



THE SYNERGY OF SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE (AN ANALYSIS OF BEST PRACTICES IN SRI LANKA)

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital landscape, the integration of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) has become essential for organisations seeking to enhance their online visibility. This research investigates best practices for optimising the collaborative efforts of SEO and PR within this context. Given the rapid advancements in technology and communication, it is crucial to develop a nuanced understanding of how these two domains intersect to achieve mutual goals. Recognising the existing gaps in the literature concerning practical applications of SEO-PR strategies, this study employs a qualitative research methodology. Insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with ten experienced PR professionals, illuminating their experiences, strategies, and challenges related to SEO-PR integration. The findings indicate that a multifaceted approach to SEO and PR collaboration is vital in the digital era. A primary theme that emerged is the importance of content quality, which must be informative, engaging, and relevant to align with the objectives of both disciplines. The study also highlights the role of authentic storytelling, which resonates with the values and interests of target audiences, as a critical component of effective communication. Ethical considerations are emphasised as integral to SEO-PR integration, particularly regarding transparency, accuracy, and trustworthiness in content creation and dissemination. This research thus provides valuable insights for PR professionals and SEO experts navigating the complexities of the digital landscape.

KEYWORDS: *Digital age, Public Relations, SEO, SEO-PR Synergy*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The rapid evolution of digital communication has fundamentally transformed the landscape in which organisations operate. In this context, the integration of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) has emerged as a crucial strategy for enhancing online visibility and fostering engagement with target audiences. As organisations strive to navigate this dynamic environment, understanding the synergy between SEO and PR becomes increasingly vital.

Search Engine Optimisation refers to the practices and strategies employed to improve a website's visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs). It encompasses a variety of techniques, including keyword optimisation, content creation, and link building, aimed at driving organic traffic to digital platforms. Given the prevalence of online information consumption, effective SEO is critical for organisations seeking to establish a robust digital presence. According to recent studies, a significant percentage of consumers rely on search engines to make informed decisions, highlighting the importance of being easily discoverable online.

Conversely, PR focuses on managing an organisation's reputation and cultivating relationships with key stakeholders, including the media, customers, and the public. Traditionally, PR strategies involved press releases, media outreach, and event management, but the advent of digital communication has expanded these practices. Today, PR professionals utilize online platforms to engage audiences, share brand narratives, and respond to public sentiment. The integration of digital tools and platforms has allowed PR to become more data-driven and responsive to audience needs.

Despite the distinct objectives of SEO and PR, their convergence presents an opportunity for organisations to amplify their messages and improve their overall effectiveness. The intertwining of these disciplines allows for a more cohesive communication strategy, where high-quality content serves as the linchpin connecting SEO and PR efforts. Content that is not only optimised for search engines but also compelling and

relevant to the audience can enhance brand visibility and foster trust. For instance, informative articles, engaging blog posts, and authentic storytelling can resonate with audiences while simultaneously improving search engine rankings.

Research indicates that there is a growing recognition of the need for integrated approaches that combine the strengths of both SEO and PR. However, the existing literature reveals significant gaps in understanding the practical implementation of these strategies. Many studies focus on either SEO or PR in isolation, leaving a need for comprehensive insights into how these disciplines can effectively collaborate in the digital age.

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, organisations are beginning to realize the importance of this integration. The digital landscape is rapidly evolving, with an increasing number of consumers engaging with brands through online platforms. Consequently, PR professionals are challenged to adapt their strategies to leverage the advantages offered by SEO, while SEO experts must understand the nuances of effective public relations.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of PR professionals who have actively engaged in SEO-PR collaboration. By conducting in-depth interviews, the research aims to uncover best practices, challenges, and strategies that can inform future efforts in integrating these two critical domains. Ultimately, the goal is to provide valuable insights that can guide organisations in optimising their SEO and PR efforts, enabling them to thrive in an increasingly complex digital environment.

1.2 Literature Review

Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) has emerged as a pivotal strategy (Holiday, 2012). A review of the existing literature reveals the evolving roles of SEO and PR and their interconnectedness in the digital realm (Forbes, 2019).

The traditional view of SEO as a technical practice, focused solely on improving website rankings, has evolved (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015). According to modern perspectives, SEO emphasises a broader approach, emphasising user experience, content quality, and brand visibility (Clarke, 2023).

This shift recognises that search engine algorithms increasingly reward high-quality, relevant content.

Simultaneously, the field of PR has expanded its scope in response to the digital age (Scott, 2020). PR, once primarily associated with media relations, now encompasses broader responsibilities, including reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication (Holiday, 2012). As organisations increasingly interact with their audiences through digital channels, PR professionals are adapting their strategies accordingly.

The intersection of SEO and PR has become more pronounced as their functions overlap (Forbes, 2019). SEO now relies on PR to secure high-quality backlinks and leverage earned media, which contribute significantly to a website's authority (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015). PR, in turn, depends on SEO for optimising online content to ensure it aligns with search engine algorithms, enhancing online visibility and reputation (Clarke, 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of this interdependence, the existing body of literature falls short in offering comprehensive insights into practical strategies for optimising the synergy between SEO and PR (Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing, 2021). Little research delves into how these two domains collaborate in practice, especially in the context of the digital age, highlighting a clear knowledge gap.

A recurring theme in the limited existing literature is the significance of content quality (Journal of Search Engine Optimisation, 2020). High-quality, informative, and engaging content is central to both SEO and PR success in the digital age (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015). Engaging content not only attracts search engine attention but also resonates with the target audience.

Furthermore, the literature emphasises the importance of authentic storytelling (Scott, 2020). The ability to craft narratives that align with the values and interests of the audience is crucial for both PR and SEO, as it facilitates effective communication (Holiday, 2012).

1.3 Research Gap

The integration of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) has garnered increasing attention in the digital landscape, yet significant research gaps persist.

While existing studies often examine SEO and PR in isolation, there is a limited understanding of how these disciplines can collaboratively enhance organisational communication strategies. Specifically, the literature lacks comprehensive insights into the practical implementation of integrated SEO-PR strategies, leaving a need for exploration into effective collaboration practices.

Moreover, phenomenological approaches focusing on the lived experiences of PR professionals engaged in SEO-PR synergy remain scarce. Current research often overlooks the nuanced challenges and strategies faced by practitioners, limiting the applicability of findings to real-world scenarios. Additionally, there is insufficient attention to industry-specific dynamics, which can influence the effectiveness of SEO-PR integration.

As organizations increasingly navigate the complexities of digital communication, understanding these gaps is crucial for developing effective strategies that leverage the strengths of both SEO and PR. This study aims to address these gaps by providing empirical insights into best practices and challenges, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of SEO-PR collaboration in the digital age.

1.4 Research Problem

What are the practical challenges and strategies faced by Public Relations (PR) professionals in integrating Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) within their campaigns, and how can a deeper understanding of these experiences enhance the effectiveness of SEO-PR collaboration in the digital age?

1.5 Objectives of the study

1. To investigate the strategies and methods employed by PR professionals to effectively integrate SEO into their campaigns.

2.To examine the challenges and successes encountered by PR professionals in their SEO-PR collaborations, providing insights into their practical experiences.

3.To Identify the best practices for optimising the synergy between SEO and PR, enhancing the effectiveness of communication strategies in the digital landscape.

1.6 Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the evolving relationship between Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) in the digital age. By exploring collaborative practices and lived experiences of PR professionals, the research provides valuable insights that can inform both academic and practical approaches to SEO-PR integration. The findings aim to equip practitioners with best practices that enhance online visibility and brand reputation, ultimately contributing to more effective communication strategies. This study addresses existing gaps in the literature, fostering a deeper understanding of how these two disciplines can work synergistically to achieve organisational goals.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Philosophy

This research adopted a constructivist philosophy, recognising that knowledge is constructed through individual experiences and interactions. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding the dynamic nature of the digital age and the collaborative efforts of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and Public Relations (PR) within it.

2.2 Research Method

The qualitative research method was selected to explore the intricacies of human experiences, perceptions, and practices. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how PR professionals engage in SEO-PR collaboration, capturing the complexity of their roles in the evolving digital landscape.

2.3 Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological approach was employed, focussing on the lived experiences and perspectives of PR professionals who have actively participated in the

synergy of SEO and PR (Moustakas, 1994). This approach provided rich context for exploring the nuances of their experiences and insights.

2.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility to explore emerging topics while maintaining consistency in the questions asked. This approach facilitated in-depth discussions that revealed the complexities of SEO-PR integration. Key interview questions were designed to investigate specific aspects of collaboration, including strategies, challenges, and best practices, allowing the study to gather rich qualitative data from PR professionals and gain valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives.

2.5 Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015), with ten PR professionals chosen based on specific criteria: extensive experience in PR, a proven track record of SEO-PR collaboration, and representation from diverse industries and organizational sizes. This selection aimed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the various contexts in which SEO and PR operate.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which facilitated the identification of key themes related to SEO-PR collaboration. The findings were systematically aligned with the key interview questions, ensuring that participant responses accurately reflected these identified themes. This structured presentation allowed for a clear mapping of insights to the specific aspects of the collaboration explored in the interviews.

2.7 Qualitative Data

The primary data collected were qualitative in nature, derived from the in-depth interviews, capturing participants' narratives, experiences, insights, and perceptions related to the integration of SEO and PR in their professional roles. This qualitative approach is supported by existing research, indicating that in-depth interviews are effective for capturing nuanced experiences and best practices.

2.8 Limitations

The study's reliance on a limited sample size of ten PR professionals might restrict the generalisability of findings. While purposive sampling aimed to select experienced professionals, the study might overlook the perspectives of a broader range of professionals or industries. As the research focused solely on the experiences and perceptions of PR professionals, there is a potential for subjectivity and bias in the data collection and interpretation. Individual viewpoints might not fully represent the entire spectrum of SEO-PR collaboration experiences. The study's time frame might limit the relevance of the findings as the digital landscape constantly evolves. Insights captured from participants within a specific period might not fully reflect ongoing changes or future developments in SEO-PR practices. The researchers' interpretations and biases might have influenced the thematic analysis. Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, the researchers' preconceptions or perspectives could have affected the identification and interpretation of themes. While in-depth interviews provided rich qualitative data, the study's focus solely on qualitative methods might have limited the depth or breadth of understanding regarding quantitative metrics or specific SEO tactics utilised within the collaboration. External factors such as industry-specific dynamics, organisational structures, or individual job roles of participants might have influenced their experiences, potentially impacting the generalisability of findings beyond the studied context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research conducted in-depth interviews with ten seasoned PR professionals to explore best practices in optimising the collaborative efforts of SEO and PR in the context of the digital age. The findings reveal key insights that illuminate the multifaceted nature of SEO-PR integration.

Content quality emerges as the cornerstone.

One of the central themes that emerged from the interviews was the paramount importance of content quality. Participants uniformly emphasised the crucial role of high-quality, informative, engaging, and relevant content in both SEO and PR efforts. They viewed content as the bridge connecting these two

disciplines, enabling them to achieve their respective goals. The researchers derived this theme by analysing participants' responses, which consistently highlighted content quality as a pivotal factor in their strategies.

The PR professionals stressed the need to align content strategies with the objectives of SEO and PR. Content should be crafted to serve a dual purpose: enhancing online visibility through SEO and engaging and informing the target audience through PR. The integration of content strategies was identified as a best practice, ensuring that content serves the interests of both disciplines effortlessly.

Authentic storytelling fosters connection

Authentic storytelling emerged as another fundamental concept. PR professionals recognized that effective communication in the digital age hinges on crafting narratives that resonate with the values and interests of the target audience. Authentic storytelling allows organisations to connect with their audiences on a deeper level, creating a meaningful and lasting relationship. This finding was derived from direct quotes and anecdotes shared by participants, illustrating their successful use of storytelling in their campaigns.

In addition to engaging the audience, authentic storytelling contributes to building brand trust and credibility. PR professionals highlighted that by conveying a brand's values and mission through storytelling, they could establish a stronger emotional connection with their audience. This emotional connection, in turn, supports the broader PR goals of reputation management and relationship-building.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations played a significant role in the integration of SEO and PR. The participants underscored the importance of transparency, accuracy, and trustworthiness in content creation and dissemination. Ensuring that the information presented is reliable and accurate was crucial not only for SEO, which relies on content for ranking, but also for PR, where credibility and reputation management are paramount. The emphasis on ethics was evident in multiple responses where participants recounted challenges they faced in balancing commercial interests with ethical considerations.

Balancing commercial interests with ethical considerations was identified as a challenge. PR professionals expressed the need to strike a delicate balance between promoting a brand and ensuring that the information shared is accurate and honestly done. The findings suggested that ethical practices are integral to maintaining a sustainable synergy between SEO and PR.

Collaborative strategies for success

Effective communication and coordination between SEO and PR teams were identified as essential for successful integration. The PR professionals emphasised the need for regular meetings, open channels of communication, and sharing of insights and strategies. Collaboration and mutual understanding between these traditionally distinct disciplines were seen as key components of their success. Participants shared specific examples of how collaboration improved their campaigns, illustrating the importance of mutual understanding between these traditionally distinct disciplines.

Furthermore, measuring the impact of their efforts was viewed as crucial. By using analytics and key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess the outcomes of their work, PR professionals were able to adapt their strategies to ensure that both SEO and PR goals were met. This data-driven approach was deemed fundamental for optimising their collaborative efforts.

Adaptability in the ever-evolving landscape

The digital age is characterised by its ever-evolving landscape. PR professionals recognised the need to stay updated with search engine algorithm changes, emerging online platforms, and digital trends. This adaptability and willingness to embrace change were seen as prerequisites for maintaining a successful SEO-PR synergy.

The participants viewed challenges not as setbacks but as opportunities for learning and growth. Whether related to algorithm updates, reputation management crises, or shifting audience preferences, they emphasised the importance of learning from setbacks. Many participants recounted specific instances where adaptability led to innovative solutions, reinforcing the significance of a resilient attitude. This resilient attitude

was integral to their ability to adapt and succeed in the digital age.

Tailoring strategies to industry dynamics

The findings indicated that the synergy between SEO and PR should be tailored to suit the unique dynamics of each industry. PR professionals recognised that strategies effective in one sector might not work in another. Participants highlighted their experiences in different industries, emphasising the need for customised approaches based on industry-specific nuances and audience behaviours. Understanding industry-specific nuances, target audience behaviours, and market trends was essential for optimising their collaborative efforts effectively.

The findings from this research illuminate the intricate and dynamic nature of SEO and PR collaboration in the digital age. Content quality, authentic storytelling, and ethical considerations serve as the cornerstones for successful integration. Effective communication and coordination, combined with a data-driven approach, play a pivotal role in achieving synergy. A proactive and adaptive mind-set is vital in an environment where change is constant. These insights offer valuable guidance for PR professionals and SEO experts navigating the complex and ever-evolving landscape of the digital age and optimising the synergy between these two critical disciplines.

This research, aligning with prior studies, accentuates the pivotal role of content quality in optimising the collaborative efforts between SEO and PR (Scott, 2020). Echoing previous findings, the present study underscores content as the linchpin connecting these disciplines and enabling the achievement of their respective objectives (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015). The emphasis placed by participants on aligning content strategies with both SEO and PR objectives aligns with the notion of integrated content approaches advocated in prior research (Clarke, 2023).

Authentic storytelling, as highlighted in this study, mirrors the emphasis seen in earlier research (Holiday, 2012). The recognition of authentic storytelling as a conduit to establish deeper connections with the audience is consistent with the emphasis on emotional

engagement and brand trust outlined in previous studies (Scott, 2020).

Ethical considerations, a key theme in this research, resonate with earlier research highlighting the importance of transparency, accuracy, and trustworthiness in content dissemination (Holiday, 2012). The balancing act between commercial interests and ethical considerations aligns with prior studies emphasising the need for ethical content creation and dissemination strategies within SEO and PR integration (Scott, 2020).

The emphasis placed on effective communication, coordination, and data-driven approaches echoes the collaborative strategies advocated in previous research (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015). The need for adaptability in the ever-evolving digital landscape, a recurring theme in this study, aligns with prior research emphasising the need for flexibility and learning agility in SEO and PR practices (Holiday, 2012).

Furthermore, tailoring strategies to industry-specific dynamics, a finding highlighted in this research, correlates with earlier studies emphasising the importance of industry-specific approaches and audience behaviour understanding in successful SEO-PR collaborations (Scott, 2020).

The consistency between these findings and prior research underscores the enduring importance and applicability of content quality, authentic storytelling, ethical considerations, collaborative strategies, adaptability, and industry-specific tailoring in optimising the synergy between SEO and PR in the dynamic digital age (Enge, Spencer & Stricchiola, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study underscore several key themes that collectively serve as a roadmap for PR professionals and SEO experts navigating the complex and dynamic digital age. The first and most central theme is the importance of content quality. High-quality content, defined by its informativeness, engagement, and relevance, emerged as the linchpin of success for both SEO and PR. This content serves as a bridge, aligning the goals of both disciplines

seamlessly. Content, it appears, is the common language spoken by SEO and PR professionals, forming the foundation of their collaboration.

Authentic storytelling emerged as another cornerstone of effective SEO-PR integration. PR professionals recognised that in the digital age, authenticity and relatability are prized by audiences. The ability to craft narratives that resonate with the values and interests of the target audience fosters a deep and lasting connection. Authentic storytelling not only engages the audience but also contributes to building trust and credibility, key objectives for both SEO and PR.

Ethical considerations are another integral aspect of the SEO-PR synergy. Transparency, accuracy, and trustworthiness in content creation and dissemination are the cornerstones of a successful digital strategy. The data-driven era demands integrity in information presentation, which is fundamental for establishing and maintaining credibility.

The findings further highlight that effective communication and coordination between SEO and PR teams are essential for a successful integration. Collaboration and mutual understanding between these traditionally distinct disciplines are key to unlocking their combined potential. Additionally, measuring the impact of their efforts through analytics and KPIs was considered crucial for optimising their collaborative strategies.

The digital age is characterized by its ever-evolving landscape, demanding adaptability, and a proactive mind-set. Challenges were not seen as setbacks but rather as opportunities for growth and learning. PR professionals recognized the need to stay updated with search engine algorithm changes, emerging online platforms, and evolving digital trends, which is vital for maintaining a successful SEO-PR synergy.

Lastly, the research highlighted the importance of tailoring strategies to the unique dynamics of different industries. One size does not fit all in the realm of SEO-PR integration, and understanding industry-specific nuances and audience behaviours is essential for optimising collaborative efforts effectively.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisations should prioritise the creation of high-quality, purposeful content aligned with both SEO and PR objectives to foster effective collaboration. Crafting narratives that resonate with audience values builds trust and connections, while transparent and credible communication ensures sustained credibility. Enhanced collaboration between SEO and PR teams is crucial for aligned efforts, adapting to digital trends, and tailoring strategies for diverse industries' dynamics and audience behaviours.

5.1 Directions for future research

Future studies should focus on conducting longitudinal analyses to track the evolving nature and long-term impact of SEO-PR collaboration. Utilizing a blend of qualitative and quantitative analyses will offer a comprehensive understanding of outcomes. Comparing SEO-PR strategies across industries and exploring global practices while considering cultural nuances and market dynamics will be essential. Additionally, investigating the integration of emerging technologies and developing ethical frameworks specific to SEO-PR collaboration will address content ethics and future-proof strategies.

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