

## **Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges**

Syed Arabi Iddid, International Islamic University, Malaysia

Zeti Azreen Ahmad. International Islamic University, Malaysia

Rizwanah Souket, Monash University, Malaysia

### **Abstract**

Doing research on public relations is both an amazing and a challenging experience, especially when it involves a longitudinal study. Public relations has spread very fast since the 1960s and is now accepted as a global practice. The overall concern among professionals and academics is for the practice to provide evidence of effectiveness and to receive recognition from top management. Public relations has gradually been accepted as an academic discipline where research findings could benefit the practitioners. The practice of public relations in Malaysia and the profile of the public relations practitioners has changed over a period of years due to socio-political and institutional factors. The first study, supposedly a cross-sectional survey in 1977, was succeeded by studies in 1992, 2003, 2011 and finally in 2018.

Several issues are faced in conducting a longitudinal study on PR practitioners and the practice. Longitudinal research requires a commitment of resources and support from colleagues who are interested in the subject area. Our research used a convenience sample in the absence of a complete list of PR practitioners, although the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) rendered assistance. A nationwide survey was conducted focusing on big cities in the country. The first two studies depended mainly on mailed questionnaire and face-to-face interviews to obtain the respondents but over time reliance was on face-to-face interviews and phone calls. The two most recent studies used online survey but as the response was dismal, the study continued with face-to-face interviews. The emphasis on topics in the study changed over a period of time, focusing on professional orientation and ethics in the early studies, but giving more regard in later studies to issues on social media use, crisis communication and corporate social responsibility. The major findings in 2018 showed an increasing number of graduates and females making public relations their career. Although respondents agreed to the professionalism of the practice yet only a low percentage were members of the local or international PR Association. Generally, respondents are satisfied with their career, use the social media and are involved in managing crisis.

**Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations:  
Some issues and challenges**

**Keywords:**

longitudinal study; public relations (PR) practice; PR profiles

---

## Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges

### Introduction

Malaysian public relations has changed over the years due to socio-political and institutional factors. This longitudinal study provides some insights into these changes. While the original study in 1977 was meant to be a one-off study, several factors made it possible for a second study in 1992. With the help of Roziyaton Jamaluddin, another study was undertaken in 2003. The fourth study in 2011 was made possible with the help of Khaizuran Jalil and Aznan Mat Piah from the Department of Communication. Thinking it would be the final study, Zeti Azreen Ahmad was solicited to help in the 2018 study. There was no idea at all that the study on public relations practitioners and practice in Malaysia would go beyond the first study. Now we are not sure that 2018 would be the final study. All the studies undertaken over 42 years showed some trends of the changes that had taken place in Malaysia and would be indicative of more changes in the future.

The previous studies managed to sample 186 respondents in 1977, 188 respondents in 1992 and 311 respondents in 2003, 329 respondents in 2011 and a total of 302 respondents in the latest study. In terms of the number of respondents gathered, the study was satisfied that a fairly sizeable number was obtained to provide an understanding of the practitioners in Malaysia over the period of years.

Studies on the demographics, education, gender, salary and professional issues of practitioners have been conducted over the past decades in several countries but the number of such studies are rather limited. Cross-sectional studies were conducted in Australia, United States, India but a longitudinal study on professionalization was done in Latin America in 2009 and 2015 (Molleda, Moreno & Navarro, 2017).

This paper aims to discuss the methodologies used in the five studies from 1977 to 2018 while providing an insight into the changes that had occurred in the Malaysian public relations. The main advantage of a longitudinal study is that similar measurements and variables provide an understanding on the patterns of change over the period of years (Kumar, 2014) required as public relations is being practiced and studied across the globe. Although the benefits of longitudinal studies are acknowledged yet they face difficulties and challenges.

#### *Population of the study*

A major problem faced in conducting public relations is the absence of a complete list of practitioners. The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia's list is not complete and not many practitioners claim membership. The practitioners are spread over ministries, government agencies, non-government organisations, and private organisations (hotels, banks, hospitals, public listed companies). Not all the organisations maintain a list of their practitioners thus adding to the difficulties in conducting research on public relations in Malaysia. Patwardhan and Bardhan (2014) acknowledged a similar difficulty when studying public relations in India, citing an absent list of a comprehensive directories of professionals. The study had to generate emails from online sources, circulating invitation via PR associations, social media posts, and direct messaging members of online PR communities. Snowballing was also added.

A population has to be identified. Other studies facing similar problems would limit their scope. Countries having strong PR associations like Australia, UK and USA were able to conduct their studies based on the record of their own members.

## **Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges**

Studies done based on membership as on PRSA (Lee, Place, & Smith, 2018; Sha, 2011a; 2011b; Shen, Jiang, Jin & Sha, 2015; Jiang & Shen, 2018); on PRISA by Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes (2008), and by Holtzhausen, Petersen and Tindall (2003) in South Africa; on PRIA by De Bussy and Wolf (2009) in Australia. Gupta (2007) obtained 368 names derived from the membership list of Public Relations of India, Public Relations Council of India and Indian Society of Advertisers.

The study in Japan in 1998 was on the professionals in 151 corporations (Watson & Sallot, 2001). Gibson (2002) focused only on the Hispanic public relations industry or another study limited itself to a region such as in NSW, a state of Australia (Singh & Smyth, 2000). Lim, Goh, and Sriramesh (2005) in Singapore, Wu & Taylor (2003) in Taiwan; Ekachai and Komolsevin (1998) on selected practitioners in Bangkok. A study was made of the practitioners in Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing and one region, Guangzhou (Ni Chen, 1996) and a limited study in Bulgaria (Karadjov, Kim, & Karamavasilev, 2000).

Varied methodologies were used but they were inclusive of surveys such as an online questionnaire, (Gupta, (2007), De Bussy & Wolf (2009); Lee, Place, and Smith, (2018); Sha Bey-Ling (2011); Shen, Jiang, Jin and Sha (2015); Jiang and Shen (2018); mailed questionnaires in a study in Japan (Watson & Sallot, 2001) while others used face-to-face interviews. Some studies added snowball and convenience sampling (De Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008; Patwardhan & Bardhan, 2014); using telephone and at later date using online (Callison, Merle & Seltzer, 2014).

Longitudinal studies provide an understanding of the changing patterns. Callison, Merle and Seltzer (2014) did two studies on public perception of public relations practitioners, in the first study they used telephone in 2003 but in 2012 data was collected mainly via online survey. But the study by Molleda et al. (2017) relied on online designed in Qualtrics as the online survey became popular after 2006.

Nearly all the studies were unable to identify the total public relations practitioners in their respective countries in the absence of a complete record. In our study, we did not have a complete list of IPRM members and also of the practitioners and consultants. The target population of this study being the public relations practitioners in Malaysia were identified through several means such as those listed in the Media Guidebook, from media advertisements, government departments, organisations and companies websites, public relations agencies, personal contacts and referrals from other public relations practitioners.

In the first and second study, several months were spent perusing the advertisements and news reports to extract the names and public relations agencies. Once the names were identified, phone calls were made to the designated offices. Making phone calls to public relations officers and government agencies were also made in the fourth and in the latest study, indicating the many man hours spent in establishing the first contact.

The second procedure was to write to a list of companies and government agencies requesting for names and details of public relations practitioners. The response from the listed companies was dismal as only a few replied giving the names of their practitioners. The list of practitioners was not that difficult in the states or in the smaller cities as there were not many public relations practitioners, even if there were they were mainly serving government employees or working in the

## Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges

(limited) big hotels. It was the most difficult to obtain particulars in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city and the other major cities.

It was less difficult to have a list of designated officers in the ministries, government agencies and the universities as public entities were more open than the private companies. The latter would normally come out with the comment of %private and confidential.+Government offices on the other hand were bureaucratic asking researchers to write in for details and with replies coming in %due+time.

In the latest study, the number of practitioners had mushroomed in the Government-Linked Companies (GLC). There were more than 100 GLCs and every unit and subsidiaries had their own public relations unit. This was to suggest a new phenomenon in the growth of PR in Malaysia. In the early days, PR was spearheaded by the government agencies but with the policy on industrialisation and corporatization initiated by the government in 1990s, the government services gave way to the opening up of these GLCs.

The list from the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia was inadequate. Members who had ceased to be active were listed and this caused confusion when they refused to answer. The study weeded out answers from those who had retired. It was quite easy in the first study as the researcher was also a council member of IPRM and hence could help in updating the membership.

Another channel was through personal contact, either with practitioners and consultants known during the early years or with students who had managed to enter the industry. During the final study, contact with former students proved very fruitful and rewarding as they lent a helping hand as some of them were also involved in the early studies. The final study also engaged the practitioners by sending an initial request to participate in the survey through online, but the response from the practitioners is indeed non-responsive.

A snowballing procedure was used. Once a practitioner had been interviewed, enumerators would then ask for names of friends that could be interviewed. We also asked consultants to furnish us the names and addresses of their colleagues for us to make contact. The answers came mainly from respondents obtained from face-to-face interviews.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire was the instrument used. When the study first began in 1977, the concern was knowing the socio-demographics of the practitioners and their educational level. We asked questions using McLeod's measurement to gauge the professional orientation of the Malaysian practitioners. We also asked questions on ethics, membership with professional association and satisfaction (McKee, Nayman & Lattimore, 1975).

In the second and third study, nearly the same questions were asked but we incorporated more on issues relating to ethics. In the fourth and latest study questions were added on the use of social media and professionalism. The final study scaled down questions on professionalism, retained questions on social media and added questions on crisis communication.

## **Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges**

### **Methodology**

The 1977 and 1992 studies questionnaires were mailed to respondents throughout the country and then followed up with reminders. Personal phone calls were made to some respondents. For the 1977 study, the researcher made trips to the state capital cities to retrieve the questionnaires. The researcher also conducted personal in-depth interviews with 30 public relations practitioners after they had returned the questionnaires to obtain a better idea on their understanding of public relations and on their functions and responsibilities.

The 1977 study accepted answers from 186 respondents arising from the mailed questionnaires (Idid, 1978a; 1978b). The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia then had 316 members. It was cheaper to use mailed questionnaire than using the phone, given the number of respondents.

In the second study in 1992, a total of 188 respondents were obtained from 521 names obtained from four main sources (Idid, 1992; 1994). Advertisements in the media over the past two years were read to obtain names of companies that had public relations departments. Besides the questionnaires that were sent out, personal interviews were also held among practitioners. The list from the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia was found inadequate. Many names came from the IPRM list, from the government ministries and agencies and from the private sector (banks, hotels, manufacturing companies). A total of three reminders were sent out to practitioners. A later analysis found no difference in the answers given in the first, second third and fourth wave (Idid, 1992).

In 2003, greater reliance was placed on personal interviews. We then had access to a professional group of interviewers besides getting limited help from the public relations classes in locating and interviewing the respondents. We obtained 311 respondents. The project was closely supervised by Dr Roziyaton who got her students to interview the respondents mainly in Kuala Lumpur while the professional enumerators assisted in getting the interviews in the states.

In 2011 study, a survey method enabled gathering of information from a large group in a cost-effective and efficient manner. To obtain a nation-wide sampling, public relations practitioners working in big towns across the states were identified, such as in Kota Bharu, Johor Bahru, Ipoh, Georgetown, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching. The focus was in Kuala Lumpur which was home to the majority of public relations offices. A total of 427 questionnaires were obtained for the study but only 329 were found suitable for analysis.

We were satisfied to collect a fairly sizeable number of respondents in 2018 to provide an updated profile of the practitioners in Malaysia. Initially, a list of companies was obtained, and letters were sent out to these companies requesting for names of their practitioners, their e-mail addresses and phone numbers. The response from online survey was rather poor (two questionnaires received). The 2018 data were then collected by asking enumerators to hold personal interviews with the practitioners that had been identified in Kuala Lumpur, the federal capital of Malaysia, and all state capital cities in Kota Baru, Kuantan, Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Ipoh, Penang and Alor Star to provide the study a nation-wide perspective of public relations practice.

There were also snowballing interviews when enumerators would ask for names of practitioners from successful respondents. It was easier for us to obtain names of

## Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges

practitioners from government agencies as these are publicly available. Majority of the respondents were obtained from the interviews conducted by the enumerators.

### Results

As in other countries, more females have entered the public relations profession. While 30 percent of females comprised the industry in 1977, in 2018 the percentage had increased to 60 percent (see Table 1). Females entering public relations are a manifestation of women making their presence in other fields (medicine, engineering, banking) in Malaysia.

Table 1. Gender of practitioners (in percentages)

Gender	1977 (N = 186)	1992 (N = 188)	2003 (N = 311)	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
Males	70	53	44	39	40
Females	30	47	55	61	60

The early practitioners possessed Form Five (11 years of education), but more degree holders (bachelors and postgraduates) had entered the field beginning from 1992. In 2018, there were 16 holding postgraduate degrees (Table 2).

Table 2. Education of practitioners (in percentages)

Education	1977 (N = 186)	1992 (N = 188)	2003 (N = 311)	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
SPM & STPM	74	10	10	10	17
Diploma	-	37	21	19	1
Degree	22	44	51	48	66
Postgraduate	4	9	18	22	16

More degree holders are making their career in public relations. This is also a trend in other countries where public relations is able to attract degree holders to enter and make a career in the field. With degrees, management can then be able to groom them for future managers.

The increase in the number of degree holders entering the field could be seen in the setting up of communication programs in universities. The first communication programs was set up in University Sains Malaysia in 1970 followed by Universiti Technology MARA (UiTM) in 1972. The local universities were able to produce sufficient graduates to meet the demand of the industry.

Table 3 suggests a less reliance on media experience. In the early years, experience in journalism was considered necessary before entry to public relations. An experience in media was seen to be able to generate publicity for the organisation.

Table 3. Media experience of practitioners (in percentages)

Media Experience	1977 (N = 186)	1992 (N = 188)	2003 (N = 311)	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
Yes	41	34	30	17	40
No	59	66	70	83	60

## Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges

Table 4 provide findings on the workplace of the Malaysian public relations practitioners. The majority (87%) in 2018 were established as permanent officers compared to 77 percent in 2011. The number of contract practitioners decreased from 12 percent in 2011 to 6 percent in 2018.

Table 4. Workplace profile of respondents (in percentages)

Work Status	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
Temporary	7	4
Probation	4	3
Permanent	77	87
Contract	12	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The practitioners are relatively new to their jobs. Public relations practitioners with five or fewer years of service comprised 84 percent in 1977, 37 percent in 1992, and 71 percent in 2011. The percentage however decreased to 50 percent in 2018. Those with six to ten years of working experience constituted 17 percent in 1977, 37 percent in 1992, 14 percent in 2011 and increased to 24 percent in 2018; those with 11 to 15 years of working experience were 17 percent in 1992, 7 percent in 2011 and 9 percent in 2018; those with 16 to 20 years of working experience constituted 9 percent in 1992, 3 and 5 percent respectively in 2011 and 2018; and those with 21 years and above of working experience figured 5 percent and 8 percent.

Table 5. Service as a PR practitioner (in percentages)

Service as a PR Practitioner	1977 (N = 186)	1992 (N = 188)	2003 (N = 311)	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
5 years & less	84	37	N/A	71	50
6 - 10 years	17	37	N/A	14	24
11 - 15 years	-	17	N/A	7	9
16 - 20 years	-	9	N/A	3	5
21 & above	-	-	N/A	5	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

NB: Total may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Majority of the respondents were not members of any professional associations (Table 6). In 2011, only 17 percent of practitioners were registered members of IPRM while those who were members were only 16 percent in 2018. Moreover, the number of accredited members was only 12 percent in 2018 compared to 19 percent in 2011.

## Conducting a longitudinal study on Malaysian public relations: Some issues and challenges

Table 6. Membership with professional association (in percentages)

Accredited by IPRM	2011 (N = 329)	2018 (N = 302)
Yes	19	12
No	81	88
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
IPRM Membership		
Yes	17	16
No	83	84
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

In general, majority of the practitioners agreed with the statements concerning professionalism (Table 7). The highest level of agreement was in relation to the statement that practitioners should be subjected to a code of ethics (94 and 96 percent respectively). The respondents also agreed that practitioners should be accredited by a professional body with 92 percent in 2011 and 95 percent in 2018. Membership to professional bodies were not mandatory among PR practitioners, but the respondents had shown a relatively high agreement that PR practitioners should be members of a professional body, such as IPRM.

Table 7. The perceptions of practitioners on professionalism and ethics

Items	2011 (N = 329)		2018 (N = 302)	
	A (%)	SA (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
PR practitioners should be accredited by a professional body.	57	35	53	42
PR practitioners should be members of a professional body like IPRM.	56	28	56	22
PR practitioners should be subjected to a code of ethics.	57	37	58	38

\*Agreement = Agree & Strongly Agree

### Discussion and Conclusion

The longitudinal study from 1977 to 2018 provides insights in the changes in public relations practice in Malaysia. The five studies from 1977 to 2018 saw changes in the methods used in collecting data and the emphasis given to certain fields of concern.

Public relations was able to attract graduates and women in particular to build a career. The findings marked the changes that were occurring in Malaysia where the establishment of universities in the 1970s resulted in the entry of more females and the production of graduates to enter the communication industry.

Public relations in the early years was mainly a government occupation but by the 1990s when industrialisation and corporatisation policies were introduced, the field of public relations expanded. Public relations moved from having more government departments that were service oriented to one where more organisations that were established were market and service driven.

## References

- Callison, C., Merle, P. F & Seltzer, T. (2014). Smart friendly liars: Public perception of public relations practitioners over time. *Public Relations Review*, 40(5), 829-831.
- Chen, N. (1996). Public relations in China: The introduction and development of an occupational field. In H. Culberston, M. Hugh, & Ni Chen (Eds.), *International public relations. A comparative analysis* (pp. 121-153). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- De Bussy, N. M. & Wolf, K. (2009). The state of Australian public relations: Professionalisation and paradox, *Public Relations Review*, 35(4), 376-381.
- Ekachai, D, & Komolsevin, R. (1996). Public Relations in Thailand: Its Functions and Practitioners Roles. In Culberston, H and Chen, N. *International Public Relations. A Comparative Analysis*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 155-170.
- Gibson, D. C. (2002). Possibilidad Y problema: An historical/critical analysis of Hispanic public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(1), 63-85.
- Gupta, S. (2007). Professionalism in Indian public relations and corporate communication: An empirical analysis. *Public Relations Review*, 33(3), 306-312.
- Holtzhausen, D. R., Petersen, B. K., & Tindall, N. T. J. (2003). exploding the myth of the symmetrical/asymmetrical dichotomy: Public relations models in the New South Africa. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15(4), 305-341.
- Idid, S. A. (1978a). Perhubungan Awam di Malaysia. Satu Tinjauan Mengenalinya. Report to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Idid, S. A. (1978b). Public relations: A glimpse of the practitioners in Malaysia. *Media Asia* 5, 165-170.
- Idid, S.A (1992). Specifying a target population: The case of the Malaysian public relations practitioners. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, 8(1), 131-140.
- Idid, S. A. (1994). *Perhubungan awam di Malaysia: Satu kajian tentang pengamal di Malaysia*. Bangi: Jabatan Komunikasi, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Jiang, H. & Shen, H. (2018). Supportive organizational environment, work-life enrichment, trust and turnover intention: A national survey of PRSA membership. *Public Relations Review*, 44(5), 681-689.
- Karadjov, C., Kim, Y., & Karavasilev, L. (2000). Models of public relations in Bulgaria and job satisfaction among its practitioners. *Public Relations Review*, 26(2), 209-218.
- Kumar, R. (2014). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. (4th Ed), SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Lee, H., Place, K. R. & Smith, B. G. (2018). Revisiting gendered assumptions of practitioner power: An exploratory study examining the role of social media expertise. *Public Relations Review*, 44(2): 191-200.

- Lim, S., Goh, J., & Sriramesh, K. (2005). Applicability of the generic principles of excellent public relations in a different cultural context: The case study of Singapore. *Public Relations Research*, 17(4), 315-340.
- McKee, B. K., Nayman, O. B., & Lattimore, D. L. (1975). How public relations people see themselves, *Public Relations Journal*, 31, 47-52.
- Molleda, J. C; Moreno, A. & Navarro, C. (2017). Professionalisation of public relations in Latin America: A longitudinal comparative study. *Public Relations Review*, 43(5), 1084-1093.
- Niemann-Struweg, I. & Meintjes, C. (2008). The professionalism debate in South African public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 34(34), 224-229.
- Patwardhan, P. & Bardhan, N. (2014). Worlds apart or a part of the world? Public relations issues and challenges in India. *Public Relations Review*, 40(3), 408-419.
- Sha, B. L. (2011a). Accredited vs non-accredited: The Polarization of practitioners in the public relations profession. *Public Relations Review*, 37(2), 121-128.
- Sha, B. L. (2011b). 2010 Practice analysis: Professional competencies and work categories in public relations today. *Public Relations Review*, 37(3), 187-196.
- Shen, H., Jiang, H., Jin, Y., & Sha, B.L. (2015). Practitionersqwork-life conflict: A PRSA survey. *Public Relations Review*, 41(4), 415-421.
- Singh, R., & Smyth, R. (2000). Australian Public Relation: Status at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Public Relations Review*, 20(4), 387-401.
- Watson, D. R. & Sallot, L. M. (2001). Public relations practice in Japan: An exploratory study. *Public Relations Review*, 27(4), 389-402.
- Wu, M. Y., & Taylor, M. (2003). Public relations in Taiwan: Roles, professionalism, and relationship to marketing. *Public Relations Review*, 29(4), 473-483.