

The Role of Bloggers in Public Relations Activities in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The presence of social media shifted the strategies employed by PR practitioners when engaging their audiences. One of the PR strategies often used to disseminate information on a product is to work with bloggers. This was due to the power owned by bloggers who serve as online opinion leaders. This study was conducted to determine the role of bloggers in PR activities in Indonesia and to reveal their engagement process as digital influencers on social media. The current study employed observation of blog posts and semi-structured interviews with eight bloggers who had been involved in PR activities. Data reduction was used to analyze the data display and data verification/conclusion. The results showed that the communication patterns of digital influencers through social media applied a multi-step flow of communication model. Furthermore, bloggers engagement in the PR activities was mutually beneficial relationship as they become directly involved in either product review, event, or campaign.

Keywords: Blogger, digital influencer, multi step flow, public relations, social media

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the Internet and social media have had a big impact on the way people interact with each other

(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The impact and change also result in the interaction between company and audience. Moreover, Web 2.0 enables audience to interact directly with the company or engage in an interactive communication (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015). Social media optimization in PR practices makes the corporate activity more global, more strategic, more two-way and more interactive, symmetrical or dialogical (Prastya, 2013). Social media used in PR

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 18 September 2017

Accepted: 12 March 2018

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strategy to builds and maintains beneficial relationships between corporate and the audience (Broom & Sha, 2013).

Companies through PR strategies use the power of social media as a means of communication. One of these strategies is to collaborate with bloggers and make use of bloggers' influence to publicize the company or product (Cross, 2011). In particular, a blogger can exert their influence on the attitudes and behavior of the blog readers while also maintaining relationship with community members (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

In addition, investigative journalists can publish stories and events related to these bloggers and make them a trending topic (Breakenridge, 2012). Bloggers communicate stories through their posts in an interesting way, aiming to reach new audience and also build relationship with loyal customers. Information dissemination concept makes use of bloggers' involvement in PR activities through the power of viral message or viral marketing message.

Viral marketing is a strategy dealing with creating original and entertaining online messages that encourage consumers to get the message across to other consumers, spreading messages on the web like viruses (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2014). Viral messages conducted by the bloggers refer to the concept of information dissemination contained in the multi-step flow model. According to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), certain people are recognized as opinion leaders who interpret the information and then pass it on to others. The multi-step flow

model explains that there is a reciprocal linkage from the media to the audience (which also interacts with each other), from the audience to the media, back to the audience and so on (Stansberry, 2015).

Therefore, based on bloggers' engagement in PR activities, multi-step flow model and viral marketing message, the research questions can be formulated as follow: (1). How does the role of bloggers as digital influencers through social media adopt multi-step flow model? And (2). How is blogger involvement process related to PR activities in Indonesia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multi-step Flow Communication and Opinion Leader

The multi-step flow model is a combination of a one-stage flow model and a two-step flow model. This model was first introduced by a sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld in 1944 and later clarified by Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955. It states that the mass media message reaches the audience through a very complex interaction. According to Bennett and Manheim (2006), the multi-step flow model has dominated studies in information dissemination for the last four decades. However, recent advances in communication technologies led to posit a multi-step flow model in which messages travel directly from an organization to the public through opinion leaders (Stansberry, 2015). This model found a reciprocal linkage from the media to the audience (which also interacts with each other), from the audience

to the media, back to the audience and so on (Nurudin, 2011).

Particularly, opinion leaders are individuals who actively filter, interpret, or provide the information of relevant brand products, and relay it to their family, friends, and co-workers (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2015). Opinion leaders can influence other individuals through their attitudes or behavior that appear appropriate to those who follow them with certain intensity (Windham, 2009). According to Koehler, an opinion leader's communication style can be seen from the way this communication style is used (Raharjo, 2016).

The characteristics of online opinion leaders are similar to those of opinion leaders in an offline setting. Online opinion leaders possess significantly higher levels of enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behavior and self-perceived knowledge than non-leaders (Yoo, Gretzel & Zach, 2011). Hence, PR practitioners indicate that the rise of social web has led to the increasing efforts in engaging online opinion leaders as active social media users to reach the segmented audience (Wright & Hinson, 2010).

The characteristics of opinion leader (Shon, 2005), are: (1) *Domain-specific innovativeness*, opinion leaders tend to be more innovative than their followers and commonly show higher levels of innovativeness that are knowledgeable (Goldsmith, 2001). (2) *Enduring product involvement*, opinion leaders tend to be more knowledgeable about a relevant product and show more enduring involvement

with it compared to their followers. (3) *Media Habits*, opinion leaders display high involvement with the media. Finally, (4) *Demographics*, opinion leaders tend to influence individuals who have the same demographic variables and provide information about a product to others.

Bloggers and Public Relations

Blogger engagement guidelines to PR activities follow several methods: First, PR practitioners are recommended to do some research and find out blogs relevant to the news or content seeking to be shared. Second, PR practitioners are directed to familiarize themselves with the blog and its author. Finally, PR practitioners are instructed to contact the blogger and present the news or content seeking to be featured on the blog (Langett, 2013).

Public Relations recognize the power of bloggers to directly influence their connected network by making suggestions, which leads to the search for, purchase and use of the products (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Consequently, PR practitioners are looking for ways to utilize this influence to generate interest, drive action, create goodwill, establish expertise, and create the dialog with their online stakeholders rather than concentrating solely on traditional media. Understanding the opportunities that bloggers provide, PR practitioners seek to benefit from characteristics such as their perceived credibility (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008) and expertise (Droge, Stanko, & Pollitte, 2010).

The concept of information dissemination uses bloggers involvement in PR activities through the power of viral message or viral marketing message. Viral marketing message utilizes friends' recommendations and has a snowball effect. Such a message is more powerful than other advertising means because it conveys an implied endorsement from a known person (Haryani & Motwani, 2016). Hence, bloggers use open communication for PR activities, including offers from sponsorship or advertising. Blogger Segmentation by Park & Jeong asserted that blogger segmentation includes: *Active Blogger publics*, *Constrained Blogger publics*, *Latent Blogger publics* and *Routine Blogger publics* (Park & Jeong, 2011).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research applied qualitative-exploratory study. The research questions on blogger engagement were studied through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative study is appropriate to discover the development and implementation of blogger engagement programs since it emphasizes process as the main feature. The data collection techniques included non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Non-participant observations were conducted by monitoring blog posts and activities of the informants' social media which were related to PR activities. Eight bloggers were interviewed as informants. There were three stages of data analysis techniques, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

The interviews were audio recorded and complemented with written notes by the authors to prevent difficulties later in the transcription process and to allow the identification of emerging themes. The interviews were conducted with eight bloggers involved in PR activities, five face-to-face, and three via telephone, each lasting between 40 and 80 minutes (Table 1).

Table 1
Participant profile of interviews

No.	Identifier	Blogger Categories
1.	A	Parenting Blogger, since 2009
2.	B	Parenting Blogger, since 2013
3.	C	Beauty and Lifestyle Blogger, since 2013
4.	D	Lifestyle and Traveler Blogger, since 2013
5.	E	Lifestyle Blogger, since 1998
6.	F	Lifestyle Blogger, since 2007
7.	G	Traveler Blogger, since 2005
8.	H	Traveler Blogger, since 2011

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The extracts from the interviews were examined under five topics: Motivation to Become a Blogger, Definition of Bloggers, Characteristics of Bloggers as Opinion Leaders, Criteria of Bloggers in Supporting PR, and the Implementations of Blogger Communication. The common points are summarized in Table 2. Additionally, other specific findings are explained in this section.

All participants agree that their desire in daily writing is to motivate themselves to become a blogger. Writing a blog is believed to be a form of self-expression

and a means to share about their daily life. Two informants reveal that their motivation in writing a blog was linked to blogger communities that encourage them to become bloggers. The motivation, perspective, is also linked to the prior community in the economic sector that provides benefit such as advertising and promotion from brand communication.

The general agreement among bloggers is that they see themselves as content generators of digital platform. Furthermore,

blogger as a content generator is defined as an individual who freely shares all of his or her opinions and personal feelings through the Internet and someone who understands the brands in order to make good information to influence others. The majority of informants defines blogger as a digital influencer or digital opinion leader who becomes part of the Internet phenomena and has the power in giving preference to the followers about a brand through his or her blog.

Table 2
Major findings of interviews

Topics	Common Points	Participants
Motivation to become a blogger	Self-expression	B, C, G, E
	Community connection	C, D
	Sharing opinions	A, B, D, E, F, G, H
Definition of bloggers	Content generators	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
	Influencers/opinion leaders	B, C, D, E, F, G, H
	Internet Phenomena	A, C, E, F, , H
Characteristics of bloggers as opinion leaders	Media Habits	A, B, C, E, F, H
	Enduring product involvement	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Criteria of bloggers in supporting PR	Brand match	A, B, F, G, H
	Tone of voice	A, B, C, D, F, H
	Content quality	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
	Reliability/ Popularity	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Implementations of blogger communication	Events	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
	Product review	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H

All participants highlight the characteristics of bloggers as opinion leaders due to their involvement with the products and their habit to use social media. Moreover, all informants agree that a blogger is someone who can provide knowledge and share his or her experience about a product. In one of the blog contents created, informants state that a blogger is also required to be able to provide

actual opinions based on their own personal views. And, the majority of informants mention that blogger as an opinion leader is a person who has a high involvement with the media, especially social media, and who focuses on disseminating information about a product.

The informants attribute the criteria of bloggers in supporting PR activities

based on (1). *Brand Match*: One of the essential criteria in selecting bloggers is finding the ones that match the brand and content of the blog. (2). *The Tone of Voice*: Two informants assert that the writing style of bloggers should be in line with the brand identity and the message that they aim to disseminate since the followers must be able to identify the bloggers with brands. (3). *Content Quality*: The content depends on the bloggers' interests, and the issues that are widely spread among the followers. The content should also offer something valuable to the brands' target audiences. (4). *Reliability/Popularity*: From the informants' point of view, the reliability of bloggers stems from the followers that perceive them as potential influencers. In order to maximize the reach within the target audience, all informants mention the importance of the breadth of bloggers' networks.

According to the implementation of blogger communication, all informants agree that the relationship between bloggers and PR increasingly becomes a mutually beneficial relationship. The common point is related to the involvement of bloggers in PR activities in an event or product review on their blog. The PR activities rely on digital activities that invite bloggers to directly get involved in either the event or campaign.

The Role of Bloggers As a Digital Influencers through Social Media

A blogger has the freedom to write anything on his or her personal blog. The role of

bloggers as digital influencers includes being an informative source that provides knowledge to others. A study find out that the initial motivations encouraging a person to write on a blog include self-expression, community connection and opinion sharing (Smith, 2010). Self-expression becomes the major reason that urges the blogger to describe his or her daily life. Considering the blog as a means to express themselves and share opinions, a blogger should make the content interactive to attract readers or followers. According to Wirtz, Piehler and Ulrich (2013), interactive content is considered to be a required feature on websites and social media. Interactive content includes features that spoil the needs and desires of the consumers or customers' centricity and that configure interaction between users (Pebrianti, 2016).

Based on the results, a blogger is someone who is quite influential in giving preference to the understanding of the follower or visitor about a brand. Moreover, changes in the channel and medium of the message used have an impact on changing perceptions of a brand. The results concluded that Blogger act as *Content Generators* who freely shares opinions and personal feelings over the Internet. Bloggers as *Influencers Opinion leaders* explain that a blogger has the ability to influence readers or blog visitors based on attitudes, perceptions and even buying behavior. In addition, bloggers are also widely interpreted as a *Phenomenon of Internet*, which can not be separated from the relevance of the use of bloggers on activities undertaken by PR, especially

linked with social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Due to their ability to influence target audience's attitudes, bloggers can be regarded as opinion leaders who have the power from their blog contents. Blogger's abilities in content management affect their followers or blog visitors by stories they post on blogs. The development of social media also allows every latest blog entry to be linked to other social media platforms. It will certainly disperse the content more widely among followers or visitors of

the blogger. Online viral marketing is rapidly becoming an important and popular communication tool. Related to this potential role of bloggers in PR activities, effective execution of viral marketing campaigns can create an instantaneous buzz and help raise the promotion of brands, products and services (Haryani & Motwani, 2016). In the light of the interviews and discussion, a model (Figure 1) of blogger's role adopting multi-step flow model was developed to reveal bloggers' influential role as a digital influencers.

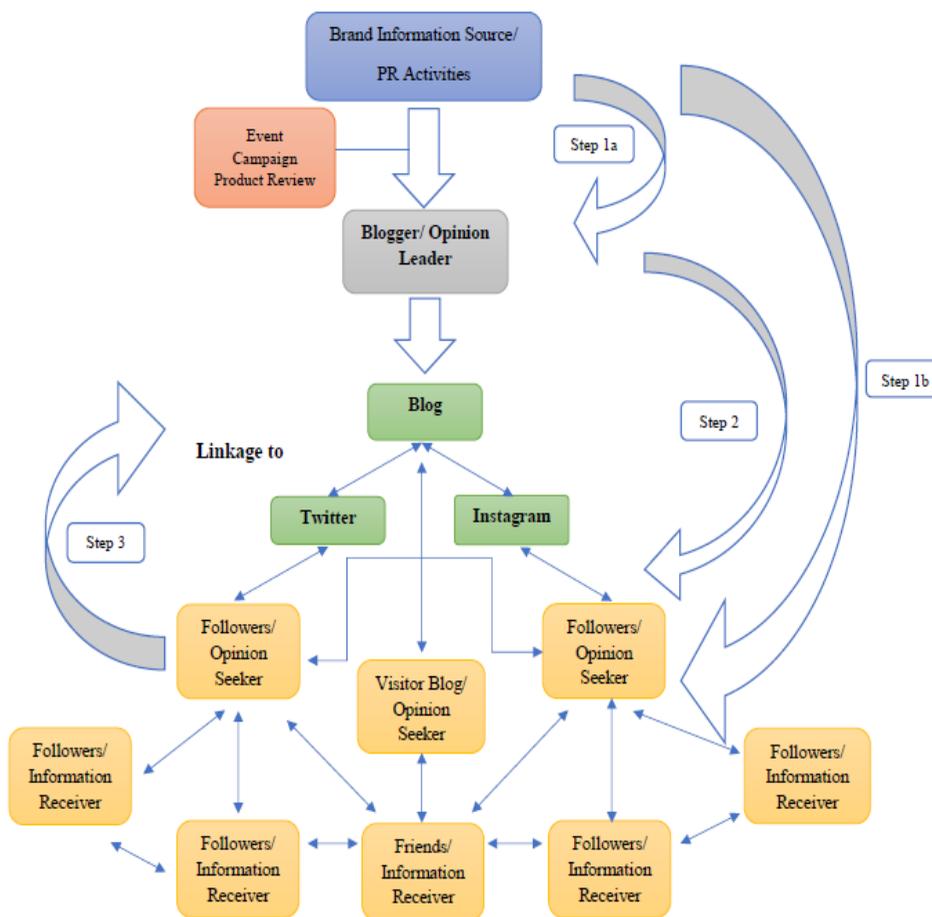


Figure 1. Multi-step Flow Model on blogger involvement in PR activities

Within the model (Figure 1), the brand information source through PR activities conveys messages directly to opinion seekers or information receivers through advertising, campaign, or event (Step 1b), both in mass media and digital media. Subsequently, the brand message is communicated to bloggers via communication activities (Step 1a), for instance sample sending or product review and events or campaigns. After decoding, the blogger codes and shares the message through his or her blog (Step 2) that is linked to other social media platforms (Twitter and Instagram). The message is transmitted to readers or followers as opinion seekers, who in turn recode, like or share it, relaying to their friends or other information receivers. Based on digital information power, readers or followers as opinion seekers have the possibility to search the information directly on the blog or social media. This information is subsequently transmitted to their friends or other information receivers (Step 3).

The whole communication process is multi-way between the senders and receivers. Due to the interactive and participative characteristics of blogs, readers, friends, and followers can comment on posts and participate in the related discussion by responding to messages delivered through blogs or social media platforms (Twitter and Instagram). Additionally, in the multi-step flow model, bloggers serve as the key in transmitting information in PR activities to a certain audience. However, blog visitors or followers in social media also send the messages to their own network (other information receivers). During the brand

communication process through online opinion leaders (bloggers) this message can be diffused virally. Brand communication in PR activities employs the power of viral message or viral marketing message that allows recommendations by friends and has a snowball effect to other information receivers.

The segmentation of bloggers targeted for cooperation with PR activities is active blogger publics (Park & Jeong, 2011). Active blogger publics are those who have high engagement in their blog. They have the ability to concurrently turn a situation into an issue. Active blogger publics tend to use blogs as a diary while retaining the language style that informs the readers. The selection of writing viewpoint that adapts to direct the experience is the key factor in the content delivery. Hence, blog contents vary according to the readers.

The role of bloggers as digital influencers through social media become the benchmark in PR activities of a brand or buzzer agency working with bloggers. It is concluded that the dominant characteristics for selecting bloggers for PR activities are enduring product involvement and media habits (Shon, 2005). The characteristic of enduring product involvement is related to the previous study that emphasizes a blog as an innovative tool to share information and knowledge from bloggers to their blog visitors and followers on social media (Chai, Das, & Rao, 2011). Blogger's experience is explained through the blog content which provides information or extensively serves a product.

Blogger's involvement process related to PR activities in Indonesia

Online or digital PR has become part of PR strategy. There are several methods used in PR digital strategy such as: Expert Articles, Email Newsletter, Blogs, web seminars, and Podcasts. The concept of viral and buzz is done by PR to run a digital strategy in order to reach the audience. This explanation further confirms the role of bloggers as a buzzers in PR activities. Audiences can view and read various information shared by other audience via blogs or trusted website. This process makes the audience source the information positively and leads them to buy the product. Currently, PR practitioners are focusing on blogger engagement strategies by reaching through e-mail, and sending information about the product or campaign to which they can contribute to share through active participation on their blogs. It is important to personalize relationship with bloggers and cultivate trust in order to have good communication with them about their content (Langett, 2013).

PR activities tend to be conducted digitally. One of these activities is to invite bloggers to engage directly in product events or campaigns. There are at least two things that make it a mutually beneficial relationship between bloggers and PR: bloggers getting free products and company getting cheap advertising. This also depends on the delivery of blog content as viral message or buzz through social media.

Based on the results of the current study, it can be concluded that some of the important categories or criteria in choosing

bloggers for PR activities are brand match, content quality and Reliability/Popularity (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Brand match is proved by the suitability of the segmentation of readers or blog visitors with the product event or review conducted by the bloggers. Content quality is a linkage to the way bloggers create and maintain their blog quality as well as writing style.

The criteria of Reliability/Popularity are considered by the number of followers on social media and visitors per post. It is in line with the results of previous studies considering blogger's productivity and popularity as essential aspects in finding top influential bloggers. Both aspects also play a vital role to find influential bloggers within a blogging community so that effective PR activities can be achieved (Khan & Daud, 2016). Blogger engagement is related to advertising as one of PR activities. This aspect is based on previous studies emphasizing that trust and credibility are further seen as decisive factors determining the influential effect of bloggers. Meanwhile, "Honesty" and "Transparency" about blog advertisements are considered to be crucial in winning readers or followers' trust and loyalty (Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Manière, & Stankeviciute, 2013).

Bloggers are considered to be an important aspect in creating social media effects due to their role as the doers in the dissemination of messages or content in real time. Bloggers also contribute in spreading the message or content anytime, anywhere, and for anyone. This is in line with the previous research finding out that

influential blogger's flow model is based on the features such as Recognition, Activity Generation, and Novelty (Aggarwal, Lin, & Yu, 2012).

The important point made in this study is that the power of bloggers lies in their blog readership and number of followers. Besides the brand, the number of followers or readers is usually used as an indicator to measure the effectiveness of viral advertising on social media, especially in getting through the consumers who have not been reached by the conventional media. In digital PR activities, cooperation with bloggers is highly profitable since it is very effective and has measurable size compared to the advertising through other conventional mass media. From the blogger's perspective, promoting and advertising as involvement in PR activities are a new source of income and benefit (Sepp, Liljander, & Gummerus, 2011).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that bloggers as digital influencers is focused on being a source of reference and information about a brand for readers or blog visitors. This also applies to the followers on their social media to where all blog content will be directly linked. It proves that the role of bloggers as opinion leaders implement the multi-step flow model. The writing style that emphasizes a form of self-expression makes the blog content easily received. Bloggers are regarded as influencers or opinion leaders with regards to their ability to influence the readers or blog visitors on their attitudes,

perceptions and buying behavior even by relying on the concept of user-generated content. Blogger segmentation targeted for PR activities is those categorized as active blogger publics. The dominant criterion in selecting bloggers for PR activities is the characteristic of enduring product involvement.

Blogger's involvement in PR activities is a mutually beneficial relationship. The PR activities rely on digital activities to get bloggers directly involved in either the event or the campaign. Other important criteria in selecting bloggers to support PR activities include Brand match, Content Quality and Reliability/Popularity. From the blogger's point of view, income from their involvement in PR activities also provides financial benefits.

Implications

In this article, the implication of multi-step flow model on blogger's involvement in PR activities identifies the role of bloggers as opinion leaders. Additionally, the multi-step flow model also provides a theoretical perspective on blogger's communication process through blog content that is linked to social media. The current study has several implications: Firstly, as proposed in our model, bloggers mediate brand messages through blogs and social media. They share their experience, being the point of reference to readers or followers and being the main source to opinion seekers or information receivers. This model (Figure 1) simultaneously adopts two-step flow model on the role of bloggers as opinion leaders in

brand communication activities (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Secondly, blogger engagement in PR activity is mutually beneficial relationship, for both blogger engagement and PR activities. In the future, PR practitioners can further make use of the role of bloggers as opinion leaders in product communication.

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