

## **The Influence of Social Media in Building Organisational Relationships in the Public Relations Industry in South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Social media has created a new era of global communication. It is reshaping communication in organisations, thereby compelling many to rethink their communication strategies. In today's technologically driven era, organisations face a multitude of responsibilities and challenges, one of which is the participatory nature of social media which requires a high level of responsiveness. Despite the global social media revolution, not all public relations practitioners in organisations use social media to its fullest potential, regardless of the advantages it may offer. This case study on a leading public relations and communications body in South Africa is used to analyse how social media could be used to maintain effective organisational communication. An interpretative, qualitative approach is employed. Data is gathered through interviews and thematic analysis enabled the categorisation of data into themes. Findings reveal a poor level of engagement on social media platforms and recommends the creation of online discussion forums, the reviewing and monitoring social media platforms, enabling the younger generation of public relations practitioners to spearhead social media activity, and the training and development of practitioners to instil confidence and understanding of social media use.

**Keywords:** public relations, social media, organisational communication, engagement

### **Introduction**

Modern digital technology is rapidly changing and the introduction of the internet and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have created new ways to connect and communicate with stakeholders in an organisation. Organisations today have little or no choice but to adapt to the new forms of communication. Social media has grown to be an essential part of society, thereby compelling organisations to include it in their communication strategies. Research has shown that most organisations have applied one or more social media platforms to organisational communication (Muhammad, 2020; Irbo and Mohammed, 2020) as it has become essential for growth, sustainability, and success. Social media is a critical area of interest for communications and public relations practitioners (PRPs) as it influences how organisations obtain, exchange, and share ideas with its key publics. With the exponential growth of social media, public relations roles have become much more nuanced, and responsibilities have evolved. Schoenmaker (2014:1) affirms that "When social media met public relations, communication practices evolved,

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change became the new constant, innovative platforms emerged, and practitioners' roles changed irreversibly". This paper provides an analysis of a leading public relations body in South Africa to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the use of social media in building organisational relationships. The stakeholders in this study are the public relations and communications practitioners affiliated with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). These PRPs either work independently or are working for other public relations and communications organisations or higher education sectors. This paper analyses how the case study organisation can use social media to advance their communication, engage, network, converse online, and build mutually beneficial relationships in the industry. The paper's main objective was to analyse PRISA's registered PRPs' perceptions of social media's influence on organisational communication.

There are many definitions of social media and Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins (2017:8) maintain that "it is generally used to describe collaborative media creation and sharing on a large-scale." Social media can also be defined as an interactive platform where users are able to engage in discussion, sharing, creating, and modifying content (Marlowe *et al.* 2017; Inya 2017). These views highlight that the most significant function of social media is communication through creating and disseminating content. In today's era of social media communication, organisations face new challenges, as the participatory modes of communication shared by social media require a high level of responsiveness. Public relations practitioners need to be responsive to stakeholders' needs in an organisation, make connections, engage, and share ideas and experiences. Although public relations involve building relationships with stakeholders, the changing dynamics of the public sphere requires engaging the public in conversations and creating and sustaining organisational relationships. Therefore, due to the rapid increase in the use of social media in organisations, PRPs are required to incorporate social media in their integrated organisational strategies (Kjaerulff, 2015; Irbo and Mohammed, 2020).

Social media differs from traditional media such as newspapers as it facilitates dialogical communication, has brought about a revolution in participatory communication, and has created online communities (Argyris and Monu, 2015). Social media promotes social interaction among an organisation's stakeholders and within an organisation. Research into social media such as Facebook and Twitter are still in their infancy in developing countries such as South Africa. The majority of studies on social media and organisational communication have been conducted in advanced economies. It is, therefore, imperative for organisations, particularly in South Africa, to understand the influence of social media on

their communication strategies to be able to grow organisations and improve levels of connectedness and sustainability.

This research is set within a framework that conceptualises communication in organisations, unpacks the rise of social media in organisational communication, and further draws on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to enrich understanding on how online connections can promote the concepts of sharing, connecting, and engaging, which could be beneficial for the practice of public relations. Karimi, Khodabandelou, Ehsani, and Ahmed (2014:54) states that one of the successful theoretical frameworks used to examine how and why individuals use the media to satisfy their needs is the UGT. Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch (1974) indicate that the focus of UGT is on what people and organisations do with the media. They debate that the audience are actively selecting and using the media in response to specific needs. The theory, therefore, is used to examine the gratifications obtained by participants because of using social media in their organisations.

### **Background to the Case Study**

The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa was established in 1957 with the role of driving professionalism among practitioners in the Southern African region, including Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, and South Africa (PRISA 2022). The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa is the only professional body for public relations and communication practitioners recognised by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham, and Motau (2016:18) explain that “PRISA aims to foster the professionalisation of the practice in Southern Africa; establish public relations as a strategic management function; and uphold professional ethics and standards.” The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa’s primary objectives include “to provide a forum for networking and professional development; to professionalise the public relations consulting industry; and to foster links with allied industries and international consultants” (PRISA 2022:1). The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa provides continuous professional development (CPD) for registered practitioners and students and enables practitioners to expand their knowledge and develop the personal qualities needed to strengthen their practice. The rapid growth and change brought by advancements in digital technology have left PRPs with no choice but to constantly keep up with communication trends if they want to remain relevant in the field. As a result, this paper analyses the influence of social media on organisational communication.

## **Conceptualising Communication in Organisations**

Communication is regarded as the glue that binds communities together and humans communicate to satisfy different kinds of needs. Human relations rely heavily on effective communication, and it is increasingly challenging for organisations in the 21st century to survive and remain sustainable without effective communication. Communication occurs when information is transferred between individuals, groups, and organisations to bring forth an understandable reaction. Communication keeps organisations together and can contribute to success and survival. In the communication process, exchanging ideas, feelings, experiences, and attitudes is essential for creating meaning and understanding to satisfy a need or achieve a specific goal. Communication management is an important aspect for effective communication that occurs in an organisation (Shonubi and Akintaro, 2016). One of the primary responsibilities of a communications and public relations practitioner is ensuring efficient communication among the organisation's stakeholders. Organisational communication is the way organisations coordinate activities, accomplish tasks, and build relationships with key stakeholders. To achieve a favourable standing with stakeholders, organisations need to attain presence through various connections with their stakeholders. The use of social media by organisations with the aim to share, connect, and engage, and create a fair, competitive advantage through instant and intimate communication, is one of the ways in which this can be done (Badea, 2014; Bossio, McCosker, Milne, Golding, and Albarrán-Torres, 2020).

Practitioners need to understand the communication process to determine factors that will assist in creating effective communication. The sender in the communication process needs to be clear regarding what he or she is communicating, and the planning of the communication should be transparent. Practitioners should aim to achieve participation in their planned communication. The communicators of the message should keep in mind that communication is more than just transmitting information but deals with the emotions and experiences that are equally important when trying to engage, convey ideas, and build continuous relationships with stakeholders (Thomas and Dittman, 2016). Effective organisational communication relies heavily on communication channels that organisations employ in their communication strategies. The perception of the communication channels used by the organisations' employees and stakeholders plays a role in how the message is delivered and effectively received. Organisational communication is an integral part of organisations such as the PRISA, where their core function is to promote sharing of good practice in the public relations industry and developing professional and ethical engagement.

Social media has influenced how organisations plan and implement their communication strategies. Many researchers have affirmed that it has become almost impossible for organisations to ignore social media or the value it can bring, particularly in communications organisations (Fielding and Du-Plooy-Cilliers, 2014; Inya, 2017). Skinner *et al.* (2016) stress that social media's ability to form instant interpersonal communication has progressed, making it an exciting and popular topic for scholars and those in communication organisations. Public relations practitioners serve as the intercessor or intermediary between the organisation and the stakeholders by establishing effective communication channels and implementing activities that are directed at sharing, connecting, engaging, and building mutually beneficial relationships (Bossio *et al.* 2020). This places them at the forefront of understanding, improving, and maintaining social media functions strategically within organisations.

### **The Rise of Social Media in Organisational Communication**

Social media enables organisations to achieve two-way spontaneous communication which allows for knowledge sharing, fostering understanding, and promoting engagement. Online communication provides users with several opportunities, such as connecting people in different locations globally and having real-time contact (Oparinde and Matteau-Matsha 2021). Social media involves using mobile and web-based technologies that enable individuals to create, converse, share, and adjust user-generated content such as photographs, videos, voice messages, and events with users. Social media has gained millions of users worldwide over the years and has become an integral part of society, changing the way people communicate. Users on online platforms get to explore, create, share content, and socialise with other users. The social and emotional interactions and experiences that occur online evolve and a single user can connect to millions of other users and contribute to the content they have published, shared, or liked (Ngai, Tao, and Moon, 2015; Irbo and Mohammed, 2020).

Mainstream social media provides organisations with the benefit of creating real-life conversations with their stakeholders, therefore, creating a shift from one-way mass communication to a two-way immediate and spontaneous mass communication. Although social media has become an increasing area of interest for researchers, research on this area in the South African context is scarce. Research indicates that social media is wildly utilised as a tool to foster organisational communication. As a result, organisations should focus on the development and implementation of using social media and social media policies and strategies (Muhammad, 2020; Pogorechvich, 2020). Liu, Xu, and Tsai (2020) further elaborate that the shift towards digital communication has been viewed by researchers as

an effective way to promote or practice organisational public relations. Even though research in the field of social media has been investigated and researched, there remains a gap in research that addresses the impact of digital media on organisational communication. The constant monitoring and management of social media platforms can provide organisations with the ability to create brand, product, or service awareness and a platform to convey ideas and experiences, address issues and crisis, formulate and sustain relationships, as well as foster engagement.

Technological developments, especially in social media, have led to the growth and change in the practice of public relations within organisations. Although public relations involve building relationships with stakeholders and practitioners, the changing dynamics of the public sphere requires stakeholders to engage their publics in conversations and create, nurture, and sustain organisational relationships. Furthermore, the growth and speed of social media has “rendered public relations a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience” (Evans, Twomey, and Talan, 2011:1). This requires PRPs to be able to adapt to these changes. The endless availability of the internet and acceptance of social media has changed the landscape of communication in organisations. Social media platforms have become an integral part of the South African communication landscape. Despite the social media revolution currently being experienced globally, one crucial element remains unchanged and constant: the need to have the right content and platform for audiences to communicate messages successfully. Communication with an organisations’ stakeholders through traditional media has been known to be costly. However, the rapid increase in the use of ICT and the continuous development of social media has afforded organisations the benefit of reaching out to a mass audience faster and at a much lower cost. In the current business environment, organisations are competing to gain a competitive advantage and building an online presence is at the forefront for many organisations. Apart from the disadvantages or shortfalls that come with the use of social media, there are more benefits such as the low cost and audience segmentation feature of social media sites (Kushwaha, Singh, Varghese, and Singh 2020; Pogorevich, 2020).

The use of social media by PRISA serves as a bridge to connect, share and engage with key stakeholders such as the PRPs in various organisations. Stakeholders affiliated with PRISA are spread across the Southern African region. It is difficult to communicate using traditional media, which is not only time-consuming but can also cause delays and incur financial costs for the institution. Organisations today generally use social media for marketing purposes, building reputation, brand promotion, and brand image. Researchers recommend that social media allow organisations to communicate with their internal and external stakeholders

and offer benefits concerning knowledge sharing and trust building (Cheng, Fu, and de Vreede, 2017; Tsimonis, Dimitriadis, and Omar, 2019). The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa can make use of these collaborative platforms to deliver continuous development programmes for remote practitioners. More so, as an organisation that promotes the common interests of PRPs and public relations best practices as well as dialogues with stakeholders, social media can be used to exchange ideas and experiences to develop the field of public relations. The use of social media by PRISA has become an important area to focus on as more practitioners who affiliate with the association are utilising social media in their workplace.

Social media has many functions and Marlowe *et al.* (2017) propose that the benefits of social network sites usage include media literacy, formal educational outcomes, informal education and learning, creativity, individual identity, and self-expression, strengthening social relationships, belonging, and collective identity. These authors affirm that social media can enable the building and strengthening of communities, civic and political participation, self-efficacy, and well-being. In terms of this research, the PRISA stakeholders who are affiliated PRPs may use social media because of the experiences, resources, and opportunities they find there.

The conversation and sharing functions of social media enable people to communicate and share content with other social media users (Kuruç and Opiyo, 2017). Researchers assert that various discussions and interactions on social media can be monitored and used to benefit an organisation, such as in averting a crisis and responding timeously (Pace, Buzzanca, and Fratocchi, 2016; Hagg, Dahinten, and Currie, 2018). Social media platforms rely on user-generated content and organisations must be both hands-on and responsive in managing posts that may impact their public image (Cartwright, Davies, and Archer-Brown, 2021). Social media sites have further provided users with the freedom to publish their grievances about organisations on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that have many followers. The posting of a negative review about an organisations' services can pose a threat to its reputation. To maintain the organisation's integrity and reputation, the organisation needs to ensure strategic responses. Organisations need to have measures in place to deal with such scenarios.

Nwokah and Aeenee (2017) further affirm that studies have highlighted that social media has negatively affected management by reducing productivity and creating a disturbance in the workplace. Despite the negative connotations linked to social media, organisations have embraced the use of social media and are finding ways to take advantage

of the benefits the platform offers. Even with the challenges presented by social media, organisations have been utilising online platforms to create and improve communication efficiency (Irbo and Mohammed, 2020; Evans, Bratton, and McKee, 2021).

The rapid growth and development of new media has brought about challenges and opportunities for organisations, such as keeping up to date with what is being posted by their stakeholders on online platforms and providing a suitable response timeously (Pace *et al.*, 2016; Swart, 2018). These challenges have created a growing demand for organisations to familiarise themselves with new media technology and adjust their communication strategies accordingly. The Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa faces this challenge as a communication management association. The use of social media in engaging with stakeholders is important and directly linked to the organisational aims and objectives of PRISA. Practitioners associated with PRISA are constantly looking at ways to improve communication with their respective stakeholders and the adoption of social media into their communication strategies.

Studies on the use of social media and the access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Africa focus primarily on developing societies (Poushter, Bishop, and Chwe, 2018; Hagg, Dahinten, and Currie, 2018). Bornman (2016) points out that South Africa is a developing country with several underprivileged communities with limited access to these ICTs. Sub-Saharan Africa is considered the least computerised region globally, leading to emerging studies that focus on the digital divide and the modernisation of African communities. This research is significant in that it offers recommendations to PRISA and other public relations and communications organisations on how to use social media to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisation.

Managers face several responsibilities which they need to perform, suggesting that more stakeholders should be employed to effectively monitor social media risks within an organisation (Juergens, 2013). It is becoming clear that more organisations are realising the various organisational opportunities presented by social media as opposed to the threats. Even though implementing social media policies is significant, policies alone are not enough. In addition to social media policies, organisations should train their employees, monitor use, and provide suitable protection for their companies' social media activities. Organisations need to consider that a single department cannot achieve this; the formulating of policies on the use of social media must involve all departments as social media involves all functions within an organisation.

A social media review is important for any organisation, regardless of the level of social media engagement. It is essential to note that reviewing social media is more than just evaluating the number of posts, likes, risks, and rewards. Organisations should place focus on strategically including social networks into the business strategy. A social media review can also indicate the benefits missed by not partaking in social media and can identify the training needs of employees.

The rapid growth of social media has pushed organisations to adopt it into their integrated communication strategies. Social media connects people with shared interests and backgrounds, making it easier for organisations to reach their audience faster, collaborate on projects, and exchange ideas and information (Chang and Hsiao, 2014; Icha, 2016). In the 21st century, the internet has singlehandedly provided organisations with the opportunity to reach a vast target audience and broadly gain attention in a short space of time. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter present a significant opportunity for organisations interested in gaining a competitive advantage while simultaneously building an online presence. Organisations need to invest in new ways to incorporate social media in their organisational communication strategy. Social media may be used as a vehicle to increase the visibility of a brand or campaign. Social media platform users create and share content that they find interesting, promoting word of mouth conversations among users. Social media is proliferating at a fast rate across the world and has become a trend prioritised in organisations today (Icha, 2016). However, simply establishing an online presence may not be satisfactory. Researchers have found that social media enables an organisation to communicate with stakeholders and allows for knowledge sharing (Ford and Mason, 2013) and a building of trust (Cheng *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly important for a communication industry organisation such as the PRISA, whose mission is to promote professionalism, responsibility, knowledge sharing, and best practices through training programmes, workshops, and development seminars, all of which can be communicated through social media.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory**

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) was established in 1974 to scrutinise media consumption and how the consumer uses it and the satisfaction it provides for users (Blumler and Katz, 1974). The UGT has its roots in communications literature and can be an important part of developing better measurement instruments for social media markets. As a result, this research applied the UGT to highlight the importance of social media in organisational communication. Karimi *et al.* (2014:54) debate that researchers are also using the UGT to provide a deeper explanation of why

social media networks have become increasingly interesting and attractive to users, what motivated the audience to join social networking sites and the gratification received by ongoing use. The theory provides a necessary framework in this research to understand PRISA’s need to leverage social media platforms to be able to engage in a dialogue with practitioners, network, share good practices, and be responsive to trends in the public relations industry.

The UGT is an integral theory of communication that explains why people use mass media and what needs are satisfied by media use. The emergence of social media gave new life and meaning to this theory. “Uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance to social media, but it has not been given prominence in the marketing and social media literature” (Whiting and Williams, 2013:363). This research applies UGT to explain and demonstrate the importance of UGT to social media; it further aims to identify the uses and gratifications that users (study participants – PRISA affiliated PRPs) receive from using social media in an organisational context and their views on PRISA’s use of social media. The rapid growth of social media has led to an interest among scholars, marketers, communications and public relations practitioners, economists, influencers, and socio-political institutions. The UGT looks at the many reasons why a user may share, create, or obtain information on the internet (Musa, Azmi, and Ismail, 2015; Eginli and Tas, 2018). In terms of this study, the researchers aim to understand the gratification obtained from using social media and why practitioners motivate for engagement in social media in their organisational context. The UGT framework has been tested and developed over the years and, in its original design, it consisted of key elements which are still relevant in society as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Five key elements of the uses and gratification theory

<b>Five key elements of UGT</b>	
1	The audience is acknowledged to be an active participant in mass media
2	Each audience member should decide which medium will best satisfy his or her needs for a specified use
3	Media channels compete to gratify the audience’s needs and cannot fulfil all human needs
4	Experiential data assessment can help control the aims of mass media users since users are self-aware enough to describe their motives regarding social media use sufficiently
5	Decisions about the cultural relevance of mass media should essentially be withheld to evade assumption on popular culture.

Source: Blumler and Katz (1974:76)

The UGT emphasises what people do with the media rather than what impact or influence the media has on the person (Katz *et al.*, 1974; Eginli and Tas, 2018). From this point of view, those using social media are active in selecting and using the media based on their needs. When users use the media for specific purposes, they get certain satisfaction (Eginli and Tas, 2018). In terms of PRISA, if valuable and developmental information, such as training and workshops are disseminated via Facebook and Twitter, practitioners will actively engage on the platform as it contributes to knowledge building and growth in the field. The UGT offers five supporting assumptions on media use that are still relevant today. The first assumption relates to communication behaviour which is driven and directed by a goal. The second proposes that users or people take on an active position when selecting a communication media to satisfy their needs. The theory's third assumption is that people define their communication reasons, intentions, and gratifications. The fourth involves the media's focus on providing communication styles and selecting and using media. The last assumption is that many social and psychological factors affect people when selecting communication mediums (Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin, 1998:252).

The universal nature and use of social media has changed society, and this transformation has attracted significant attention from both businesses and the academic world. The organisational implementation and use of social media is riddled with many challenges, sometimes leaving organisational managers frustrated when it does not accomplish the desired results. This emergent and complex nature of the social media phenomenon requires researchers to consider novel approaches when conducting social media research. As the number of organisational communication theorists engaging in research on the social media phenomenon increases, so too does the need to develop relevant and rigorous social media theories (Roberts, 2019). The UGT, rooted in "communications literature can be an integral part of developing better scales and measurement instruments" for those working with social media (Whiting and Williams, 2013:362).

The use of media by people can be explained in two ways. Firstly, based on content gratification and secondly based on process gratification - the experience of using media. Social media offers more content gratification as people can communicate and exchange ideas with others (McGuire, 1974; Eginli and Tas, 2018). In an organisational context, this can contribute to improving networking, partnerships, collaboration on projects, richer content, and a range of opportunities to enhance organisational development. A central reason for social media providing gratification to users, mainly in the working world, is that information can be acquired and exchanged immediately. More importantly, this exchange has no boundaries as it can be done globally (Ngcongong, 2016:16). In the

case of PRISA, members of the organisation can use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to engage in global best practices and interact with top practitioners worldwide. The application of the UGT to social media supports an understanding of the reasons users use social media. The data gathered will further provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of why users use social media, and these findings can contribute to organisations reflecting on the value it can add to its communication functions.

### **Methodological Approach**

The exploration and interpretation of perceptions on the use of social media in this study requires the use of a qualitative research method to gain an understanding of how social media can be used to improve and maintain effective organisational communication in communications and public relations organisations. Leavy (2017:124) suggests that qualitative methods enable the “robust” understanding of an area or phenomenon and unpack “the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, circumstances, people, and objects”. Qualitative research enables participants’ recollections and interpretations of lived experiences to create meaning (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019:149). This method was used to delve into and obtain information regarding the perceptions and practices of PRPs around the use and influence of social media. The qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to be actively involved in the research process and observe behaviour, responses, and emotions expressed by participants. It enhanced the quality of the data collected and, thus, the findings produced.

A study population comprises members or a collective of individuals who meet specific criteria required for the research investigation (Alvi, 2016). The population in this study was PRISA affiliated PRPs. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed to meet the objectives of the research. This type of sampling enabled the researchers to focus on specific characteristics of the population and, thereby, fulfil the study’s aims and objectives which was to analyse the influence of social media on organisational communication. In a non-probability convenience sample, subjects are usually selected based on their accessibility or by the researcher’s purposive personal judgement (Mugera, 2013).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Five in-depth interviews with PRISA affiliated members were facilitated. The participants in the study are qualified professionals who practise in the industry as PRPs, managers, lecturers, and academic managers. The interviews enabled a clear understanding of how PRISA makes use of social media in communicating with its publics or intended stakeholders. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to conduct face-to-face interviews

with predominantly open-ended questions to gain rich, in-depth data on the influences of social media on organisational communication.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data was transcribed verbatim using Microsoft (MS) Word. The data was coded, and the researcher was able to identify the emerging themes. The researcher employed NVIVO (version 11) which assisted in the organisation and categorisation of data. Transcribing the data was useful as it enabled a rich understanding of the participant's perspectives. Apart from an audio recording of the interviews, field notes were made during and after the interviews and were valuable, particularly while analysing and interpreting the data. This enabled the notating of initial thoughts and ideas on the data before the formal data analysis, as recommended by Nowell *et al.* (2017). "The process of qualitative data analysis and interpretation can best be represented by a spiral image, a data analysis spiral, in which the researcher moves in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (Creswell, 2013:182; Creswell, 2018). Data analysis included following a multi-step process: familiarising oneself with the data, reading and notating, coding the data, generating themes, reviewing the themes, and presenting the findings (Assarroudi, Nabavi, Armat, Ebadi, and Vaismoradi, 2018). Data was analysed using thematic content analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The structure of the questionnaire and rigour of the pre-testing ensured the internal validity and reliability of the data collected. Furthermore, participants were asked the same questions. These approaches ensured the reliability of data garnered. Data was assimilated with accuracy and consistency.

### **Delimitations/Limitations**

Interviews were conducted with PRISA affiliated members based in South Africa. Therefore, the study is limited to PRISA and cannot be generalised to other organisations using social media platforms to communicate with stakeholders.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research was granted ethical clearance by the Durban University of Technology (DUT), ethics protocol number FREC No.:/18FREC. In addition, gatekeeper's permission was received from the case study organisation and consent from participants was obtained. Participants' identities were kept anonymous, and pseudonyms were used in the discussion. For example, Interviewee 1 was given a name, followed by the

initial 'I' for interview and a number – Noncebo (I1), I1 indicating interviewee 1.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study used thematic content analysis as a method of identifying and organising patterns of meaning or themes. Thematic analysis enabled the creation of understanding and making sense of shared meanings and experiences within the context of the study. The findings of this study were deduced from in-depth interviews with PRPs affiliated with the case study organisation. The researcher used interactive, open-ended questions to obtain information regarding experiences and perceptions of affiliated practitioners on the influence of social media on organisational communication. The findings of this study are discussed under three themes.

#### **Theme One: Social Media as an Effective Communication Tool**

Social media has impacted how organisations communicate and has led to organisations revisiting how they communicate with their publics. Social media has introduced several communication platforms that are being used by stakeholders in their everyday lives, leading to an indirect influence on the overall organisational communication approach. Scholars have revealed that social media has proved to be fast and instant communication adapted by many people in society (Icha, 2016; Matali, 2018). As a result, practitioners should aim to develop and adapt to communication channels that are instant, efficient, and cost effective. Participant Noncebo (I1) in the structured in-depth interview expressed how feedback is valued in the work of PRPs and how social media enables real-time contact and engagement in a fast-paced environment: “It is about the effectiveness of the feedback and the immediacy of getting information, because sometimes you post something on an e-mail or website and it takes time to get a response”.

Noncebo (I1) further suggested that organisations such as PRISA should focus on employing a dedicated person who will communicate and respond instantaneously. This practitioner suggested how the organisation can use Facebook and Twitter platforms to engage in discussions on relevant industry issues. “PRISA should be more immediate, maybe be a conversation starter on issues that will benefit individuals and organisations in the industry”.

Noncebo’s (I1) view is noteworthy as PRISA is a leading public relation’s professional body, expected to foster the professionalisation of public relations practice in Southern Africa. One of the ways it can effectively carry out its responsibilities is through using social media to host conversations and share fresh, current, regular information to

effectively communicate with its key publics and promote best practice in the industry.

Lilli-Ann (I5) explained that one needs to embrace technology mainly when working in a communications environment.

“We are in the fourth industrial revolution, some of us are told that we are beyond the fourth industrial revolution. We need to advance to the latest modes of communication...the greatest form of communication [is] happening in an environment which is ostensibly understood to be a networking environment and public relations practitioners’ concern is within the nature of the function.” Lilli-Ann (I5).

Social media brings about many opportunities and advantages for users and organisations. In responding to PRISA’s engagement on its Facebook and Twitter accounts, Noncebo (I1) explained that: “We need to take note that in this age, we cannot just be unwilling subjects of technology we need to engage with it critically”. Lilli-Ann (I5) further explained that “There are many disciplines using the social media platforms on a more consistent and structured basis... personnel should be assigned to the systematic monitoring of trends and the rapid growth of the industrial revolution”.

PRISA is well positioned to spearhead the creation of digital or online communities to discuss, debate, share ideas and experiences. This can raise the profile of PRISA and contribute to the body gaining support as well as promoting the development of online communities in the industry. These participants have highlighted the need for the case study organisation to take a more active stance in engaging in the online space.

### **Theme Two: Social Media’s Role in Building Organisational Relationships**

Organisations use PRPs to build and maintain relationships with specific audiences or key publics. As affirmed by social science researchers, public relations efforts are not about control; they focus on building and maintaining professional relationships and communication between stakeholders and the organisation (Skinner *et al.*, 2016; Hiscock, 2019) for mutual understanding, growth, and development. It is further affirmed by Evans, Twomey, and Talan (2011:1) that the growth and speed of social media has rendered public relations practices as “a constant dialogue between an organisation and its audience.” Noncebo (I1) mentioned PRISA’s ability to reach large audiences through social media: “PRISA can reach a lot of people as they have a wide reach and can make a difference”. Noncebo (I1) states that PRISA’s website is more effective in information sharing than its social media accounts. This suggests that despite its wide reach, the organisation is not optimally using online platforms such as its

Facebook and Twitter accounts. For an organisation to ultimately make use of social media in building harmonious relationships, it must ensure that it invests both time and resources on online communication. Building an online presence is essential for organisations aiming to build relationships with stakeholders who embrace online platforms. A strong online presence will work to the advantage of any organisation that utilises social media to achieve a competitive advantage and build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Participant Joe (I4) noted that PRISA ought to do more in terms of using social media to develop strategic relationships with stakeholders: “social media is there to grow relations between the organisation and the public. PRISA has not done that yet... They should be spearheading social media.” Joe’s comment affirms that as a leading communications body the organisation should drive social media initiatives.

Social media has enabled PRPs to gain access to latest information in the field, engage, receive instantaneous feedback, and give voice to their ideas concurrently. Ashley (I2) expressed that “through the use of social media we get to know what is happening and trending”. This is supported by Joe (I4) who highlighted that “PRISA is not there as an institute, but they could serve as a networking platform for people in the industry”. In this case, it is evident from participants that engagement is important and social media has presented the ability to network and build key partnerships. Some practitioners are not convinced that PRISA makes full use of social media. Kaya (I3) expressed that PRISA needs to adapt to technology shifts and the changing nature of the public sphere: “I feel like they are old fashioned and they not keeping up with the trend so I’m not sure from my opinion if they are actually doing what they supposed to be doing when it comes to building and maintaining relationships.”

To effectively reach key publics, organisations need to be active on platforms that their key publics use. Commenting on how the use of social media platforms has influenced organisational communication, Sam (I5) explains “there are multiplicity of platforms ...that has influenced [PRISA] to be more innovative and more flexible in the modes of communication and more alert to the management of and control of social media as a platform profiling its own agenda.”

Ashley (I2) confirmed using Facebook to communicate with PRISA: “social media is easily accessible...most young practitioners, like myself, spend their time using social media in their interaction.” If PRISA is to build continuous relations with the younger generation of PRPs, then it needs to understand the communication modes and incorporate these in its communication strategy. Organisations need to build their online presence

to engage in information exchange and promote sharing experiences and ideas.

### **Theme Three: Relevant and Responsive Public Relations**

Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have contributed to a shift in communication and how information is consumed and shared in organisations. Social science researchers maintain that social media influences how information in organisations is obtained and exchanged and how ideas are shared and ultimately contribute to the survival of many organisations (Skinner *et al.*, 2016; Xie, 2018). Social media has become a core of society's communication cycle and impacts how organisations communicate with their publics (Badea, 2014; Kjaerulff, 2015). PRISA has made use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with its intended stakeholders, albeit minimally. However, their approach from the data gathered shows that more should be done to focus on building mutual participation and feedback for effective communication. Kaya (I3) suggests that "PRISA should be more interactive, shoot more videos, go live more...that can touch the youth...short videos to be more hands on." Lilli-Ann (I5) further suggests that "they can use social media to share information and experiences amongst practitioners". This comment resonates with comments presented in theme two, highlighting the need for PRISA to adapt to changes in the social media world and play a more active and visible role in reaching its key publics.

Kaya (I3) suggested making use of more interactive content to appeal to younger users. Facebook, for example, has many interactive modes that should be employed by PRISA to be more visible, and these mediums should be used to stimulate participation on social media and enhance organisational communication. Lilli-Ann (I5) further advised that discussion forums will help PRISA take up its position as a leading communications body in Africa: "To gain information...from like-minded practitioners and also provide networking opportunities as an information gathering practice". Joe (I4) emphasised that "they could be using the communication tool to really build relationships.... social media is the way to go to have an impact in one's industry." Lilli-Ann (I5) suggested that for PRISA to be more effective in their quest to operate on social media, they should focus on "writing and disseminating information that ensures that participants of PRISA are well informed". Lilli-Ann (I5) affirms the importance of PRISA adapting to changes in the social media environment to remain relevant and responsive. She further suggested the value of monitoring and reviewing social media platforms to ensure efficient use of social media in organisational communication.

## **Recommendations**

This study aimed to offer ways to assist organisations in navigating through the fast-paced landscape of social media and to improve and maintain social media functions strategically within their organisations. The effective use of social media by a Southern African communications body such as the PRISA will enable PRPs in the region to connect, share, collaborate, engage in dialogues, and build and sustain relationships. Using its Facebook and Twitter platforms could enable the exchange of mutual experiences, a sense of connectedness in the industry and building of healthy organisational relationships. Participants proposed that social media is a unique environment that enables effective communication with stakeholders and allows for sustained interactions and as a result should be nurtured. Relatedly, organisations need to purposefully structure themselves and manage their resources to respond to the opportunities of engagement in online contexts. Key recommendations include:

**Building an online presence** - Time and resources should be invested to build and maintain an online presence to enable PRPs to learn from each other and to network and become more confident in using social media platforms.

**Training and development** - PRPs need to be trained to instil confidence and understanding of social media use. Understanding social media and the accompanying communication practices, not just the technology, is important for practitioners in embracing opportunities and mitigating risks when cultivating relationships online (Macnamara, 2014).

**Social media policy, monitoring, and review** - Social media policies must be implemented. A social media review is important for any organisation, regardless of the level of social media engagement.

**Younger generation to spearhead social meeting activity** - The younger generation of PRPs should be encouraged to spearhead social media initiatives as this will ensure that the needs of younger publics are met.

## **Conclusion**

Social media has spurred a new era of global communication and is undoubtedly reshaping communication in organisations. This requires organisations to review their strategies to be responsive to stakeholders' needs. This study brings new perspectives on how social media can be incorporated into organisational communication strategies and serves as a knowledge base for public relations and communications organisations to understand the influence of social media on organisational communication.

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