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Barriers to Social Media Adoption among Malaysian Public Sector PR Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

While the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) effectively explains technology adoption through perceived usefulness and ease of use, the meaningful integration of social media in public sector public relations (PR) remains highly complex. This study aims to explore the structural barriers that hinder the effective acceptance and utilization of social media among PR practitioners in the Malaysian public sector. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight public sector PR practitioners, encompassing both operational communication officers and senior decision-makers. The interviews were conducted between January 2025 until July 2025. The data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis to identify key institutional challenges. The analysis revealed four primary barriers restricting effective social media engagement namely, structural and policy constraints, severe resource and staffing limitations, crisis management pressures and the prevalence of fake news, and a lack of two-way communication. This study contributes to the existing literature by qualitatively contextualizing TAM within public sector PR. It demonstrates that beyond functional efficiency, digital technology adoption is heavily mediated by organizational norms, bureaucratic control, and psychological barriers such as the fear of public criticism. The findings suggest that successful social media optimization requires dedicated staffing, structural support, and flexible communication protocols, rather than just technical competence.

Keywords: *Public relations, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), public sector, social media, institutional barriers*.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital communication, social media has become an important platform for information sharing and public engagement. As of January 2025, approximately 5.24 billion people worldwide use social media, highlighting its growing influence on communication practices (Kemp, 2025). Platforms such as Facebook have transformed how organizations interact with stakeholders through faster and more interactive communication.

In the public relations (PR) field, social media enables organizations to improve transparency, strengthen public trust, and enhance communication with the public. However, despite its importance, the adoption of social media in the public sector remains challenging (Mustafa et al. 2022). Compared to the private sector, government institutions are often slower in adapting to digital technologies due to bureaucratic structures, limited resources, restrictive policies, and concerns over information management (Criado & Villodre, 2022).

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In Malaysia, PR practitioners face various challenges in utilizing social media effectively, including limited digital skills, lack of training, organizational resistance, and difficulties in managing online communication (Ahmad, 2019). These challenges may reduce the effectiveness of government communication and public engagement efforts. Therefore, this study examines the digital communication challenges and barriers to social media adoption among PR practitioners in the Malaysian public sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

This study is anchored in the framework of Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally developed by Davis (1989). The framework was originally developed to explain and predict users' acceptance of information systems. TAM asserts that technology adoption is primarily driven by two cognitive constructs: Perceived Usefulness (PU), which refers to the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system will enhance job performance, and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), which refers to the degree to which the system is perceived as requiring minimal effort.

The model was later extended into TAM3 by Venkatesh and Bala (2008) incorporating external determinants, such as user interests, organizational support, and incentives, in shaping technology acceptance. Al-Qaysi et al. (2020) reviewed 57 empirical studies and found that researchers frequently extended TAM with additional variables such as perceived enjoyment, subjective norms, and perceived security to better explain social media adoption. Recent studies continue to validate TAM as a dominant framework for examining digital communication and technology adoption in public sector and social media environments (Nguyen et al., 2024; Khalil & Al-Ali, 2026).

TAM has become one of the most extensively applied models for studying social media adoption. In the context of public sector PR, technology acceptance may also be influenced by practitioners' attitudes, trust, and institutional norms (Fu et al., 2024). El-Kasim and Idid (2017) highlighted the necessity of using robust theoretical frameworks like TAM to properly understand how social media influences organization-public relationships.

The evolution of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed PR from a traditional top-down communication model into a dynamic, participatory, and dialogic ecosystem (Weder & Weaver, 2026). Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and X now serve as vital channels for real-time information dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and relationship management (Macnamara, 2025). Consequently, PR practitioners are increasingly required to evolve from traditional "message controllers" into "conversation facilitators," managing decentralized and interactive communication environments where audiences expect transparency, responsiveness, participation, and authentic two-way engagement through digital and social media platforms (Hansson & DePaula, 2025).

TAM and Public Relations

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its extended frameworks have been widely used to examine how PR practitioners adopt and integrate social media into professional communication practices. In general, TAM explains technology adoption through two central constructs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Within the context of PR, these constructs are especially relevant because practitioners are more likely to adopt social media when they believe that it improves communication efficiency, supports relationship

management, enhances public engagement, and is easy to operate within their professional routines.

Several studies have directly applied TAM to understand social media adoption among PR practitioners. Igben and Ugbome (2023), for instance, examined how TAM influences the use of social media among PR practitioners in Nigeria. Their findings showed that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were directly linked to practitioners' willingness to adopt social media for communication functions. When practitioners perceived social media as useful for managing public opinion and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships, their intention to use these platforms increased. This suggests that social media adoption in PR is not merely driven by technological availability but by practitioners' perception of whether the platform can meaningfully support their communication objectives.

El-Kasim and Idid (2017) further validated an Online Relationship Management Model based on the extended TAM framework. Using structural equation modelling, they found that the model explained 73% of the variance in practitioners' use of social media. Their findings suggest that PR practitioners adopt social media not only because the platforms are easy to use or technically useful, but because they are perceived as valuable for maintaining long-term relationships based on trust, commitment, satisfaction, and mutual understanding. This provides stronger evidence that TAM can be adapted to explain relationship-oriented technology use in PR.

Overall, the literature shows that TAM and its extended frameworks provide a useful foundation for understanding social media adoption in PR practice. Early applications of TAM emphasise perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as core predictors of adoption. However, studies in PR have increasingly expanded the model to include variables such as interactivity, mutual relationship, trust, commitment, satisfaction, social influence, and stakeholder engagement. This development reflects the relational nature of PR, where technology adoption is not only about efficiency or convenience, but also about the ability of digital tools to support dialogue, relationship management, organisational visibility, and public engagement. Therefore, TAM remains relevant, but its application in PR requires adaptation to account for the communicative, relational, and organisational dimensions of social media use.

Social Media in the Public Sector

In the contemporary digital era, social media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of public communication, particularly within the public sector, evolving from a mere communication channel to an integral element of governance. The seamless integration of platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube into government communication strategies transcends simple information dissemination (Mergel, 2013; Criado & Villodre, 2022). It actively cultivates two-way interactions with citizens, fostering an environment where dialogue and feedback are not only possible but expected. This interactive paradigm empowers governments to cultivate greater transparency in their operations, actively promote civic engagement in policy discussions and initiatives, and ultimately improve the delivery of essential public services, all of which are indispensable factors in bolstering public trust and ensuring inclusive participation from all segments of society.

The pivotal role of social media in enhancing accessibility to government information and amplifying public engagement within the public sector has garnered increasing and significant scholarly attention in recent years (Fu et al., 2024; Piqueiras et al., 2020). Studies have demonstrated that social media platforms can significantly enhance citizen engagement and streamline service delivery within the realm of mobile government by enabling real-time communication channels, fostering an atmosphere of openness and transparency, and actively promoting public participation in decision-making processes (Fu et al., 2024; Bhanye & Shayamunda, 2025). Furthermore, social media has emerged as an indispensable tool for fostering robust citizen engagement within the public sector, demonstrably contributing to heightened levels of public accountability and a greater sense of trust in governmental institutions (Piqueiras et al., 2020). This interactive capacity allows for a more direct and immediate connection between the government and the people it serves, breaking down traditional barriers to communication.

As a developing nation with digitally connected population, Malaysia has adopted social media as a mechanism to enhance government transparency, strengthen accountability, and improve responsiveness to public needs . A diverse array of ministries and government agencies across Malaysia actively leverage these powerful platforms to effectively communicate government policies, promptly respond to public queries and grievances, and proactively promote public awareness campaigns on a wide spectrum of pressing national issues. These issues span crucial areas such as public health and safety guidelines, ongoing economic initiatives and opportunities, and critical environmental conservation efforts. A notable example of effective social media utilization within the Malaysian context is the Ministry of Health's strategic deployment of these platforms during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic (Amri & Asri, 2022). Their timely dissemination of crucial updates, clarification of health advisories, and proactive efforts to combat the spread of misinformation played a significant role in influencing public compliance with essential health guidelines and mitigating public anxiety.

Despite these significant and positive developments in the adoption and application of social media within the Malaysian public sector, the widespread uptake and truly strategic implementation of these tools continue to encounter several notable challenges. These persistent issues include addressing existing disparities in digital literacy levels among both government staff and the general citizenry, navigating limitations in available resources and technological infrastructure, effectively managing the rapid spread of misinformation and addressing negative public feedback in a constructive manner, and consistently ensuring the authenticity and relevance of online content. Moreover, public sector communicators face the complex and delicate task of balancing the imperative for transparency and open communication with critical considerations of individual privacy rights, national security protocols, and diplomatic sensitivities in their online interactions.

Recognizing the transformative potential of digital platforms, the Malaysian government has introduced various policies and strategic initiatives, such as Malaysia’s Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDigital) and comprehensive e-Government development programs. These forward-looking initiatives are specifically designed to leverage the power of digital platforms to significantly increase accessibility to government services and information, foster greater citizen participation in governance, and enhance the overall efficiency of public service delivery. These strategic efforts clearly underscore the growing importance of equipping PR professionals and all government officials with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively manage social media channels, craft compelling and easily

understandable messages, and engage dynamically and responsively with public feedback in the digital sphere.

The strategic and responsible use of social media by public sector PR practitioners in Malaysia is fundamentally and inextricably linked to the overarching goals of building and diligently maintaining public trust in government institutions, fostering a more engaged and participatory citizenry in democratic processes, and demonstrating a clear commitment to accountability and good governance. Research indicates that transparent and authentic communication delivered via social media platforms can significantly enhance citizen confidence in their government and encourage greater participation in various governance processes (Song & Lee, 2016; Arshad & Khurram, 2020). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors that influence technology acceptance and sustained usage within the specific context of the Malaysian public sector is absolutely crucial for developing evidence-based best practices, continuously improving digital communication strategies, and ultimately strengthening the vital and evolving relationship between the government and its citizens in the increasingly interconnected digital age.

METHODOLOGY

To address the aim of the study, which is to explain the barriers to social media utilization, this study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews. A total of eight respondents involving PR practitioners in the Malaysian public sector were involved in this study. They were interviewed using semi-structured interview guide to gather valuable information regarding social media usage. The interviews were conducted between January 2025 until July 2025.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed direct and relevant experience in public sector communication and social media practices. The inclusion criteria required participants to be employed in public relations, strategic communication, corporate communication, or related communication roles within Malaysian public sector organisations. The sample included both senior decision-makers and operational practitioners, thereby providing perspectives from different levels of communication practice. Participants were identified through professional networks and organisational contacts, with recruitment guided by their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide information-rich accounts of social media use in PR.

The semi-structured interview was based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and its extended determinants, particularly perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008), and was adapted to the context of public sector public relations. Participants were asked about how social media was used in their professional tasks, its usefulness and relevance for information dissemination, public engagement, media monitoring and crisis communication; and the organisational and managerial factors influencing decisions to use social media (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008). Questions also examined participants' perceived ability and ease in managing social media-related tasks, including their digital skills and capability to undertake activities such as content creation, monitoring engagement and responding to public feedback (Compeau & Higgins, 1995). Organisational support, staffing and training, gatekeeping procedures, workload, misinformation and reputational risks were also explored, reflecting the roles of external control, computer anxiety and objective usability in technology acceptance (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008).

Table 1: Demography of participants

Label	Age	Gender	Agency/Role
R1	54	Male	Principal Assistant Secretary (Ketua Penolong Setiausaha)
R2	43	Male	Head of Strategic Communication
R3	43	Female	Information Officer
R4	50	Female	Corporate Communication Officer
R5	50	Male	General Manager
R6	29	Female	PR Officer Jabatan Penerangan
R7	30	Male	PR Officer
R8	43	Male	Head of Corporate Communication

Table 1 shows that the study involved eight interview respondents representing communication-related roles across government agencies and organisational communication settings. The respondents consist of officers holding positions such as Principal Assistant Secretary, Head of Strategic Communication, Information Officer, Corporate Communication Officer, General Manager, and PR Officer. This indicates that the sample includes both senior decision-makers and operational communication practitioners.

In terms of age distribution, the respondents are generally adults with professional experience in the field. Most of the stated ages fall between 29 and 54 years old, with several respondents in their early 40s. This suggests that the study captures views from both younger practitioners and more experienced officers, allowing for a broader understanding of social media use and communication practices across different career stages.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing up."

First, during the familiarisation phase, the researchers read and reread the interview transcripts to develop an overall understanding of the participants' experiences and to identify preliminary patterns relevant to social media utilisation. Second, initial codes were generated from meaningful segments of the transcripts. The coding process focused particularly on participants' descriptions of their experiences, perceptions, challenges, organisational practices, and factors affecting their use of social media. Third, the generated codes were examined and grouped according to similarities and conceptual relationships to develop potential themes.

Fourth, the potential themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the overall dataset. Themes that overlapped conceptually were refined or reorganised where necessary. Fifth, the themes were further defined and named according to the central idea represented by each theme. Finally, the themes were organised into a coherent narrative and supported by relevant evidence from the interview data.

To enhance the rigour of the analysis, the coding framework and emerging themes were reviewed by an external expert. This external review provided an additional assessment of the consistency and appropriateness of the interpretation of the interview data.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Participant identities were anonymised, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

FINDINGS

From the interviews, four key themes were identified inductively through thematic analysis:
T1: Structural and Policy Constraints: Bureaucracy, Approvals and Organisational Control
T2: Resource and Staffing Constraints
T3: Crisis Management and the Scourge of Fake News
T4: Lack of Two-Way Communication and Reliance on Formal Channels

Themes T1 to T4 represent the main barriers that limit the effective use of social media in public sector communication. These include bureaucratic procedures, approval requirements, gatekeeping practices, limited staffing, heavy workloads, online criticism, fake news, emotional pressure, reputational risks and restricted two-way communication. The reliance on formal complaint channels further suggests that social media is not always treated as a fully interactive platform for direct engagement with the public. Instead, it often functions as a supplementary communication channel that operates within existing institutional structures and formal accountability systems.

Overall, the themes demonstrate that social media use among public sector PR practitioners is limited by organisational control, resource limitations, risk concerns and formal public sector procedures. Therefore, the findings suggest that the acceptance of social media in the public sector should not be understood purely as a matter of technology adoption. Instead, it must be examined within the wider organisational, bureaucratic and professional context in which PR practitioners make communication decisions.

Theme 1: Structural and Policy Constraints: Bureaucracy, Approvals and Organisational Control

The first theme highlighted that PR practitioners in the public sector operate within strict bureaucratic and policy-driven communication structures. Unlike private or individual social media users, government PR practitioners could not publish content freely or spontaneously. Instead, every post often have to go through several layers of screening, approval and managerial review to ensure accuracy, appropriateness and compliance with official guidelines. While these procedures are important for protecting institutional credibility and preventing controversy, they also create significant constraints on speed, responsiveness and creative decision-making.

A major factor influencing decision-making in social media content posting is the existence of formal gatekeeping mechanisms within government organisations. Practitioners were required to follow specific Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), obtain approval from superiors and ensure that content aligned with public sector communication guidelines. The findings showed that social media use in the public sector is not only shaped by technological affordances, but also by institutional hierarchy, risk management and administrative control.

Respondent 1 explained that all aspects of a social media post, including images, captions and other content elements, had to undergo a screening process before publication. This reflects the highly regulated nature of government communication, where social media content must comply with official rules and guidelines. Respondent 1 stated:

> Yes, before any content is uploaded to the organisation's social media, it must go through several levels of screening, including the selection of images, captions and other related elements. However, there must also be control

> and compliance with the guidelines on the use of social media in the public sector issued by the Government through the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU). (Personal communication, January 7, 2025)

Respondent 2 further explained that this approval process became a barrier because PR practitioners had to go through internal gatekeepers before any communication action can be taken. Management played an important role in determining what can be posted, how it should be framed and when it can be released. This indicates that decision-making power does not rest solely with PR practitioners, even though they are the officers responsible for managing social media communication. Respondent 2 stated:

> The barrier is We still have our own gatekeeper, which means management has set a specific SOP. Any matter must first be informed to the management. (Personal communication, May 13, 2025)

Respondents 4 and 5 also emphasised that government PR practitioners could not respond or post immediately because content must pass through multiple layers of approval. This process slowed responsiveness, particularly in situations that require quick clarification, public engagement or crisis response. The fear of giving an incorrect response also encouraged delays or non-response, as officers may avoid replying without official clearance from their superiors. Respondent 4 stated:

> In the government, it is necessary. Everything must obtain approval first. There are many layers. We cannot simply create something and post it straight away. No, we cannot. (Personal communication, June 19, 2025)

Respondent 5 stated:

> For government officers, they need to obtain approval before responding. They are afraid of giving the wrong answer and being reprimanded by their superior. So, they simply remain silent. (Personal communication, February 17, 2025)

Respondent 8 added another important dimension by showing that creativity is encouraged, but only within controlled boundaries. This suggests that social media creativity in the public sector is not entirely absent, but it is carefully managed to prevent reputational risks or possible backlash against the ministry. Respondent 8 stated:

> We allow them to express their creativity, but with control, so that nothing becomes excessive or backfires on the ministry. (Personal communication, July 30, 2025)

At the same time, bureaucratic constraints were also associated with differences in digital literacy between junior officers and senior management. Respondent 3 noted that varying levels of digital literacy among senior officers can make it difficult for PR practitioners to convince management to accept newer and more contemporary approaches to public

engagement. This finding indicates that structural constraints are not only about formal approval procedures, but also about the digital confidence, understanding and readiness of decision-makers. Respondent 3 stated:

> The varying levels of digital literacy among senior officers sometimes make it more difficult to convince them to accept responses or newer approaches for engaging with the public through social media. (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

These findings are consistent with existing literature, which argues that bureaucratic decision-making, unclear digital communication policies and rigid hierarchical structures can constrain responsiveness and innovation in public sector PR practice. For example, Yusof et al. (2021) argued that bureaucracy and hierarchical approval systems could limit public sector communication flexibility, while Fu et al. (2024) suggested that differences in technical competence and digital literacy among government staff could hinder sustained digital communication adoption.

Haryanti and Rusfian (2018) observed that bureaucratic pathologies directly hamper the flow of communication. Even when citizens provide feedback, the PR personnel managing the social media accounts often lack the authority to answer complaints without going through a tiered hierarchical system, which leads to "communication atrophy".

Theme 2: Resource and Staffing Constraints

Theme two highlighted that PR practitioners face significant resource and staffing constraints in managing social media communication. Although social media has become an important platform for government communication, many PR Officers (PROs) were not assigned exclusively to social media duties. Instead, they were required to manage social media alongside multiple offline and administrative responsibilities, including event management, emceeing, media relations and complaint handling. This situation created an overwhelming workload and limited their ability to plan, produce and update social media content consistently.

Respondent 3 explained that there is often no dedicated unit or specialised team responsible solely for social media management. In many ministries, social media work was treated as an additional task under broader PR responsibilities. This suggests that social media is institutionally recognised as important, but the staffing structure has not fully adapted to the demands of digital communication. Respondent 3 stated:

> Human resource constraints, where the unit is small but carries major responsibilities, also pose a challenge. PR Officers in ministries are not specifically assigned to manage social media only; instead, they have various other duties such as event management, serving as emcees, and handling complaints. (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

As a result, social media management often became a secondary responsibility rather than a specialised function. Practitioners were expected to cover programmes, manage physical events and immediately produce social media updates afterwards. This situation created additional pressure because content creation requires not only speed, but also

technical skills, creativity and time for editing. When officers were already physically and mentally tired after official programmes, the additional requirement to produce videos, edit content and upload updates became a major burden. Respondent 6 stated:

> *Fatigu*e after a programme, yet still having to provide updates. Time and energy constraints also arise when video production or editing is required. (Personal communication, M*ay 21, 2025)*

This finding indicates that the challenge is not simply about whether practitioners are willing to use social media. Rather, it concerns whether they are given sufficient manpower, time, equipment, training and institutional support to use social media effectively. Without a dedicated team or clear division of labour, PROs may struggle to maintain consistent posting, produce high-quality multimedia content and respond quickly to public engagement.

These findings are consistent with existing literature, which identifies operational constraints such as limited manpower, insufficient budget allocation, lack of professional training and inadequate organisational support as persistent barriers to effective social media use in public sector PR. Yusof et al. (2021) similarly argued that public sector PR practitioners are often expected to maximise digital communication outcomes despite working within limited institutional resources.

A study by Macnamara (2025) revealed that the sheer amount of effort and time required to manage social media was identified as a major concern among European PR practitioners. Macnamara (2025) emphasized that before implementing social media, government agencies must verify whether the staff in charge actually have the time to update these channels. They warned that the lack of resources and standard procedures directly undermines the accuracy and quality of the information posted.

Recent studies have argued that the limited progress in effective two-way government communication is not primarily caused by technological constraints, but rather by organizational and institutional barriers. Researchers have identified shortages of trained personnel, bureaucratic structures, limited digital competencies, and insufficient institutional support as major obstacles to timely and interactive communication with citizens through social media platforms (Hansson & DePaula, 2025; Khalil & Al-Ali, 2026).

The literature also supports the findings that managing social media should not simply treated an additional duty and requires dedicated personnel and structural reorganization. Fu et al. (2024) state that allocating dedicated personnel to specific initiatives is necessary to ensure continuous monitoring and maintenance. They argued that agencies cannot take resource constraints lightly and must secure necessary funding and human resources to sustain public engagement tools. Supporting the finding that PROs juggle social media as an additional duty, Khalil and Al-Ali (2026) highlighted the indiscriminate allocation of tasks to staff without specific competence as a major challenge in PR. The literature argued that it is necessary to establish specific, dedicated sections for individual PR functions, such as social media, content writing, and customer service, so that employees can focus on their specific tasks. Mergel & Bretschneider, in their three-stage adoption model, argue that successful "institutionalization" of social media only occured when organizations established specialized units and dedicated roles, such as a "social media director", with formal job descriptions and success metrics.

Wukich (2021) observed that the capacity of local government agencies often fell short of the public's expectations for immediate engagement specifically because they lack personnel or are unwilling to engage directly. There are also contrasting perception among some government officials who viewed social media as a tool that does not require investment. Fu et al. (2024) argued that there is a common assumption among public administrators that social media and open government initiatives won't require many resources. While they warn that this assumption is flawed and leads to failure, the perception itself contrasts with the reality of investment needs.

Theme 3: Crisis Management and the Scourge of Fake News

Theme three highlighted that crisis management, online negativity and fake news were major barriers that affect PR practitioners' use of social media. Although social media enables fast and direct communication with the public, it also exposes practitioners and organisations to negative comments, troll attacks, misinformation, reputational risks and emotional pressure. These challenges made social media management more complex because practitioners are not only responsible for disseminating information, but also for monitoring public reaction, correcting false information and protecting the organisation's image.

Respondent 3 explained that managing negative comments and troll attacks could be challenging because such online responses may affect the organisation's reputation. These findings suggest that social media is a high-risk communication space, where public criticism can spread quickly and potentially damage institutional credibility. Respondent 3 stated:

> Sometimes. For example, when we have to manage negative comments or troll attacks that can affect the organisation's reputation. Information security issues also raise concerns. (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

Respondents 4 further showed that online criticism affected not only organisational reputation, but also the emotional well-being of PR practitioners. Respondent 4 explained that certain issues can become emotionally difficult to handle, especially when they involve false or misleading information. The spread of fake news creates additional pressure because practitioners must determine whether information circulating online is accurate before deciding how to respond. Respondents 4 stated:

> At times, for example, when there are certain issues that affect my emotions. Yes, it becomes emotional at that point. (Personal communication, June 19, 2025)

Respondent 4 also added:

> Incorrect news, or fake news. Nowadays, it is difficult to know whether something is true or not. (Personal communication, June 19, 2025)

Similarly, Respondent 5 explained that being attacked by netizens can be emotionally unpleasant. However, the respondent also acknowledges that public feedback remains important, whether it is positive or negative. This reflects the difficult position of PR

practitioners, who must remain open to public engagement while also managing the emotional impact of hostile online responses. Respondent 5 stated:

> If we post something and netizens attack us, of course we do not feel good about it. But we still need that feedback, whether it is negative or positive. (Personal communication, February 17, 2025)

This finding suggests that social media creates a dual challenge for public sector PR practitioners. On one hand, social media allows government agencies to receive immediate feedback from the public. On the other hand, the same openness exposes practitioners to public hostility, misinformation and reputational threats. As a result, practitioners may become more cautious in using social media, especially when dealing with sensitive issues or controversial topics.

These findings suggest that the openness of social media can make practitioners more cautious when managing sensitive or controversial issues, particularly when rapid public responses may expose the organisation to reputational risk. This is consistent with Macnamara (2025), who identified the need for rapid responses, authorisation to comment publicly, and the loss of control as major challenges experienced by public relations practitioners in social media communication.

The literature strongly supports the finding that fake news and misinformation are significant barriers to effective public sector social media use. Because social media allows for rapid and widespread dissemination of user-generated content, government agencies become highly vulnerable to false information postings, rogue activist groups, and public criticism, which can cause considerable reputational harm. Fu et al. (2024) pointed out that because information shared on social media becomes public, government employees are exposed to potential attacks and negative remarks from citizens, which can cause them to feel worried, frustrated, or feel incompetent. Macnamara (2025) emphasized that the ability for anyone to publish complaints or engage in public discussion triggers major anxiety among PR practitioners regarding a loss of control over their organization's messages and image building. During disaster recovery, dealing with frustrated and distressed citizens becomes even more difficult as the public uses these platforms to express intense dissatisfaction.

Theme 4: Lack of Two-Way Communication and Reliance on Formal Channels

Theme four highlighted that direct engagement with citizens on social media remained limited within public sector PR practice. Although social media is often seen as an interactive platform, the findings suggest that government PR practitioners do not always use it for two-way communication. Instead, their decision-making was shaped by limited manpower, unclear authority to respond, the absence of specific KPIs for replying to online comments, and the continued reliance on formal complaint channels such as the Public Complaints Management System, SISPAA.

Respondent 1 explained that social media cannot fully replace face-to-face communication, especially in PR work that requires networking, interpersonal interaction and relationship-building. While social media is useful for disseminating information to a broad audience, it is still perceived as more suitable for mass communication and one-way communication rather than deeper, interactive engagement. Respondent 1 stated:

> The main challenge is that not all tasks of a PR Officer can be carried out using social media. For example, building networks still requires face-to-face, interpersonal and interactive communication methods, as these allow us to obtain feedback, whereas the use of social media is more inclined towards mass communication and one-way communication. However, other PR activities such as media management, speech writing, media releases, image-building and networking cannot be fully implemented through social media alone. (Personal communication, January 7, 2025)

Respondent 3 further explained that responding to every social media inquiry is not considered the main responsibility of PROs. This is because PROs were not specifically assigned to manage social media alone, but are also responsible for many other duties. There was no specific KPI that requires them to answer every question posted on platforms such as Facebook. This suggests that two-way engagement is not strongly institutionalised within the performance structure of public sector PR work. Respondent 3 stated:

> PR Officers in ministries are not assigned solely to manage social media; instead, they have various other duties. There is also no specific KPI that requires them to answer every question on Facebook. (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

Another important factor was the issue of authority. Respondent 6 explained that PR practitioners may not always have the power to respond to public inquiries, especially when the matter involves official government policy or ministerial decisions. If no official statement had been issued, practitioners may avoid responding because the issue may fall outside their authority. This finding indicates that social media engagement is constrained not only by workload, but also by hierarchical decision-making and the need for official clearance. Respondent 6 stated:

> In ministries, the authority to respond usually comes from the Minister or the ministry itself. If no official statement has been issued, sometimes it is not within their authority to respond to the matter. (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

The reliance on formal complaint systems further reduced direct engagement in social media comment sections. Respondent 8 explained that their organisation does not actively practise replying to comments on Facebook. Instead, users who send direct messages were usually given a response template and directed to submit their complaints or inquiries through Public Complaints Management System known as SISPAA. This reflects a formalised and bureaucratic approach to public feedback, where social media functions mainly as a referral point rather than a space for active dialogue. Respondent 8 stated:

> We do not really practise replying or responding in Facebook comments. Usually, when they DM us, we provide a response template for them to key in their complaint or inquiry into our complaint system, SISPAA. (Personal communication, July 30, 2025)

Respondent 3 similarly noted that the official KPI focuses on formal complaints submitted through channels such as SISPAA, rather than on responding to every question on Facebook. This indicates that public sector communication is still heavily shaped by formal accountability mechanisms, even when communication takes place in a digital environment. Respondent 3:

> There is no specific KPI that requires all questions on Facebook to be answered; instead, the KPI only requires responses to official complaints, such as those submitted through SISPAA... (Personal communication, May 21, 2025)

These findings show a clear tension between the interactive potential of social media and the formal communication culture of the public sector. While social media theoretically allows immediate two-way engagement, public sector PR practitioners often remain bound by bureaucratic procedures, limited authority, official complaint systems and risk-avoidance practices. As a result, social media is often used more for information dissemination than for sustained dialogue with citizens. The findings suggest that many government agencies continue to rely on one-way dissemination and formal complaint channels, rather than fully embracing dialogic communication.

The finding that PR practitioners lacked the authority to respond and rely on official mechanisms like SISPAA was also consistent with studies of other developing public sector contexts. Haryanti and Rusfian (2018) found that the individuals charged with managing government social media accounts often did not have the authority to provide answers to citizen complaints. Because they could not provide immediate answers without navigating the bureaucracy, it leads to ignoring complaints and feedback, leading to communication atrophy. Similarly, Haryanti and Rusfian (2018) note that instead of handling issues directly on social media, government feedback processes frequently require citizens to use formal online complaint platforms like Dumas Online and lapor.go.id, which function similarly to SISPAA in providing structured channels for public complaints and feedback.

DISCUSSION

Through inductive thematic analysis, this study identified several structural and cultural barriers that hinder the effective use of social media among public sector PR practitioners. The findings show that social media adoption is not only shaped by individual willingness or technical ability, but also by wider institutional conditions. In particular, practitioners continue to face operational constraints such as limited professional training, insufficient budget allocation, lack of manpower, and inadequate organisational support. These constraints limit their ability to use social media strategically, creatively, and consistently in public communication (Yusof et al., 2021).

TAM traditionally explains technology adoption through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, this study shows that these factors alone are insufficient to explain social media acceptance in the public sector. Even when practitioners recognise social media as useful and easy to use, adoption is still shaped by organisational norms, institutional constraints, and psychological barriers. Therefore, the findings suggest that social media adoption in PR should be understood not only as a matter of functional efficiency, but also as a process influenced by organisational culture, risk perception, professional confidence, and relational outcomes.

Beyond these operational limitations, the study also found that public sector PR practitioners operate within a cautious and risk-averse communication culture. Since social media allows the public to openly question, challenge, and contest organisational narratives, practitioners often fear public criticism, reputational damage, or unintended controversy. This fear, combined with bureaucratic approval processes and resistance to change, discourages experimentation and restricts the innovative potential of digital engagement. As a result, social media is often used more as a controlled information-dissemination platform than as a space for open interaction and relationship-building.

This study has several limitations. First, the study involved only eight public relations and communication practitioners from the Malaysian public sector. Although the in-depth interviews provided rich and contextualised insights into participants' experiences, the relatively small sample limits the generalisability of the findings to the wider population of public sector PR practitioners in Malaysia. The findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific rather than statistically representative.

Second, the participants represented selected communication-related roles and organisational settings. Public sector organisations vary considerably in terms of structure, size, communication practices, resources, and levels of digital readiness. Consequently, the experiences identified in this study may not fully reflect those of practitioners across all ministries, departments, statutory bodies, and government agencies.

Future studies could address these limitations by involving a larger and more diverse sample across different government organisations, administrative levels, and geographical locations. Quantitative or mixed-method studies could also test the relationships between TAM constructs and organisational factors such as bureaucratic control, resource availability, risk perception, professional autonomy, and institutional support. Such research would provide further evidence on how structural factors influence behavioural intention and actual social media use among public sector PR practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This study identified several structural and cultural barriers that hinder the effective use of social media among public sector PR practitioners. The findings show that social media adoption is not only shaped by individual willingness or technical ability, but also by wider institutional conditions. In particular, practitioners continue to face operational constraints such as limited professional training, insufficient budget allocation, lack of manpower, and inadequate organisational support. These constraints limit their ability to use social media strategically, creatively, and consistently in public communication.

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