoming mistakes, for example when a customer complains, of course we need PR to restore the good name of MSMEs. even though they are in the developing stage, MSMEs still need homework" (Participant 8, GW).

MSME owners still think that PR is only important for branding, they still can't get out of the assumption that everything that is communication is for marketing "…PR is important to do because it makes branding activities easier. Compared to reaching out to consumers directly as has been done so far without a clear structure, PR activities also make it easier for a brand to reach out to consumers with their strategies…" (Participant 10, MM).

4.3.   RQ3: How do Indonesian MSMEs currently utilize social media platforms forPR purposes?

Participants in this study had various goals in using social media:
1. To increase followers from consumers "...I want to add my closest followers,know my products, be able to post products every day/latest menus..." (Partic-ipant 9, CK)
2. For product promotion and marketing "…For promoting, branding, selling products…" (Participant 3, NN)
3. To communicate with consumers "...First for sure selling, also for promos, discounts, a place to upload custom results, a place to communicate also be- tween me and the customer." (Participant 12, RB)
4. For branding and consumer awareness of products "the initial goal was to fo-cus on brand awareness because it was still new and of course not many peoplewere aware of it, so the main goal was to do branding through interactive post- ings..." (Participant 5, AAA)
5. To provide product information and sell products "…The aim is to provide information to the public, regarding prices, what kind of orders…" (Participant6, KD)
6. To monitor the market and competitors "...the aim is to check the market, com-petitors, in other competitors there is something that is being sold and content,so we must also adapt the content but with some changes." (Participant 7, MR)

From the use of social media explained by the participants, MSME owners still did not show the correct understanding of using social media for PR, their goals were still dominated by sales and marketing objectives. From the points above, what is interesting is that MSMEs use social media to monitor competitors.

4.4.   RQ4: What are the challenges and obstacles faced by Indonesian MSMEs inimplementing effective PR strategies on social media platforms?

In managing social media, all SMEs participating in this study stated that they were still held by the owners of the SMEs. They carry out all social media management activities themselves. The reason that is the majority is a matter of human resources and financial capabilities. However, there are idealistic reasons for some MSMEs "...Managed by the owner himself, the reason is that he has not found a suitable team, the content plan for Instagram, public relations is thought of by the owner himself." (Participant 6, KD).

The following are the obstacles experienced by MSME owners in using social media:
1. Finding ideas for social media content "…Content ideas, because I think con-tent ideas are very difficult to come by. And also the time for editing and ed- iting, because editing also requires ideas. So for 1 post it takes days to work on it because I think of ideas for a good design, what kind of nuance should itbe…" (Participant 3, NN)
2. Production of social media content and getting a good response from followers "…Editing, because it's still difficult to edit. And how do you make good reels,how do you add followers. Because sometimes no one watches posts, only 1 likes, no one watches, so it feels useless. How do you spread the posts, becauseeven though there are only a few followers, if you see a lot it will be good because many people know…(Participant 1, DS)
3. Still don't understand features and technology in social media "…Maybe I'm a rather clueless child, so like Instagram ads I don't know how to use them. The info doesn't know how to take advantage of features on Instagram, what about Shopee, how…" (Participant 4, RA)
4. Adequate human resources are not available to activate social media "... by the system there is none, but in terms of human resources it is lacking and the owner is busy, from the features they already understand from digital PR theyunderstand, but the problem in HR is that no one manages it, creates a contentplan, evaluation, execution, to create content plans and design executions are still having difficulties." (Participant 13, FW)
5. Consistency in managing social media "The difficulty is more consistent and structured, because it is only done by the personal owner without a team. In terms of features, everyone already knows and understands, but it is more a constraint on the human or HR side…" (Participant 6, KD)

5   Conclusions

The conclusion that can be drawn from the data that have been obtained from this study are, MSMEs owners thought that PR is important to implement by using media social, but they have an inaccurate understanding of PR. They haven't understood that PR is

responsible to image and reputation of a company. PR will help MSMEs establish credibility and build a positive reputation among their target audience. This is crucial for gaining the trust of customers, investors, partners, and other stakeholders.

The role of PR is handled by the MSMEs owner. This is devastation, because social media for enterprises need a well construct content plan, a series of production, specific creation of content that serves of audience interest. Therefore, to do PR in social media MSMEs face various technical challenges. They need to broaden the human resources dan team to create a proper social media for PR and the marketing as needed by them.

From the results of this study, we can see that MSMEs in Indonesia still need support and enrichment of knowledge from various parties to be able to carry out communication activities on social media. The provision needed is to straighten out the notion that PR is also important to be implemented for the continuity of their business. Further research is needed to find out to what extent the level of influence of PR activities on social media has an impact on the reputation of the products and services offered by SMEs.

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