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Examining the impact of digital media on PR practitioners' capacity to network and build stakeholder relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic

by

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Declaration

I, Jade Otto, declare that the contents of this dissertation represent my unaided work and that the dissertation has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Signed: Jade Otto **Date: 12 December 2021**

Abstract

This study investigates PR practitioners' capacity to build stakeholder relations during the COVID-19 pandemic and is guided by the fact that most PR practitioners were compelled to work remotely during the government-imposed lockdown. This qualitative research seeks to understand how PR practitioners were able to connect and network with their stakeholders using social media and other new media tools with little or no face-to-face contact throughout the pandemic. Through thematic analysis, it provides answers to the question: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?*". This study also explores the importance of in-person contact in an industry which is heavily reliant on face-to-face contact for engagement. The findings show PR practitioners could build stakeholder relations online, by using new media tools and social media to connect with their stakeholders. The findings also show that most PR practitioners are not capitalising on social media for two-way or dialogical communication online to build new or to sustain existing stakeholder relationships. A direct consequence of little or no physical interaction in the PR industry made it impossible for PR practitioners to network. It is, however, clear that new ways of building relationships online are possible, but a phasing out of the traditional means of face-to-face engagement is not likely. Instead, a hybrid model of building stakeholder relations is more probable. Further research is recommended to include an evaluation of a far wider analysis of various forms of social media for networking and stakeholder engagement online. In addition, it is recommended that a large-scale survey be conducted among all members of the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) for a more widespread finding on the topic.

Keywords: Stakeholders, networking, social media, engagement, COVID-19 pandemic

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Dedication

I dedicate this body of work to my loving husband, Brent, and our first child conceived and born during this Master's journey.

> My love, I wish to thank you for believing in me, the many hours you sacrificed and all the late-night snacks and cups of tea.
>
> My boy, Myles Otto, thank you for being so good in mommy's tummy throughout my pregnancy. I love you forever.

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Clarification of basic terms and concepts

Term	Definition
Engagement	"...the various communication practices, processes and actions that an organisation (or project team) must perform to involve stakeholders to secure their involvement and commitment, or reduce their indifference or hostility" (Bourne, 2016:433).
Essential services	Health workers, police "officers, traffic officers, military medical personnel, those involved in the production, distribution and supply of food and basic goods, essential banking services, the maintenance of power, water and telecommunications services, laboratory services, and the provision of medical and hygiene products" (Ramaphosa, 2020:1).
Lockdown	Prohibition of movement which prevented people from leaving "their homes except under strictly controlled circumstances, such as seeking medical care, buying food, medicine, and other supplies, or collecting a social grant" (Ramaphosa, 2020:1).
Networking	"…the patterns of contact that are created by the flow of messages among communicators through time and space" (Monge & Contractor, 2003:3).
Social distancing	Prohibition of "contact with other people by staying home" and remaining at least 1 meter apart from other people in "public places, cancelling all social events", and the mandatory wearing of masks in public (Ramaphosa, 2020:1; 2021:1).
Social media	"Web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organisations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible" (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017:17).
Stakeholders	"Loaded term now widely used to mean someone who has a real or psychological 'stake' in an organisation: used to include anyone who has significant dealings with it, such as customers, employees, suppliers, distributors, joint venture partners, the local community, bankers and shareholders" (Vinten, 2000:377).

List of acronyms and abbreviations

Abbreviation/Acronym	Definition
ANT	Actor-Network Theory: The continuous connections made by people and machines or objects (Dankert, 2011).
CMC	Computer-mediated communication: “a process where messages are electronically transferred from a sender to one or more recipient(s), both in synchronous (in real time) and in asynchronous (independent from time and place) settings” (Opdenakker, 2006:1).
COVID-19	“A communicable respiratory disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus that causes illness in humans” (Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021:1).

Chapter 1

Introduction

At the onset of 2020, a novel coronavirus known as, COVID-19, engulfed the world, having a dire impact on the health of people and businesses. The far-reaching implications necessitated a change in the way people went about their personal and professional lives. Many industries were affected and had to adapt to a new way of conducting their daily operations. It included a greater reliance on digital technologies to ensure businesses stayed afloat, remained relevant and contacted their most valued stakeholders despite social distancing.

This study examines the impact of digital media on PR practitioners' capacity to network and build stakeholder relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also investigates how PR practices and techniques changed, given the South African government-imposed lockdown, and how effective the use of social media and other new media tools were in maintaining existing and building new stakeholder relationships. Through the lens of stakeholder and network theory, the researcher explores how the current social media communication paradigm can best serve organisational PR while working remotely during a pandemic.

As Grunig (2009:1) states, for the PR industry to fully use digital media, it needs to reinstitutionalise itself "as a behavioural, strategic management paradigm rather than as a symbolic, interpretive paradigm". Employing the views of Daymon and Holloway (2010), this research will adopt a qualitative methodology, which enables the researcher to get an in-depth and rich understanding of individual experiences from each interviewed respondent.

1.2. Background to the research problem

The context of this study is engagement in PR practice with a particular focus on the factors that affected this engagement under the backdrop of a global pandemic. In December 2019, an influenza-like respiratory virus known as the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV, or COVID-19) was first spotted in Wuhan – the transport hub of China. The strain of the virus spread across China and soon overtook the world (Zhu, Wei & Niu, 2020). By 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus an international health emergency. As of 10 March 2021, more than 117 million people worldwide were infected with COVID-19, and 2.6 million people died of the virus. The rate of infection far exceeded recent flu-like outbreaks, such as that of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) (Zhu et al., 2020).

In this study, the researcher focuses on South Africa, which saw its first confirmed COVID-19 infection on 5 March 2020. A 38-year-old man who had travelled from Italy was infected (Mkhize, 2020). Local infections increased, and within two weeks, President Cyril Ramaphosa instituted a national state of disaster. Ten days later, a 21-day nationwide lockdown, curtailing the movement of people except for essential services workers, was imposed (Ramaphosa, 2020). The nationwide lockdown, which was extended several times, aimed to reduce the spread of the virus by enforcing social distancing and mandatory wearing of masks when in public (Ramaphosa, 2021). Consequently, all people-oriented industries, including PR, which conventionally relied on physical contact and engagement with its stakeholders, had to adapt rapidly. The lockdown further marginalised businesses that were not tech-savvy (Psaropoulos, 2020) and necessitated the urgent need for new media tools to keep businesses open and maintain contact with stakeholders.

If COVID-19 shook the fundamentals upon which PR is built – people and relations – it is essential to examine the impact COVID-19 has had on the traditional way PR practitioners build relationships. The well-known four models of corporate communication, as identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984), is an accurate description of the industry in practice today (Steyn, 2002b; Theaker, 2020). These models include publicity, information, two-way asymmetrical persuasion, and two-way symmetrical communication. According to Steyn (2002b), the first three models encompass the manipulation of stakeholders. Conversely, the two-way symmetrical model is geared towards negotiation and dialogue for mutual benefit. Theaker (2020:13) takes the argument further saying the models "suggest different approaches to communication – one-way and two-way – that reflect the relationship between the communicating parties".

Hunter (2020) explains the new paradigm for PR has shifted from manipulating stakeholders with messages to initiating, building, nurturing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. As far back as 1999, Hutton stated that PR involves the strategic management of relationships, that PR roles and functions change as the situation changes, and that the tools utilised in managing these relationships were also situation-specific. Therefore, during the pandemic, the situation had changed for nearly all industries (Herath & Herath, 2020; Kodama, 2020), including PR, which suddenly had to rely on web-based applications to stay in contact with their stakeholders (Camilleri, 2021). There was a significant upsurge in the use of social media to facilitate two-way communication and doing so made their stakeholders "feel valued, recognised and cared for" (Camilleri, 2021:16). Camilleri (2021) goes further to say while digital media provided a host of new opportunities for stakeholder engagement, it took some adjusting to adapt to the new way of executing their duties. The literature review will look at how PR practices changed since the onset of COVID-19, the relevance of stakeholder and network theories and the use of new media tools and social media in modern-day PR.

1.3. Statement of the research problem

The opportunities associated with two-way communication or stakeholder engagement online to build relationships is evident from the literature (Aichner, Grunfelder, Maurer & Jegeni, 2020; Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021; Grunig, 2009; Johann, Wolf & Godulla, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2021; Komodromos, 2016; Morenoa, Navarroa, Tenchb, & Zerfassc, 2015; Uysal & Yang, 2013). Yet, the literature shows, some PR practitioners were underutilising digital technology for dialogue in PR practice, and instead using it as a "corporate showcase" of their work (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021:26). In 2009, Grunig stated new media provided the PR industry with the means to interact globally and strategically. Still, PR practitioners were not making full use of it (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021; Grunig, 2009). Grunig

(2009), highlighted that PR practitioners were using social media as a "dumping ground" for their key messages instead of a means to interact with their stakeholders. Social media is more relevant than ever as it is a more "participatory communication model based on interaction and dialogue" (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021:16).

Similarly, Shin, Pang and Kim (2015) find that international organisations were not capitalising on the potential of online media for two-way communication. Instead, websites, like Facebook and Twitter are used more for information dissemination and not user engagement. The authors propose future research around tools used to encourage stakeholder feedback. In addition, Lovejoy, Waters and Saxton (2012) found that most organisations were underutilising technology to cultivate relationships. Taking the argument further, Kent and Taylor (2021) argue that social media should be treated as the genesis of social debate and thereafter encourage further interaction offline such as face-to-face engagement.

Therefore, with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became pertinent to examine stakeholder engagement in PR and whether it was used for two-way communication or as a "corporate showcase". COVID-19 further compelled PR practitioners to rapidly adapt the way they build stakeholder relationships from a traditional face-to-face environment to a greater dependency on digital technology for networking. The underutilisation of digital technology in professional relationship-building is explored to establish why it is the case, and what lessons can be learnt from the reliance on face-to-face interactions. The PR industry can benefit from a better understanding of building new and nurturing existing professional relationships while working remotely, given the lack of physical stakeholder connection during a pandemic.

1.4. Research questions

The main question underpinning this research is: How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?

To address the main question, the following sub-questions are presented:

- What effect does little or no face-to-face interaction have on stakeholder relations in the PR industry?
- How was technology used as a tool for networking and stakeholder engagement in PR practice?
- To what extent did PR practitioners use social media for engagement and/or two-way communication?

1.5. Aim and objectives

The primary aim of this study is to determine the nature of the communicative relationship between PR practitioners and their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic as relationships between stakeholders is at the centre of PR. To achieve the aim, the following objectives are proposed:

- Establish some of the immediate social and professional effects of less face-to-face interaction from the perspective of PR practitioners, as traditionally, stakeholder contact takes place in-person.

- Establish which (digital) tools and techniques are used in the context of less face-to-face interaction given the restrictions of stakeholder contact during lockdown.
- Determine the preferred ways of interacting on the part of PR based on their experience before and during the pandemic.
- Determine the effectiveness of new modes of relationship-building practitioners to establish whether technology can be used as a replacement for in-person contact.

1.6. Research design and methodology: overview

This study is guided by a qualitative research design. At the core of PR is relationships and making connections with stakeholders. Daymon and Holloway (2010) suggest qualitative research allows the researcher to immerse themself in the information to get an in-depth perspective of the world according to the respondent, as opposed to quantitative research where the researcher is "detached and operates from a distance" (Daymon & Holloway, 2010:8). Similarly, Michaelson and Stacks (2014:95) state: "In essence, qualitative research examines opinions and ideas in-depth using the language of a small sample of individuals to explain their representative thoughts, ideas, and reactions to concepts".

Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Michaelson & Stacks, 2014), is used in this study. Non-probability sampling is usually undertaken when there are "speciality populations" and are hard to reach (Michaelson & Stacks, 2014:179). Convenience sampling is used because respondents are easily accessible, have limited time, and are more cost-effective (Michaelson & Stacks, 2014). In this instance, PR practitioners are specialists in their field and may be hard to reach, given the implications of the national lockdown. Here, a small sample of six selected PR practitioners will provide a glimpse into what they experienced as individuals and not that of the entire industry. Daymon and Holloway (2010:5) argue that qualitative research aims to explore the meaning and how relationships are formed from the respondent's perspective. This is a critical factor as this research seeks to understand how PR practitioners adapted to the changes around them, and whether their understanding of the traditional means of networking is still viable.

To collect the data, each respondent was asked whether they prefer a face-to-face setting or a virtual one-on-one in-depth interview. An interview guide in the form of a set of questions was used as a data collection instrument. Given the nature of this study, each of the participants opted to do virtual interviews. This meant there was no need to complete the mandatory COVID-19 pre-screening forms, wear a mask, sanitise or maintain social distancing in line with COVID-19 protocols (Higher Health and Universities South Africa [USAf], 2021). The interviews were conducted during a time when South Africa was still under national lockdown and contact was restricted (Higher Health & USAf, 2021). An advantage of a virtual setting for the interviews meant neither the researcher or participant needed to wear a facemask as wearing one would have hindered observing facial expressions when responding to questions and made it difficult to hear what was being said.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. McKee (2003) states that textual analysis enables the researcher to gather and analyse data, reflecting how respondents see the world and how they fit into it. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) state that textual analysis enables the researcher to describe and interpret the recorded or visual message. There are two categories of messages: 1) transcripts and 2) outputs from the respondents. All six interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis with the view to find common threads, exact matches and whether the information is similar.

Braun and Clarke (2006:6) state that thematic analysis helps the researcher in "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data". As Neuendorf (2019) explained, these patterns or codes are developed by the researcher as themes emerge from the data. Neuendorf (2019:213) suggests that thematic analysis aims to "develop a story from the texts of interest…this may construct a codebook".

1.7. Delineation of the research

This study is limited to PR practitioners who hold the most senior communication management positions in their respective organisations and to practitioners who live and work in Cape Town, Western Cape. An essential aspect of this study is that it only includes PR practitioners who worked remotely and used social media and virtual tools to carry out their daily tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.8. Expected outcomes, results, and contributions of the research

Against the backdrop of stakeholder and network theory and the evolution of technology, this study may be particularly useful for PR practitioners, students, and academics, as it will enable them to better understand how the new social media PR communication paradigm can best serve organisational PR while working remotely during a global pandemic. This research may reveal new techniques for the PR industry and enable practitioners to adapt quickly in a crisis and incorporate social media and virtual tools when networking and building stakeholder relationships. These may enable an integrated approach to stakeholder relations that does not forego physical interaction but creates a new inclusive model of building relationships both face-to-face and virtually.

1.9. Thesis outline

This thesis will consist of five chapters as explained in Table 1.

Chapter 1 presents an introduction, background, and context of the study.

Chapter 2 consists of the literature review.

Chapter 3 is an overview of the research methodology undertaken.

Chapter 4 presents the findings gathered from the analysis of the in-depth interviews with the respondents.

Chapter 5 summarises the research, draws conclusions and makes recommendations for further study.

Table 1. Outline of chapters.

Chapter	Focus	Overview
Chapter 1	Introduction, background and context	This chapter presents the research context, sets the scene of the global pandemic and what it means for PR practitioners in South Africa. The research aims and objectives are outlined, and a summary of the research design is given.
Chapter 2	Literature review	An outline of the existing body of knowledge on the topic is given and what that means for the current research. This includes current trends in stakeholder and network theory, and particularly the use of technological tools in PR during the pandemic.
Chapter 3	Research methodology	This chapter details the use of qualitative research methodology, the rationale for the data collection instruments used and the sampling method chosen.
Chapter 4	Formulation and analysis of results	Using thematic analysis, the results obtained in this study from the one-on-one interviews are formulated to determine how effective digital technology was in building stakeholder relations via the internet and social media. Participants' social media accounts are also analysed to determine whether it is used for dialogue.
Chapter 5	Summary of research, conclusions, and recommendations	This chapter concludes the study and establishes whether the main research question and aims and objectives were answered. It also presents limitations and recommendations for future study.

1.10. Chapter summary

This chapter outlined the context of the research, expressed the background to the research problem, the main research questions as well as the sub-research questions. It also provided a preliminary literature review and detailed the research methodology used which includes virtual interviews and an analysis of the participants' social media accounts. It laid the groundwork to answer the research question: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?"*

Chapter 2 reviews the literature pertaining to stakeholder and network theory, face-to-face relationship-building in PR and internet-based relationship-building in the industry. Finally, it investigates social media and new media tools for networking and social media as a participatory model.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework and literature review

This study addresses the question: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?"* Two theories underpin this research, namely stakeholder theory and network theory. The researcher also discusses face-to-face relationship-building as well as computer-mediated relationship-building in the PR industry. The impact of COVID-19 on stakeholders and PR practitioners' ability to network is also discussed. The evolution of PR roles is particularly relevant as it details the type of PR practitioner and how that practitioner's roles and responsibilities have evolved, particularly with the advent of online media, social media and given that PR departments have dwindled. This may explain an overlap in PR duties which will be discussed later.

2.1. Theoretical framework: Stakeholder Theory

This study is guided by stakeholder theory and network theory and how the two theories are intertwined in the work of modern-day PR. Organisations are complex and require several role-players to ensure its success. One essential group of role-player is its stakeholders. As far back as 1984, Freeman stated a stakeholder is a person or grouping who has the ability to influence or be influenced by an organisation and its goals. Vinten (2000) described it as someone who has "stake" in the organisation such as customers, employees, suppliers, distributors, society, and shareholders, with Lock (2019:3) labelling stakeholder theory as "corporate-centric". Goodijk (2003) suggests organisations cannot ignore the feelings, perceptions and pressures from stakeholders as their behaviour may adversely affect the organisation. Instead, management needs to be strategic about the relationships it builds with different stakeholders.

According to Friedman and Miles (2002), PR practitioners need to examine why different stakeholders influence organisations differently, why some stakeholders have more influence, and why the organisation-stakeholder relationship changes. The strategy-making process starts by learning and gaining insight from within the organisation, the market, and then plotting a way forward (Mintzberg,1994). According to Steyn and Puth (2000), as well as Baltussen, Jansen and Bijlmakers, (2018) environmental analysis and issues tracking from employees, management, the product, and other stakeholders, can be used as intelligence for executive management. Okazaki, Plangger, Roulet and Menéndez (2020) put it differently, saying stakeholder communication occurs internally and externally with the aim of creating mutually beneficial gains for both the organisation and stakeholder.

Therefore, it makes strategic business sense for organisations to adopt a clear stakeholder approach. Each stakeholder, such as clients, employees, and interest groups, is different and requires a different communication approach when trying to manage their interests and that of the organisation. In this study, the researcher explores whether there was a difference in how PR practitioners strengthened their relationships with their stakeholders online during the pandemic, compared to traditional face-to-face interaction before COVID-19.

2.1.1. Stakeholder salience

Constantly evaluating the strength of the relationship with each stakeholder is another crucial aspect of stakeholder theory (Steyn, 2004). This is supported by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), who contributed to the theory of how to identify stakeholders and evaluate why certain stakeholders receive more attention and are regarded in higher esteem by managers than others. These attributes, the authors describe as: “the stakeholder's power to influence the firm, the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the firm” (Mitchell et. al., 1997:854). PR practitioners should also constantly interact and evaluate their relationships with their respective stakeholders, especially, as the behaviour of each stakeholder and the strength of its influence on operations, investments and public opinion can change at any time, impacting the success of the organisation.

During the pandemic, stakeholders’ salience may have changed given the use and access to social media and virtual conferencing. The researcher will explore whether there was a change in the relationship of specific stakeholders who were on the periphery of the organisation, but the use of digital technology may have brought them closer to each other and improved or worsened their relationship.

2.1.2. Stakeholders and COVID-19

Van der Wal (2020) highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement during a crisis and reaffirms how challenging it can be against the backdrop of COVID-19. According to Van der Wal (2020), the ongoing crisis, forced organisations to be creative and put measures in place to garner long-term stakeholder buy-in. Based on his research, country-unique campaigns such as “Beating Corona together” (in the Netherlands), “Let’s all do our Part” (in Singapore), and “Stay at Home, Save Lives, and Protect the NHS” (in the United Kingdom), were online campaigns used to build and maintain stakeholder relations. These deliberate PR campaigns aimed to evoke a “sense of belonging, positive association with sometimes competing stakeholders”, levelling the playing field for new stakeholder relationships to be formed (Van der Wal, 2020:8).

Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010) state that PR practitioners need to seek new communication channels through which to engage with stakeholders, because if it is not done, organisations may lag and fall into the dangerous space of being irrelevant. This pandemic is likely to reveal which organisations thrived through adversity and which lagged or were resistant to change.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Network Theory

In addition to stakeholder theory, it is important to understand the network theory and how it is applied to PR. In the 1980s, Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law studied how human and non-human, elements, in nature and technology, coexist (Czarniawska, 2006), and the network theory was born. Dankert (2011) interpreted it as the actor-network theory (ANT) which focuses on the continuous connections made by people and machines or objects. Taking it further, O’Connor and Shumate (2018) described network theory as a “web of mutual relationships” which comprises many messages, many channels, and many partners.

Gregory (2000) put it differently, stating the network theory is at play via the internet as each user may have varying degrees of “agency”. This “agency” refers to the power to influence, as is the case in stakeholder theory explained above in section 2.1.1. Gregory (2000) also draws correlations between systems theory in PR and network theory as the environment is always evolving and affecting the organisation. However, unlike systems theory where the organisation is at the centre, in network theory, the position of the organisation can change depending on the strength of its stakeholders, meaning it is now simply part of an interwoven group of interactions. Technology and social media, by implication, restricts PR practitioners’ ability to control messages.

Adding to network theory, Phillips (2006) states that relationships can extend their sphere of influence through patterns of linkages. This means as relationships are cultivated, the strength of the linkages grow and can extend to further potential linkages for the organisation. Similarly, if there is a breakdown in a stakeholder relationship, it can adversely affect other stakeholder relationships, particularly when it comes to reputation management.

2.2.1. Networking and PR

In PR, networking refers to building integrated communities among an organisation’s stakeholders (Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015). PR practitioners, knowingly or unknowingly practise network theory daily. The multi-dimensional nature of their job involves making and remaking connections with humans and inanimate objects, such as the world wide web, their computers or laptops and cell phones. O’Connor and Shumate (2018) point out that digital advancements have rapidly expanded channels and the speed through which messages flow. This is the case with social media, where comments and actions of little significance can quickly escalate and become a crisis with an uncontrollable life of its own. Terms such as “data techniques”, “data analytics” and “geo-location” are more common as PR practitioners use technology to target their audience with stakeholder-specific content and can tell PR practitioners what happened to their messages once they were transmitted.

Uysal and Yang (2013:461) say new media has enabled an interactive dimension of communication from just one-way to “horizontal or vertical networks of interaction, both local and global, at any given times. These networks enable a new communication realm”.

2.2.2 Networking with stakeholders during COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has forced organisations to make unique connections and broaden their networks, according to Van der Wal (2020). For example, when it is business as usual, the same connections are made, but in a crisis, a communication manager needs to collaborate with other businesses, organisations, and NGOs to form new stakeholder networks. Working from home is also touted as the new reality, but Castells (1996) noted that the “new” trend was in fact not new. Instead, all it required was a flexible working environment, which is evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exactly which PR practitioners used social media and new media tools to network during the COVID-19 pandemic could shed light on the need for smarter technologies to combat the need for physical interaction to network.

2.3. Face-to-face relationship-building in PR

PR is centred on the interaction between publics (stakeholders) and relationships (Ledingham, 2003; Lock, 2019). This research investigates how relationship-building can take place with little or no face-to-face interaction, especially as PR has its roots in social sciences (Steyn & Everett, 2009). As Parnell, Widdop, Bond and Wilson (2020) put it, COVID-19 has exposed the society we have built over centuries – a society that is inherently social, interdependent on infrastructural architecture and symbolic gatherings. The question therefore is, how do we adapt without these generational social constructs?

According to Ean (2010), face-to-face communication is perceived to be a more effective form of communication compared to computer-mediated communication (CMC). The internet has enabled CMC, which takes place via several networks as it allows users to utilise several forms of media to engage. In her study, Ean (2010) finds that while CMC may be the most frequently used mode of communication, it was not participants' preferred means of conversing. A few of the reasons included that face-to-face interaction allows for people to hear and observe non-verbal communication, it is more direct, and reactions are instant. Therefore, Ean (2010) suggests face-to-face communication still plays a vital role, and a need exists to examine how to best utilise technology in organisational communications.

However, Valentini (2015) argues that digital advancements and social media have altered relational practises and how people communicate interpersonally. This becomes apparent because, with online interaction, "physical presence is no longer a precondition for interpersonal communication" (Valentini, 2015:172). Valentini (2015:172-174) further argues that while social media has many benefits for online communication, it "limits direct human-to-human relations" and "undermines other, non-social media-related initiatives that are more effective in nurturing relationships".

2.4. Social media and new media tools for networking

From the literature it emerged how social media and other new media technology can be used as a new tool of trade for the industry. DiStaso, McCorkindale and Wright (2011) are of the view the more popular social media is becoming, the greater the changes to PR practice. The authors say social media makes it possible for PR practitioners to interact with many stakeholders. But to ensure effective dialogue in the social media realm, organisations need to be where their stakeholders are to avoid being spoken about, without their knowledge, which could be detrimental to the organisation and its brand.

Himelboim, Golan, Moon and Suto (2014) propose that relationship-building in PR via social media is worth exploring as it encourages conversation between the organisation, its stakeholders, and new interested parties, and in doing so, creates a network structure. This structure focuses on patterns and links between each participating stakeholder, enabling the formation of symbiotic relationships in the virtual realm (Himelboim et al., 2014).

Social media is a fundamental aspect of daily living, and it allows people, groups of people and organisations to interact and build a new society virtually (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016). These communities can “create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016:17, 23). Social media has taken PR practice to a new level as practitioners can easily reach out to their stakeholders, have a conversation but also enhance media relationships (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008).

According to Johann, Wolf and Godulla (2021), social media has drastically changed the way organisations communicate with their stakeholders, with the goal posts shifting from output (the number of followers, likes, shares and comments) to outcome (user interaction). This user engagement must be examined to determine whether the communication between the organisation and its stakeholder was successful and whether it is aligned to the organisation’s goals and objectives. Johann, Wolf and Godulla (2021) go further to say that Facebook is one type of social media which enables organisations to engage with its stakeholders, delving deeper into online PR practice. Their study found that Facebook can be useful as an interactive communication tool for building and maintaining relationships in the industry.

2.4.1. Social media as a participatory model

Social media allows stakeholders to comment, ask questions, give feedback, and get near-immediate responses to their queries. One of the key features of social media for organisations is that it creates and enabling environment for a conversation to take place (Aichner et al., 2020). This new media tool is beneficial for both the organisation and the stakeholder as the organisation can ensure stakeholders receive the correct information quickly and the stakeholder feels he or she is being heard. The correct use of social media can also be a competitive advantage for organisations who meet their stakeholders where they are (Aichner et al., 2020).

While the definition of social media varies from simple to overly complex, one common thread is its ability to connect people (Aichner et al., 2020). Morgan and Wilk (2021:2) concur, stating social media changed the conversation, describing it as a “many-to-many interactive form of public communication”. In a time of crisis, social media users direct and even control the conversation online, according to Morgan and Wilk (2021). The authors believe PR practitioners must therefore get a better understanding of their online audience and stakeholder behaviour when developing communication strategies. By understanding their social media stakeholders’ feedback, “organisations will be better equipped to protect their brands, specifically by developing more effective and relevant crisis communication strategies”, (Morgan & Wilk, 2021:1). In terms of monitoring, Morgan and Wilk (2021:7) propose that PR practitioners perform “social media listening" to consider user activity and what impact it has on the organisation.

Interestingly, Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2021) found that some organisations have little interest in dialogical communication on Facebook for two reasons; one, the lack of existing need to interact and two, the low level of interaction itself. To combat this, organisations must review their social media strategies and create one that is dialogic in nature (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021). Social media is more relevant than ever as it is a more “participatory communication model based on interaction and dialogue” (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021:16).

Facebook is suitable for dialogical communication as it enables two-way communication via its comment portal, immediacy, live events, and videos. But to capitalise on the benefits of this social media form for dialogue there needs to be active engagement from the organisation (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021). According to Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2021), the question arises: does the interaction generate a response, and is the content of such a nature that it garners a desire to engage? PR practitioners need to ask themselves whether they are posting interesting content so that users go beyond just liking a post, but instead, sharing and commenting on it. Organisations must therefore rethink their online communication strategies to ensure they use Facebook to make their content go viral (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021). They go further to say that organisations continue to use social media in a unilateral way but not to encourage dialogue.

While Facebook has the like and share feature, which enables users to interact with a post, it cannot be interpreted as engagement, as there is no dialogue, or two-way communication, which is only evident when users comment on a post (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021). Another factor why social media is not used for dialogue, according to Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2021:26), may be because organisations are using Facebook as a “corporate showcase”.

Kent and Taylor (2021) put it differently, saying organisations count likes and responses, which reflect what happened, but have no concrete way of measuring engagement. To do this, the four categories of measurement Kent and Taylor (2021:1) designed include “user expectations, engagement, content curation and sustainment”. Another factor to consider is user behaviour. Are users articulate, comfortable to enter a public debate, or do they want to steer clear of bullying and even stalking if they expose themselves by having an opposing view? Kent and Taylor (2021) also describe dialogue as extending beyond informal chit-chat to in-depth conversations which include risk, trust, empathy and willingness to change. Unfortunately, social media was not designed for what dialogical scholars would have envisioned, and that is dialogue and engagement. Instead, it is widely accepted that “more data means more revenue” (Kent & Taylor, 2021:5). Taking the argument further, the authors say social media was developed for discussions and social change, not marketing and sales tools.

Kent and Taylor (2021) argue that social media should be treated as the genesis of social debate and thereafter encourage further interaction offline such as face-to-face engagement - especially as social media sets the scene for engagement as it creates an environment for people to come together, share ideas and opinions before any form of face-to-face interaction, such as a meeting or a protest.

2.4.2. COVID-19 and social media

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed society's digital user behaviour rapidly, and one of the most widespread consequences of the pandemic and national lockdown was the spike in the use of social media (Pérez-Escoda, Jiménez-Narros, Perlado-Lamo-de-Espinosa & Pedrero-Esteban, 2020). Pérez-Escoda et al. (2020:15) state the health crisis also accelerated the transformation of the communication industry with more "videoconferences, interventions from home, digital montages and interviews from different spaces". This also presented new challenges for traditional media professionals as there was a greater reliance on online and social networks.

Before COVID-19, access to the internet was not a priority, but all that has changed for professionals to function. The pandemic fast-tracked unprecedented user behaviour which manifested in the use of digital technology and social media (Beaunoyer, Dup & Guitton, 2020). This meant PR practitioners needed to adapt as their stakeholders moved to the online and social media sphere. According to the We are Social report by Kemp (2020), about 4.1 billion people or 56 percent of the global population use social media. This equates to an increase of 81 million in October last year, compared with the same month in 2019. In Southern Africa, 49 percent of the population use social media, 40 percent of internet users reported they use social media for work and 57 percent of internet users reported they spent more time using social media because of COVID-19.

Given these statistics and the fact that many people used social media for work during the pandemic, we turn our focus to the importance of social media in the work of PR practitioners. Graham and Avery (2013) propose social media is a significant tool with exciting potential which PR practitioners can use to build relationships. Przybysz (2020:8) agrees, saying "human relationships would not exist without social media". Taking the argument further, Komodromos (2016) says digital advancements and social media have increased the potential for two-way communication online as it allows for instant engagement and feedback. However, Morenoa et al. (2015) point out that while PR practitioners are aware of social media and its benefits, organisations still do not make effective use of the possibilities associated with two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue online.

From the literature, it emerged that there is an underutilisation of digital technology for relationship-building in PR (Grunig, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012; Shin, Pang & Kim 2015). "Social Networking has opened up new possibilities for organisations to engage their stakeholders by allowing them to send information out quickly and to receive real-time feedback" (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012:2). However, online participation is not automatic. It needs to be cultivated and even stimulated through posing questions. The question then is, should campaigns be shifted to creating an environment which enables conversations online? During this investigation, the researcher gets a better understanding of whether PR practitioners optimised the use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, as well as virtual video calls including Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams and Zoom to enhance two-way communication to build stakeholder relationships.

2.5. PR roles

The advent of new media and social media means that PR roles are changing all the time and PR practitioners need to adapt and improve competency levels (Knight & Sweetser, 2021; Tworzydło, Gawronski & Szuba, 2021). PR roles have evolved from only technician and manager only, to now include the PR strategist (Steyn & Everett, 2009). The most junior communications role in the organisation is that of the PR technician, who is responsible for practically implementing the corporate communication plan as set out by the PR manager (Steyn, 2000). Hogg and Doolan (1999) agree, saying their duties include writing, editing and conference organising.

The PR manager is responsible for developing a corporate communication plan and policy for the organisation as guided by the communication strategy, which is formulated by the PR strategist – a position which is held by the most senior communication practitioner (Steyn, 2000). The PR strategist, also known as the reflective strategist, is responsible for monitoring the internal and external environment, identifying issues, and contributing to organisational strategy (Steyn, 2000; Steyn & Niemann, 2010; Steyn, 2018). When the reflective strategist practices the reflective approach, the relationship between society and the organisation is analysed, information is gathered and fed back to the organisation. This information adds value and forms part of the non-financial aspects of the organisational strategy, such as human rights, social responsibility and sustainability (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Put differently, Steyn and Everett (2009) contend that the PR strategist brings the broader societal perspective to the boardroom table.

As PR practitioners grow in their careers from technician through to strategist, being in a management role does not preclude the practitioner from performing technical tasks too. An assumption of this study is that most PR practitioners should have adequate knowledge of the duties and responsibilities of each practitioner as one would often be expected to stand in or help the other with their tasks. Another valid point based on the current economic client is what Dozier and Broom (1995:4) call “role enactment”, which is based on the number of PR practitioners in an organisation and whether there is an overlap of duties. The authors say the technician and manager role are not mutually exclusive. While they may be independent, they are often also interdependent.

2.6. Environmental scanning

Steyn (2002a) describes a different paradigm for PR in which managers rethink their business strategies in conjunction with the environment in which it operates and not just profits. Here, the task for a 21st century PR practitioner is to be aware of the holistic stakeholder environment. The PR environment has changed with the onset of COVID-19. Instantly, PR practitioners were unable to follow their traditional means of building stakeholder relationships via events, media drop-offs, coffee dates and face-to-face meetings. The task for PR practitioners is now to monitor the changing environment. Digital advancements have necessitated a change in the stakeholder environment to include social media. This means PR practitioners cannot solely rely on traditional media but must consider what is happening in the social media sphere as well.

Therefore, the monitoring function has extended from daily scanning and analysis of print and electronic media to include social media trends, agendas, and potential issues (Steyn, 2000; Steyn, 2002a; Steyn & Niemann, 2010; Steyn, 2018). Currently, news breaks on social media, and activists' rumblings are spelled out on Twitter first to gather momentum for their cause. Reputational harm to the organisation can occur on social media too, with the use of a mere 280 characters on Twitter, and it is dangerous given how rapidly the information can spread across the world at just the click of a button (O'Connor & Shumate, 2018; Steyn & Puth, 2000; Welman, 2020). Social media also presents several opportunities for PR practitioners to interact and engage with stakeholders. Komodromos (2016), says social media enables organisations to show the human side of the organisation, which can build trust, understanding, and brand loyalty.

2.7. Chapter summary

The literature review delves deeper into the importance of stakeholder and network theory in PR showing that stakeholders are integral to the proper function of any organisation (Goodijk, 2003; Mintzberg, 1994; Steyn, 2004) and that networking -whether via humans or machines- are not static (Gregory, 2000; Phillips, 2006; Uysal & Yang, 2013).

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The debate on face-to-face communication in PR vs CMC rages on with Ean (2010) arguing there is no replacement for face-to-face interaction, whereas Valentini (2015) argues that physical contact is not a precondition for engagement. A particular focus was also on how social media has changed PR practice (Johann, Wolf & Godulla, 2021). A review of the literature revealed that social media made it possible for PR practitioners to engage with a larger audience and build new virtual communities (DiStaso, et al., 2011; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2016). Finally, the review provides a critical analysis on social media as a participatory model as it enables dialogue, but recognise that organisations need to create an environment to make it possible (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira 2021).

Chapter 3 focuses on the research design and methodological approaches of this qualitative research. It explains how the researcher investigated the topic: "*Examining the impact of digital media on PR practitioners' capacity to network and build stakeholder relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic*". The scope of this study is exploratory in nature. More specifically, it explores whether relationships can be built virtually during a pandemic.

Chapter 3

Research design and methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach followed in this study. The research design, methodology, sampling and sample size and data collection is described. The research is an empirical study, which is exploratory in nature as it seeks to gain an understanding of how PR practitioners were able to build or sustain relationships while working remotely during a pandemic. At this stage, it is important to consider the problem statement to understand what needs to be addressed and the methods involved in trying to solve the problem (Annamalai, Kamaruddin, Abdul Azid & Yeoh, 2013). The problem statement examines why there appears to be an underutilisation of digital technology in professional relationship building in PR.

To address the problem statement, the objectives of the study must be met. These objectives include; establishing what the professional effect is of less face-to-face interaction for PR practitioners as stakeholder contact was in-person pre-COVID-19; establishing which technological tools were used in the context of less face-to-face interaction given the restrictions on stakeholder contact during lockdown; determining the preferred ways of interacting on the part of PR based on their experience before and during the pandemic; and determining the effectiveness of new modes of relationship-building for practitioners to establish whether technology can be used as a replacement for in-person contact.

3.1. Research design

The research design as explained in Chapter 1, is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is to "study, examine, analyse, or investigate something" (Stebbins, 2001:2). Stebbins (2001) goes further to say that exploration takes place when there is little knowledge of a particular phenomenon which it is worth uncovering. Exploratory research also takes place when little or no empirical studies have been conducted on a particular topic or if the study was done under prediction and not "flexibility or open-mindedness" (Stebbins, 2001:7). Importantly, research should be designed to suit the objectives of the study and provide "usable and actionable information" (Michaelson & Macleod, 2007:6).

A qualitative method of study was considered most suitable for this study as it enables the researcher to follow an "in-depth, probing, open-ended response format" (Stacks, 2006:). Taking the definition further, Daymon and Holloway (2010:4) say qualitative research forms part of the "interpretive worldview" which explores people's "intentions, motivations and subjective experiences". Michaelson and Macleod (2007) describe it as providing perspectives that are unique to each participant. Qualitative research is also generally small-scale as researchers aim to obtain a rich, deep, and holistic understanding of the participants' experiences and understanding of a topic (Daymon & Holloway, 2010: 6). Interviews are conducted in participants' natural, comfortable environment (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Turner, 2010) such as at their offices, as is the case in this study, while working from home during the pandemic.

This study will also be inductive by nature meaning ideas and patterns emerge from the data during data analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019). Researchers are cautioned as qualitative methodologies may be "subjective, impressionistic and difficult to replicate", and "because qualitative investigators are the main research instrument, the replicability of a study is practically impossible" (Daymon & Holloway, 2010:7). The researcher is also actively involved in qualitative studies as he or she interacts directly with the participants as opposed to quantitative research which is far-removed and the basic interaction is via a survey.

Another crucial factor, according to Daymon and Holloway (2010), is that PR needs to adapt as its nature is to constantly create new means, new ways of doing and transforming messages. Therefore, as the virus spread worldwide, PR practitioners became more creative and used technology more efficiently. The researcher investigates which new techniques were used which challenged the status quo and establishes what worked well and which areas need more attention. Overall, qualitative research is best suited to this study as it will provide a unique perspective of the stakeholders being studied and is rich in depth and description (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Michaelson & Stacks, 2014).

3.2. Research methodology

The primary method used in this qualitative study was interviews. According to Opdenakker (2006), computer-mediated communication created new ways of conducting qualitative research. While face-to-face interviews have been the dominant method of conducting interviews for years, it changed as technology evolved from telephonic to the use of computer programmes seeing as "interviewing using the internet is rising" (Opdenakker, 2006:1).

In this study, a combination of fixed and open-ended questions were drawn up and posed to each participant during a virtual meeting. Participants were allowed to answer questions freely and frankly and, in most instances, they gave everyday examples of their experiences. One hour was allocated to each interview with some finishing earlier than others. The second part of the research design took the form of textual analysis, which is explained in more detail in section 3.5.5. This allowed the researcher to monitor each of the participants' selected social media accounts with the view of establishing whether social media was used for two-way communication or whether communication was unilateral.

3.3. Sampling

Selecting a sample is important as it enables the researcher to answer the research questions. But to do so, the target population must first be defined, the framework within which that sample is required needs to be set out and then a sampling technique needs to be chosen (Taherdoost, 2016). The sampling technique undertaken in this qualitative study is non-probability sampling, which focuses on a small number of participants and gives the researcher and understanding of "real-life phenomenon" (Taherdoost, 2016:22).

Delving deeper, the type of non-probability sampling technique used is purposive sampling, which is also known as judgmental sampling. Taherdoost (2016) says with purposive sampling, participants are specifically selected as they can provide relevant information that is required for the study. Put differently, Etikan and Bala (2017) say the sample design is according to the discretion of the researcher in determining who will provide the most relevant feedback to meet the objectives of the study. Purposive sampling is also a means of obtaining “manageable data” according to Ames, Glenton and Lewin (2019:1). Purposive sampling has advantages such as convenience, low-cost and not time-consuming. However, the disadvantages include that it is subjective and does not allow for generalisation (Malhotra & Birks, 2006). Researchers should also identify and define the sample of the study using desired characteristics (Michaelson & Macleod, 2007) which align the participants. In this study, all six participants are PR practitioners who worked remotely during the pandemic.

In this study, participants were selected that had one main characteristic in common and that is that they actively worked as a PR practitioner during the pandemic. Participants were contacted via email to find out if they would participate in the study, and the six that were selected all agreed, completed and signed ‘permission to participant in the study’ forms. To obtain multi-sectorial insights, the six participants are from different organisations with varying years of experience in the PR industry. The social media accounts of the six participants were also examined, with their permission to try to understand whether their social media accounts were used for engagement and two-way communication.

3.3.1. Sample size

Concerning sample size, Michaelson and Macleod (2007) argue that it must be reliable and consistent with the objectives of the study. Guest, Namey and Chen (2020:10) state “the most prevalent, high-level themes are identified very early on in data collection, within about six interviews”. Their findings indicate that at interview six or seven, most themes emerge with an 80% saturation. They refer to saturation as the point at which interviews do not produce any new valuable information. Morse (2000) states several factors influence the number of participants in a study when determining at which point saturation has been reached. One of these factors include the scope of the study. So, the more succinct the topic, the sooner saturation is reached, and between interview six and 10, the point of useful data is reached.

Similarly, after examining 25 in-depth interviews, Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi (2017:591) found saturation was reached at nine interviews where researchers say they have “heard it all”. Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016:5) propose a sample of six to 10 participants may be adequate, however, it is dependent on whether “thick data” is obtained from the interviews. Therefore, in this study, six participants were interviewed for about one hour each with the aim of obtaining “thick data”, as suggested by Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016). They were canvassed via email to determine if they would participate in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with each PR practitioner using open-ended questions, leaving room for the respondents to elaborate and add anything they may feel is relevant. This should be effective as Michaelson and Stacks (2014) point out that researchers need to be flexible in their approach, ask open-ended questions and allow respondents to elaborate when answering the questions.

The researcher also identified six PR practitioners who were likely to have behaved similarly, such as working remotely during the national lockdown and using the same social media to communicate with stakeholders and virtual tools for meetings and video conferences. In addition, the six practitioners in this multi-sectoral study hold senior PR positions in their respective organisations and work in public affairs, lifestyle and fashion, communications and media, media and entertainment, at a retailer and PR agency. They are responsible for daily scanning and analysis of print, electronic and social media for trends, agendas, and potential issues which Steyn and Niemann (2010) identified as tasks for the PR strategist.

3.4. Data collection

Collection of the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in this study took the form of two parts. The first data set included a video-recorded interview, and the second, an analysis of each participant's organisation's social media accounts. Each of the six participants in this study agreed to be interviewed via the Zoom video conferencing platform given that South Africa was placed under level four lockdown. This meant a greater restriction on the movement of people and restriction on in-person contact. The interviews were held virtually and recorded with the permission of each participant. Zoom allows for an automatic download of the recording, and after each interview the recording was saved and transcribed verbatim.

Following the video-recorded interview, permission was requested and granted to monitor the most used social media sites the participants referred to during their interviews. It emerged that Facebook was the main social media and secondly, Instagram. The researcher had, over a period of one week, from the periphery, observed the interaction of the organisation with its external stakeholders. The main point of observation was whether PR practitioners were using social media for two-way communication or engagement (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2021) or as a "dumping ground" for their messaging, as Grunig (2009) had referred.

3.4.1. Interviews

The research instrument used was a combination of set, open-ended questions which were divided into four sections: section a) general, b) stakeholders, c) networking and d) social media. According to Turner (2010), interviews enable the researcher to obtain the experiences and perspectives directly from the participants. The questions were designed to get an overview of each PR practitioner, their experience, the organisation they work for, their understanding of stakeholder engagement and network and the role that social media plays in their current working environment. Open-ended questions give interviewees the opportunity to provide as much detailed information as they wish and at the same time enables the interviewer a chance to ask follow-up questions (Turner, 2010).

3.4.2. Social media accounts

Sarker (2020), borrowing from The Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) PR strategies, refers to five elements which can help measure how effective PR is online. These are engagement, impressions, items, mentions and reach. In this research, the respondents were asked which tools they used to measure online activity and if they have reports that aid in triangulation of the data. Buhmann and Likely (2018) state evaluation is imperative for strategic communication to determine whether its organisational goals are met. It would have been interesting to establish whether PR practitioners formulated reports or put strategic tools in place to measure online engagement during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the respondents were unable to provide reports of their social media activity, citing confidentiality, but allowed the researcher to monitor their social media accounts from the periphery as it is already in the public domain.

Following the video-recorded interview, permission was requested and granted to monitor the most used social media sites the participants referred to during their interviews. It emerged that Facebook was the main social media and secondly, Instagram. The researcher had over a period of one week, from the periphery, observed the interaction of the organisation with its external stakeholders. The main point of observation was whether PR practitioners were using social media for two-way communication or engagement or as a "dumping ground" or "corporate showcase" of their messaging.

3.5. Data analysis

Interpreting the data is the final part of the interview process (Turner, 2010). In this phase, it is the researcher's responsibility to make "sense out of what was just uncovered and compile the data into sections or groups of information, also known as themes or codes" (Turner, 2010:759). However, while open-ended questions provide a rich, thick data set, it can be challenging and time-consuming for researchers to code the information and fully present the participants' viewpoints (Turner, 2010). The extracted data was divided into relevant, manageable sections based on the words and/or phrases that reoccurred in the transcription of the interviews. These words were first grouped into codes, themes, and sub-themes.

3.5.1. Data capturing and coding

Transcripts of the interviews were collated onto a spreadsheet to identify themes, patterns and codes which forms the extracted data by means of thematic analysis. The data collected from the social media observations were tabulated on excel as well, and the texts were analysed to establish how the various social media platforms were used.

During data analysis, themes are identified and coded into categories (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).
Coding in qualitative research enables the assembling, categorisation and thematic sorting of information to obtain meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). The authors, using the Grounded Theory method describe a three-step process to code data. That process includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. A vital aspect of open, axial, and selective coding is that it is non-linear. Instead,

it is “cyclical”. In other words, there is a constant loop of information and interconnectedness with the data (Williams & Moser, 2019:47).

Phase 1: Open coding:

- The researcher identifies themes and concepts emerging from the data to find reoccuring texts. "In practice, the researcher needs to sift through informant’s responses and organise similar words and phrases, concept-indicators, in broad initial thematic domains," (Williams & Moser, 2019:48).

Phase 2: Axial coding:

- "... axial coding further refines, aligns, and categorises the themes," (Williams & Moser, 2019:50).

Phase 3: Selective coding:

- "It enables the researcher to select and integrate categories of organised data from axial coding in cohesive and meaning-filled expressions. With the work of selective coding done, the researcher can move toward developing theory and ultimately constructing meaning,"(Williams & Moser, 2019:52).

Figure 1. The phases of coding as adapted from Williams and Moser (2019).

3.5.2. Thematic analysis

The primary form of data analysis used in this qualitative study was thematic analysis. At the very least, thematic analysis describes data in rich detail, but Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this method to analyse and report patterns or themes. These themes reflect relevant information according to the research question. In addition, some of the advantages of undertaking thematic analysis is its flexibility and that the researcher can use their discretion when determining what a theme is or what pattern emerges. Thematic analysis also allows the researcher to reflect the reality of participants’ experiences. Further, this research is inductive by nature as themes will be identified as it emerges from the data itself. It is also semantic as it will not be going beyond what respondents have said or looking at any deeper meaning in what they are trying to say but simply reflecting what the participants have said (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, the researcher transcribed all the interviews and divided the content according to four key concepts: general, stakeholders, networking and social media. No codes were identified in the general category as it simply reflected the demographics of each participant, their industry experience and whether there is an overlap of PR duties in their organisation. For the following three concepts: stakeholders, networking and social media, initial codes were developed as it emerged from the participants’ answers to each interview question. Refined codes were then created by grouping the primary codes and finally, themes were categorised by further regrouping similar refined codes.

3.5.3. Triangulation

Triangulation is important for this study as it refers to using more than one data analysis technique or sources of information and establishing how it all comes together. Turner (2010) says that interviews can be used together with other methods of data collection to get a holistic understanding of the data set. It also adds a new dimension of validating the results (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014). Triangulation can bring about confirmation of the findings or highlight a completely new aspect. Similarly, Flick (2004:178) describes it as “the observation of the research issue from at least two different points…by applying different methodological approaches”.

For example, Xin, Luyuan and Pieter (2020) in their study used observations, questionnaires, and interviews to come to the most reliable results. The authors, however, feel interviews add a dimension which is missing from simple observations or rigid questionnaires. Flick (2004:178) adds that “triangulation of data combines data drawn from different sources at different times, in different places or from different people”. The researcher applied Flick’s (2004) rational by also monitoring the social media accounts of the organisations as it provided insights from different stakeholders other than the participants. The social media analysis was also done at a different time to the virtual interview over a period of one week. Therefore, in order to further interrogate the results of the study, the organisation’s social media accounts were monitored and analysed by means of textual analysis.

3.5.4. Textual analysis

McKee (2001:3) describes textual analysis as making an “educated guess” on how certain pieces of texts can be interpreted. Interpretations may differ vastly from researcher to researcher, but what is important to note is that there is no one correct understanding of the text, according to McKee (2001). The one element that is essential is understanding the context in which the texts have been formulated because while the interpretations may vary, the context remains static. In this study, the context of each organisation’s social media is specific to the type of organisation and its brand objectives. While some may post only texts, others post just pictures or videos.

Lwin, Lu, Sheldenkar, Cayabyab, Yee and Smith (2020) put forward that social media can be analysed to get a clearer understanding of the public’s opinions and feelings. Monitoring social media pages also allows the researcher to obtain perspectives as they occur. Their study highlighted how Facebook, for example, is used for more detailed messaging and engagement. The authors suggest that Facebook should be used to engage with stakeholders on “a personal level” (Lwin et al., 2020:7).

McKee (2001) guides researchers in formulating a question which the researchers want to answer. With reference to this, the researcher wants to examine whether social media is used for engagement. The researcher had identified the period over which each organisations’ social media accounts would be observed and tabulated the number of posts and responses from Monday to Sunday. The observations included the type of content the organisation posted (content/videos/pictures) and whether it elicited a response from the social media audiences. Responses took the form of the embedded emojis Facebook generates (like/love/sad/wow/care/care) and comments. For the purposes of this research, a simple click on the post was not regarded as engagement, but an actual comment and response from the organisation was considered engagement or two-way communication.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained before any interviews were conducted, and participants were guaranteed explicit privacy and confidentiality given the implementation of the Protection of Personal Information Act this year (Roux, 2021). It was also important to consider whether the respondents of this study had their respective organisations in mind and provided feedback which could cast their employer in a positive or negative light, particularly if professional relationships were broken for whatever reason. When evaluating the findings, it was important to consider whether it was fair to pit one organisation against the other given their respective access to technology and ability to adapt faster due to their financial position. The researcher also had to consider the possibility that respondents may become infected with COVID-19 and may need to isolate (Higher Health & USAf, 2021). The severity of the illness may have impacted whether they are able to continue with the study and may have had a direct bearing on the findings.

3.7. Methodological constraints and limitations

While a qualitative research method was best suited for this study, it left the researcher with hours-long recordings to transcribe verbatim which was time-consuming. It was also challenging for the interviewer to steer the conversation, resulting in redundant information. Furthermore, given that only six PR practitioners participated in this study, it cannot be viewed as an accurate reflection of the industry. A recommendation of this study, to be discussed in the last chapter, is that a survey can be conducted among all members of the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) for a more widespread finding on the topic. A final limitation of this study was that the researcher only observed one week of social media activity of the respective organisations. For richer results, the social media accounts could be analysed over a longer period, such as the full duration of the pandemic.

3.8. Chapter summary

The methodology used enabled the researcher to obtain valuable insights into how PR practitioners went about their daily tasks despite the challenging environment they were faced with. The Zoom interviews allowed the researcher to have a conversation with each practitioner and establish their understanding of the topic and how new media and social media was used in their respective organisations. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to compare experiences as explained by the participants in the most natural way and draw correlations from the responses. Monitoring of the respective social media accounts also allowed for the validation of the findings.

In Chapter 4, the researcher analyses the results following the interviews that were conducted as well as the social media accounts that were monitored to establish how PR practitioners networked and built stakeholder relationships during the pandemic and whether social media was used for two-way communication.

Chapter 4

Formulation and analysis of results

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research conducted to answer the following question: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?"* as well as subsequent sub-research questions. The research examined which new media tools were used to build relationships and whether social media was used for engagement in their respective organisations. The aim is to determine the nature of the communicative relationship between PR practitioners and their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. The population

Section a) of the interview questions were aimed at obtaining background information of each participant including their demographics and the type of organisation they work for to obtain multi-sectoral results. In addition, each participants' years of industry experience is detailed, the size of the PR department in the organisation for which they work and whether there is an overlap of PR functions in the organisation as role enactment (Dozier & Broom, 1995) is becoming more apparent in modern-day PR. The study was done on an anonymous basis. Table 2 below summarises the background information of each of the six participants and their view on whether there is an overlap of PR duties in their organisations.

Table 2, subdivided into general categories, shows the PR practitioners interviewed in this study have varying years of experience from 13 years to 35 years' experience and that the six participants hold senior PR positions in their respective organisations. While the types of organisations vary, four participants or 66 percent say their focus area is PR, marketing, publicity, social media management, mainstream media management and monitoring and stakeholder engagement and networking. Participant 1 says her focus area is only public affairs, and Participant 6 describes the predominant area of interest as PR, publicity and stakeholder management.

From the summary of the surveyed population, four participants (66 percent) are of the view that there is an overlap in PR duties, citing the size of the department, being required to step up if someone is sick or simply that it is expected of good communicators to know everything. These findings validate what Dozier and Broom (1995) found more than two decades ago.

Table 2. About the surveyed population.

Participant and role	**Type of Organisation**	**Years of experience**	**No. of staff**	**Overlap of PR duties (in their words)**
Participant 1: Managing Director	Public affairs	35	28	*"…all of our staff are required to be good communicators no matter what the platform is".*

Participant 2: Owner	Fashion, lifestyle, PR agency	13	7	*"Definitely not. Everybody has a designated function; we all support each other as a team".*
Participant 3: Head of newsroom	Communication and media	26	12	*"Yes, and I think it is because people need to know. You have your area you are strong in, but you also need to know everything else".*
Participant 4: Communication and PR senior manager	Media and entertainment	15	1	*"…because we're a small complement in terms of staff that overlap is natural because it has to happen and we call it a cross line of business approach".*
Participant 5: Managing Director	PR agency	15	35	*"It depends on the services that we are going to be giving to that client. (Staff) have job descriptions that are very clear but, especially with COVID you have to be super adaptable..."*
Participant 6: Brand Publicity Manager	Africa's biggest retailer	12	20	*"No, not really. We actually have too few people working in our department, so obviously we all have our own duties. But when it comes to bigger things and crises like at the moment (looting/unrest) then we all just jump in".*

4.2. Emerging codes and themes

Given that the context of this study is on PR practitioners' use of new media and social media tools to network during a pandemic, several codes were developed based on three categories namely stakeholders, networking and social media. The researcher identified primary codes, refined codes and finally, themes and sub-themes were established based on the participants' answers to specific questions. Overall deductions and conclusions were drawn, particularly from the answers derived from the open-ended questions. Answers provided in category one, i.e. general were not used as part of the coding process as this was just background on each participant and was tabulated in Table 2 (see page 25 and 26).

4.2.1. Stakeholder codes and themes

In the stakeholder category, 69 primary codes were developed via the induction method, 18 refined codes were identified, 13 themes and 3 sub-themes were established. For ease of reference, the researcher tabulates the identified refined codes, themes, and refined themes below.

Table 3. Emerging stakeholder refined codes, themes and refined-themes identified.

Refined code	Links to initial code	Theme	Links to initial codes	Refined theme	Links to initial code
Interested parties	2	Vested interest	4	Interdependent	9
Asset	5	Mutually beneficial	3	Engagement	30
Dialogue	1	Multi-level communication	1	Technology	44
Good communication	11	One-on-one communication	23		
Growth opportunities	6	One-on-one engagement	6		
In-person contact	11	Reliance on technology	4		
No in-person contact	2	The show must go on	7		
Disadvantages of virtual interaction	12	Innovation	3		
Business as usual	1	Complex nature of virtual interaction	18		
New ideas	7	Convenience	5		
Advantages of virtual interaction	19	Change in media landscape	7		
Loss of contact	5	Financial impact	2		
Very important	4				
Stakeholder contact	1				
Ability to produce despite no face-to-face contact	5				
Change in stakeholder reach	1				

Change in working environment	1				
Budget	2				
Total refined codes: 18		**Total themes: 13**		**Total refined themes: 3**	

Important findings from the stakeholder coding process show that of the 69 primary codes developed, five codes had the highest rate of occurrence each appearing thrice throughout the stakeholder section of the interview. These include direct communication (3); no personal engagement (3); spike in virtual interaction (3); time-saving (3) and impact on staff (3). Considering the refined codes, the advantages of virtual interaction was top with (19) links to the primary codes, then disadvantages came in a close second with (12) links and good communication (11) and in-person contact (11) scored an equal number of links to codes.

The highest theme that emerged was one-on-one communication with (23) links to codes, then the complex nature of virtual interaction with (18) codes, and the show must go on (7) and the change in media landscape (7) both recording seven links to codes. From the refined themes technology was at the top with (44) links to the primary codes, engagement with (30) links and finally interdependent with (9) codes

4.2.1.1. Stakeholder codes and themes discussion

It can be deduced that all six participants had, before COVID-19, built stakeholder relations through one-on-one direct communication. For example, Participant 3 said:

> "*So it's very easy for me to pop over the road and talk to people and say well 'how's it going, are you happy with our stories, do you want to chat about anything?' So those one-on-one interactions, it is the most valuable and it's the most effective way to build relationships*".

However, all participants agree that during the pandemic there was a lack of personal engagement.

> *"It becomes even more important because Covid effectively separated people humanly. So they were not able to engage personally",* remarked Participant 1.

To combat the lack of personal engagement, there was a spike in virtual interaction.

> "*We do show and tell sessions where we each tell the other what work we are doing and we are working on. We do water cooler sessions where we try and replicate those natural conversations you would have when you go to make a cup of tea and your colleague comes and gets something out of the fridge. We put four random colleagues in a session just for like 15 minutes or half an hour and they just talk about whatever the hell they want to talk about, and it just*

brings people together and it just replicates that situation. So it's a lot more of these kinds of digital interventions", said Participant 5.

The primary advantage of stakeholder interaction during the pandemic was the convenience factor and a significant amount of time was saved, as explained by Participant 5:

"So I would say 95 percent of our meetings are now virtual and it's really been a lot of a time saver. I feel like there's more meetings happening now but it's certainly not taking as much time as travel and it's easier to dial in people from different territories and they can dial in people on their side from different regions to get perspectives".

Conversely, one of the main disadvantages for stakeholders was the impact on staff, said Participant 1:

"*I think work from home has been isolating, I think they're less effective. And because my staff are all working from home right now, with the exception of a couple who come into the office, I have to keep those efficiency levels up and the way I do that is, I monitor their time".*

4.2.2. Networking codes and themes

Secondly, in the networking category, 24 primary codes, five refined codes and four themes were developed. No refined-themes were established given the small number of themes that emerged.

Table 4. Emerging networking refined codes, themes and refined themes identified.

Refined codes	**Links to initial codes**	**Themes**	**Links to codes**
Make contact	5	Multi-level communication	7
Physical interaction	15	In-person contact	14
Research	1	Lacks personal connection	7
Disadvantages of technology	7	Implications of pandemic	3
Lockdown restrictions	3		
Total refined codes: 5		**Total themes: 4**	

The 24 primary codes developed in the networking category show that the most common way the participants networked with their stakeholders was by attending events (4). Then, reaching out (2), meeting people (2) and relationship building (2). Further, the refined codes show physical interaction, with (15) links to the primary codes, was necessary to networking and that the disadvantages of technology (7) made it difficult to network in the virtual realm. The highest theme identified was that networking took place via in-person contact, with (14) links to the primary codes, and by means of multi-level communications (7) such as WhatsApp, email, and virtual meetings. However, the increased virtual interaction meant there was a greater lack of personal connection with (7) links to the initial codes. It was not necessary to develop refined themes for this category.

4.2.2.1. Networking codes and themes discussion

The in-person contact theme resonated with all six participants as the means in which they networked with their stakeholders. So said Participant 3:

> "*It is something that I believe again is easier to do face-to-face but it is people that you know, people that you get to know and people you get introduced to".*

As explained by Participant 1, multi-level communication was used to network during the pandemic.

> *"On WhatsApp, on the phone, on Zoom. I used every platform available to me to network".*

While all participants made use of technology to stay in contact with their stakeholders, the resounding response is that virtual methods of networking lack the personal connection usually experienced during face-to-face engagement. Participant 4 explains:

> "*Whether it's engaging people at media houses, whether it's engaging people at functions or screenings or things like that. Those instances, that's when people are relaxed, that's when people are engaged, that's where people are certainly engaging your brand, and that's where you want the ideas and sprouts to be flowing, less around the boardroom table or a Zoom meeting*".

4.2.3. Social media codes and themes

Thirdly, in the social media category, 77 primary codes were developed, and 14 refined codes, 17 themes and 4 sub-themes were established. For ease of reference, the researcher tabulates below the identified refined codes, themes and refined-themes.

Table 5. Emerging social media refined codes, themes and refined themes identified.

Refined codes	**Links to initial codes**	**Themes**	**Links to codes**	**Refined themes**	**Links to codes**
Unnecessary	3	Not valuable	5	Value	18
Necessary	18	Highly valuable	13	Content	10
Key messages	2	Messaging	2	Engagement	27
Loyalty	2	Brand promise	2	Virtual realm	69
Dialogue	16	Stakeholder engagement	23		

Reach	3	Virtual interaction	48		
Advantages of technology	59	Change in stakeholder behaviour	2		
Disadvantages of technology	6	Website is repository	2		
Messaging	3	Multi-pronged approach	2		
No dialogue	1	Discretion	1		
Physical contact	1	One-way communication	3		
Combination	5	No engagement	1		
In-person contact	5	Convenience	4		
Personal	1	In-person contact	1		
		Hybrid model	5		
		Growth	9		
		Budgets	1		
Total refined codes: 14		**Themes: 17**		**Refined themes: 4**	

Important findings in the social media category show that of the 77 primary codes, technology played a key role with websites (5), Instagram (5) and Zoom (4) platforms ranking the highest in terms of rate of occurrence. From the refined codes, advantages of technology were most significant with (59) links to the initial codes, and participants believing that it is necessary (18) and using social media for dialogue (16). The three themes that had the most links to the primary codes were virtual interaction (48), stakeholder engagement (23) and the overwhelming opinion that social media is highly valuable (13). From the refined themes, the virtual realm (69) was most prominent, then engagement (27), value (18) and finally content (10).

4.2.3.1. Social media codes and themes discussion

These results show that there are substantive benefits of technology for all participants and their stakeholder engagement during the pandemic.

> "*So, because of the costs, you can reach more people. You don't have to pay for venue hire and all of those things. It works out much cheaper and you can reach more people and people are keener to actually participate when they can sit at home and enjoy wine with their friends*

instead of dressing up and going out for an evening. So, the numbers are obviously much better and the costs work to our benefit as well", said Participant 6.

While some may have seen the lockdown as negative, others highlight the benefits of the restrictions on movement during the pandemic.

> "*But more people are at home, so more people are on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter. So, we are trying to connect with people out there, our friends, our contacts, with companies, with brands, so it is where people are spending their time now because it's too dangerous out there. It's like the world has become much smaller thanks to social media or because of social media*", said Participant 3.

In addition, that social media was used for engagement, Participant 6 commented:

> "*But on the PR side it's more two-way communication because we want to know whether people are actually interested in what we are doing*".

4.3. Survey findings

The primary research question of this research is: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic*?" In a bid to answer the main research question, the researcher will focus on the stakeholder themes and the three factors that emerge from the refined themes. First, it is important to understand that the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholder is a complex one that speaks to an interdependence on one another. For that relationship to exist there must be a vested interest in each other and a mutually beneficial relationship which is centred on financial impact for either party.

Secondly, the findings show that there has to be one-on-one communication and one-on-one engagement with stakeholders. Before COVID-19 this engagement took place face-to-face but during the pandemic it occurred on multiple levels. This brings me to the third factor which is technology.
Participants in this study agree there was a greater reliance on technology during the pandemic and despite the disadvantages of technology which removed in-person contact, the show had to go on. While technology has its benefits there are a few challenges that emerge speaking to the complex nature of virtual interaction. This compelled organisations to be creative and innovative.

Interdependence is vital in the organisation-stakeholder relationship, as explained by Participant 1:

> "*I guess the way to define it is anybody who holds a stake in the sustainability of the company*".

Similarly, Participant 5 remarked that stakeholders have a vested interest in the organisation.

"*I understand it to be your clients in a way are your stakeholders, so is the media, so is anybody who has a vested interest in what you do*".

In terms of engagement, while it was difficult at first, Participant 3 was of the view that it was easier to engage with people online.

"*It's been a challenge, but I think also as people started getting used to all the different virtual platforms. It is actually, strangely, easier to build relationships or contacts with people because I can very easily have a conference call, a Zoom call with a business writer in Beijing and I can actually see the person "on screen".*

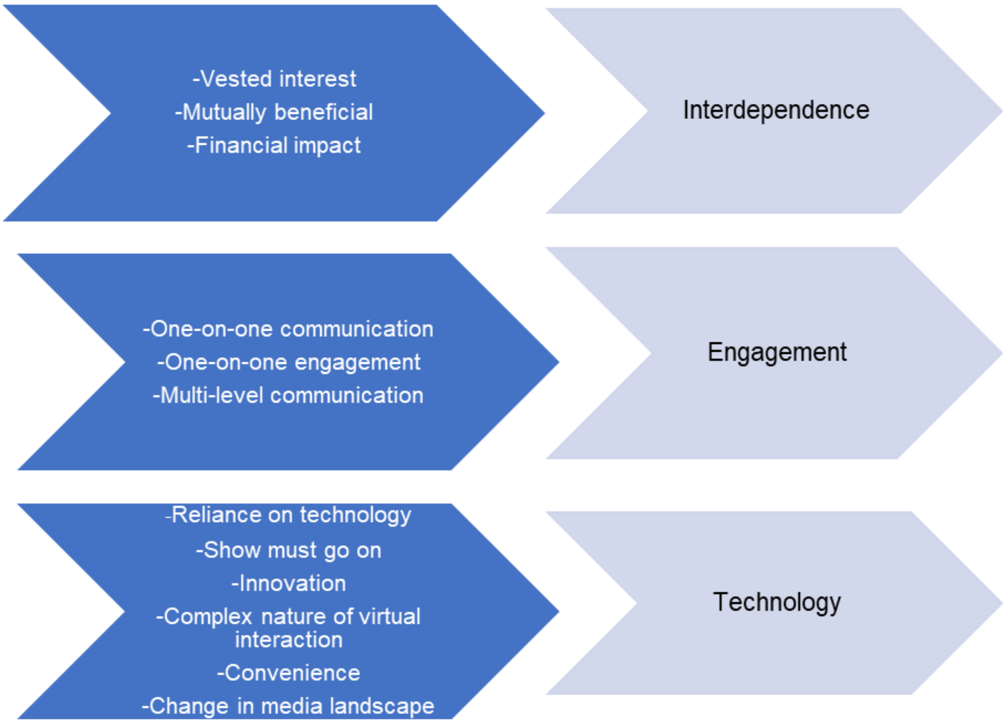

Figure 2. Stakeholder themes and refined themes.

Technology also enabled PR practitioners to connect more frequently. Participant 1 said:

"*I'm a good communicator. So I tend to connect with my staff even more during COVID than I did outside of COVID. So for example, my staff in Johannesburg, I would either see them when I flew to Johannesburg or when I talk to them on WhatsApp or the phone. When COVID hit, I insisted on Skype or Zoom meetings so I could actually see them*".

But technology had its disadvantages. As Participant 3 pointed out:

"*I think I've gotten to the Zoom fatigue point; I'd like to actually see people sitting across the table from me. We still chat to people. I phone people. Email I think is sometimes a little bit impersonal, but it's become easier and more difficult at the same time if that makes sense".*

Similarly, Participant 1 was of the view it is harder to have a captive audience in a virtual meeting when compared to face-to-face meetings.

> "*You're having a meeting with 10 people and 9 of them are not concentrating on Zoom. They are doing their email or they're doing something else. And I understand that. So, you need to have very, very good communicators who are on the meeting. Who are able to keep the attention and interest of those who are engaging in communication and it's really hard to do. It's really hard to do. It's very easy to zone out of a Zoom meeting, very easy. It requires great skill, particularly of chief executives to keep the attention of the people they're speaking to*".

Therefore, PR practitioners were building stakeholder relationships during the pandemic through interdependence on one another, engagement and technology.

4.3.1. Findings: sub-research question 1

In answering sub-research question 1: "*What effect does little or no face-to-face interaction have on stakeholder relations in the PR industry?*" the researcher compares the advantages and disadvantages of the lack of in-person contact from the perspective of the participants. These advantages emerge from the primary codes that were developed in all three categories, namely stakeholders, networking, and social media.

Table 6. Advantages and disadvantages of little or no face-to-face interaction.

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
Stakeholders:	
Time-saving	Distractions during virtual meetings
Virtual events	No personal engagement
Easy access to stakeholders	Forced interaction over phone or email
Cost-saving	Virtual is impersonal
Unchanged output	Difficult to manage staff
Adaptability	Difficult to mentor staff
Creative thinking	Impact on staff
Innovation	
Networking:	
Virtual conferences	Unable to network
	Impersonal
	Impossible to network
	Cold interaction
	Ineffective networking

	Just a number
	No forming of relationships
Social Media:	
Stakeholder-specific campaigns	Unable to measure effectiveness
Showcase work	Lack of networking interaction
Credibility	No replacement for face-to-face interaction
Story ideas	Need more human contact, one-on-ones
Useful	Prefer in-person interaction
Virtual connections with staff	
Engagement	
More people on social media	
Two-way communication	
Reach stakeholders	
Valuable feedback	
No travelling	
Time-saving	
Work-life balance	
Learning	
Adapting	
Cost-saving	
Track sentiment	

4.3.1.1. Stakeholders

From Table 6 it is evident that there are a near-equal number of advantages and disadvantages when considering in-person stakeholder contact. Participants were of the view that the major positives that emerged from the lack of face-to-face contact during the pandemic were time-saving, cost-saving, innovation, new ideas and adaptability. This is a crucial factor as many organisations had to adapt to virtual means of stakeholder relations. As Participant 2 said:

> "*It's about, one of my philosophies is not thinking in a box or out of a box as people say, I think it's out of a circle and I put it in my presentations is that a circle is never ending and that you are constantly finding and looking after*".

Participant 4 concurred:

> *"You have to think of ways to make your lives easier as a journalist but we also have to be very creative in terms of how we're going to engage with you in terms of how our brands are going to engage with you".*

However, the negatives associated with the lack of face-to-face interaction for stakeholder relations was the impact on staff, and the challenges for managers to monitor and mentor staff who were working remotely.

> "*But I have one staff member who is in Joburg whom I haven't met and I don't really feel connected to him, and I feel like I don't have a handle on what he's feeling…And it's really hard to read him when it's just like this (virtually), you know? So I think that makes managing people very different because you miss a lot of cues",* said Participant 5.

Virtual interaction was also distracting and very impersonal as there was no personal engagement taking place.

4.3.1.2. Networking

In terms of networking, Table 6 shows that there was only one advantage when it comes to the lack of face-to-face interaction, and that was virtual events. Most participants reported that it was impossible to network without physical interaction, or if they tried, the form of networking was ineffective because the interaction was cold and impersonal.

It was tougher to network during video conferences or virtual events for example, Participant 5 remarked:

> *"Pre-COVID there was more hotel openings, launches, PR gatherings or conferences or whatever that you would go to and meet people. Now it's just virtual conferences and that kind of thing. But you don't end up meeting people there. You're all just in an audience. You can raise your hand and make a comment but no-one is. You're not forming a relationship there, unless you take a conversation offline".*

4.3.1.3. Social media

Social media is the one area in which participants felt the lack of in-person contact had the least effect on the work that they do. In fact, they could showcase their work on various platforms, obtain and supply story ideas for journalists and connect with staff virtually. In addition, they say social media was used for engagement and two-way communication. The researcher delves deeper into this point in sections 4.4.3 and 4.5. The participants also reported other advantages of using social media when in-person contact was not possible such as reaching a larger audience or number of stakeholders, receiving valuable feedback, time and cost-saving and a work-life balance. Participant 3 remarked:

> "*But at the same time also I love being at home. My animals and my wife are here and I am more productive at home, to be honest and I get more done".*

Therefore, this study shows the little or no face-to-face interaction during COVID-19 had the most significant effect on PR practitioners' ability to network as it was virtually impossible to do so without physical interaction. And while stakeholder interaction had a significant amount of disadvantages because they were not connecting in-person, PR practitioners were able to capitalise on the use of virtual tools to remain in contact and connect with their stakeholders. From the research it also emerged that the use of social media and new media tools assisted PR practitioners to do their jobs despite the lack of physical interaction.

4.3.2. Findings: sub-research question 2

In addressing sub-research question 2: "*How was technology used as a tool for networking and stakeholder engagement in PR practic*e?", the researcher starts by looking at networking. From the results, it is evident that there is no set number of times participants would network with their stakeholders. Some participants said networking takes place weekly in the form of coffee dates or after work drinks on a Friday, others saying on a casual, ad hoc basis and others merely twice a year at events or media drop-offs. Participants were asked whether they were able to network during COVID-19 and the results show a mixed-bag of responses.

Table 7. Participants' responses to whether they were able to network during COVID-19.

Participant 1	*"Ja, very well. On WhatsApp, on the phone, on Zoom. I used every platform available to me to network. Ja, I had to cut down on the coffees with journalists…It's gone from a longer engagement to a quick coffee or Zoom call but I've kept all those networks very alive".*
Participant 2	*"Definitely not".*
Participant 3	*"I think the lockdown and the restrictions have had an obvious determining impact on anything anyone was able to do and that also applies to networking".*
Participant 4	*"It's been seeking up new contacts a lot of it would be cold emails, cold calls 'we would love to have you on' or media contacting us saying we'd love to be on your mailing list. But it's a lot colder".*
Participant 5	*"Not as effectively. Pre-COVID there was more hotel openings, launches, PR gatherings or conferences or whatever that you would go to and meet people. Now it's just virtual conferences and that kind of thing. But you don't end up meeting people there. You're all just in an audience. You can raise your hand and make a comment, but no-one is. You're not forming a relationship there. Unless you take a conversation offline".*
Participant 6	*"No, we actually stopped face-to-face networking just because of obviously, for COVID".*

Fifty percent of participants said they were unable to network during the pandemic, 33 percent say they were able to but it was not effective, and just one participant or 16 percent, said they were able to network. From the results, networking is highly dependent on in-person contact and that while virtual interaction makes it possible to keep in touch with stakeholders it is more impersonal, and "feels forced", as one participant put it.

4.3.3. Findings: sub-research question 3

Building on the findings of the social media category in sub-research question 1, the researcher addresses sub-research 3: "*To what extent did PR practitioners use social media for engagement and/or two-way communication?".* The researcher now evaluates the themes and refined themes from the data set in the social media category. As a point of entry, most participants were of the view that the use of social media and new media tools were valuable in their organisation. Just one participant had no regard for social media or does not have any social media accounts. Participant 1 remarked:

> "*Less than interested. If somebody has to say to me, can we do a Twitter handle or Facebook page for (the organisation), I would say you're working for the wrong company. We deal in big, big, big corporate issues. The last thing we're going to do is talk about (a client's) government affairs strategy on our social media platform. For God's sake. Not interested".*

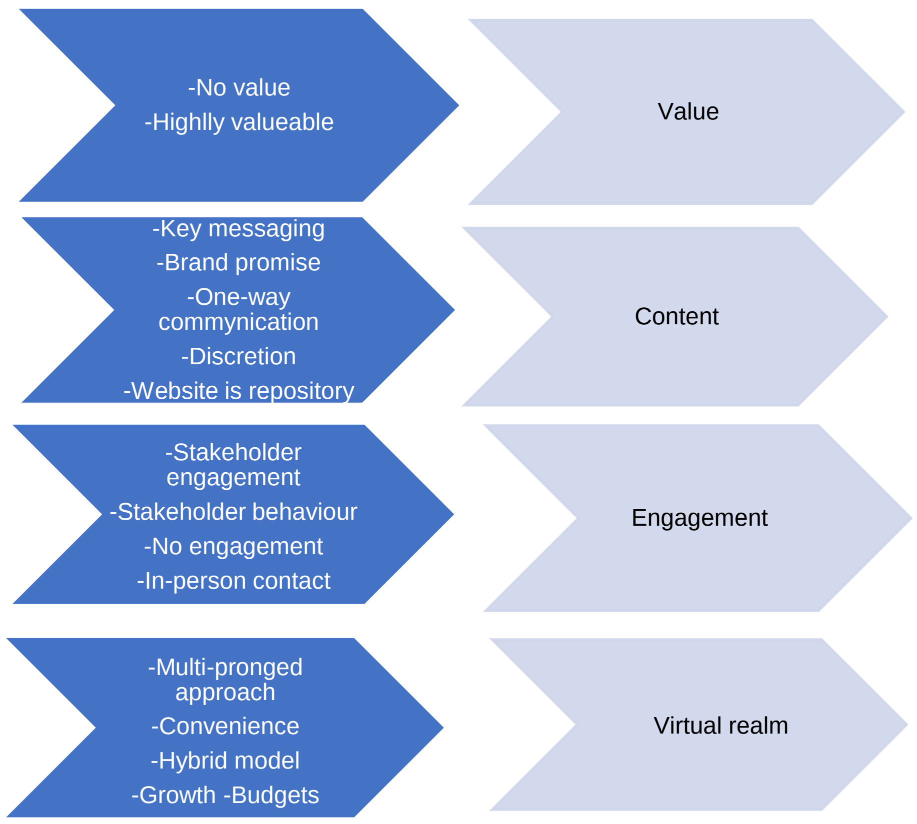

Figure 3. Social media themes and refined themes.

Content is a vital factor as it speaks to client-specific campaigns that are developed as a value proposition as it reflects their key messages and brand promise. Some participants agree that social media is used for one-way communication and that they do not respond to every comment or complaint, instead that discretion is used when responding. As remarked by Participant 6:

"*Sometimes we do get queries that won't be answered because it's been answered so many times, and especially what happens is the social media team do answer but the customer or person would ask the same question over and over and they tend to sort of ignore it*".

Participant 3 agrees:

"*So then you know sometimes you can respond and sometimes you can ignore it*".

While other participants use social media to showcase their work, others only use their websites as a repository.

"*For our business we don't really have a focus on engagement. But ja, like I said earlier, our social media channels are there for us to share our own work we have done for our clients, to highlight. It's an online portfolio that's not on our website*", said Participant 5.

Turning to engagement, most participants, save for Participant 5, said they use social media for engagement with their stakeholders.

Table 8. Participant's use of social media.

Participant	Use of social media
Participant 1	"*In the ones we use, WhatsApp and Zoom, it absolutely is. I don't deliver lectures to my staff. I ain't got the time or the interest. I get them together to discuss something critical. I don't waste their time. I really don't. And I expect them to engage. And if they don't engage, I call them by name and say are you sleeping? So, no I don't use it to pontificate to my staff. I don't have the time or energy or inclination. It's all two-way".*
Participant 2	*"You have a conversation with your followers. You've got to engage with your followers but you also have to put up what you are doing to your followers".*
Participant 3	*"But it is a, for us, at (organisation) we use it for two-way but I know a lot of other platforms that use it for one-way announcements".*
Participant 4	"*Not to each and every one because then you are also opening yourself up. You have to be very careful about what you say".*
Participant 6	*"But on the PR side it's more two-way communication because we want to know whether people are actually interested in what we are doing".*

Everything was happening in the virtual realm during COVID-19. Most participants reported a multi-pronged approach when staying in contact with their internal or external stakeholders and that the use of social media was a great convenience. Costs could be saved for online campaigns, and they showed tremendous growth as an organisation, adapting to new ways of virtual engagement. All participants also said that new media enabled them to facilitate a hybrid working model for stakeholder engagement. This model would work towards ensuring safety from the virus, make financial sense with the more frequent use of digital tools for events and press conferences and enable organisations to implement the new working arrangements for the duration of the lockdown and even long after the pandemic has passed. Table 9. below depicts the viewpoints of each participant regarding a new hybrid model of working.

Table 9. Participant's views on a new hybrid model of stakeholder engagement.

Participant	Hybrid model for stakeholder engagement
Participant 1	*"Both. I mean, if you talk about the way we talk to journalists, we are doing a lot of press conferences as webinars now…I think that will be a permanent change, but it's not to say the traditional forms of stakeholder relations will fall away because they certainly won't. And I'm hoping they revert to normal as soon as possible because nothing replaces face-to-face comms".*
Participant 2	*"I think life has changed; it's never going to be the same again. And yes, we are going to use more technology, yes, we were using Teams and Google and all of that to have a meeting, but it was very rare. It was more one-on-ones, human contact but I think it will be a combination".*
Participant 3	*"I think it will be a combination of both but it also it probably depends on how the world changes when the fourth wave arrives. What other platforms are available by early next year. I know a lot of my colleagues, we prefer the in-person interaction with clients and colleagues. It's nice to see people, to feel their energy, especially if you work in the creative field. You need interaction with other people because you draw energy from them. But at the same time also I love being at home. My animals and my wife are here. And I am more productive at home to be honest, and I get more done".*
Participant 4	*"Definitely a hybrid, it's got to be a hybrid, because you've got such great learnings about what do people want and the ability of people to. We will certainly not be trekking half an hour to go to an hour-long client meeting every single week. We are going to be learning and adapting the best lessons. I think the one thing that will go back to normal is to try and do more social things with clients and with our staff. Try and do more team building".*
Participant 6	*"We have already noticed that we can reach more people when we do things digitally. So, because of the costs, you can reach more people, you don't have to pay for venue hire and all of those things. It works out much cheaper and you can reach more people and people are keener to actually participate when they can sit at home and enjoy wine with their friends instead of dressing up and going out for an evening".*

Therefore, the value of social media, content, engagement, and the virtual realm all make it possible for PR practitioners to utilise social media for two-way communication. Based on the findings, five participants, or 82.6 percent, say they use social media for engagement and will continue to use virtual platforms for engagements in the form of a hybrid working model in the future. This finding will be interrogated further in section 4.4 when the respective social media accounts of the participants are analysed.

4.4. Summary of themes and sub-research questions

In the stakeholder category, the most prominent theme that emerged was one-on-one communication and secondly, the complex nature of virtual interaction. These themes answer sub-research question 1 and 2 as it shows little or no face-to-face interaction during COVID-19 had the most significant effect on PR practitioners' ability to network as it was virtually impossible to do so without physical interaction. In the networking category, the dominant theme identified was that networking took place via in-person contact and by means of multi-level communications such as WhatsApp, email, and virtual meetings. This particular finding also answers sub-research question 1 as virtual interaction was distracting and impersonal. Further, it answers sub-research question 2 with all participants agreeing they could not network without in-person contact. In the social media category, virtual interaction, stakeholder engagement and the view that social media is highly valuable emerged as the top three themes. These themes answer sub-research question 3 as nearly all participants (82.6 percent) used social media for engagement.

4.5. Analysis of social media accounts

For the purposes of this study, two social media accounts of each participant were analysed namely Facebook and Instagram, between 16- 22 August 2021. These two social media platforms were observed over one week to establish whether social media was used for engagement (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2021) or simply a "dumping ground" as alluded to by Grunig (2009). The researcher observed the social media accounts and noted the number of posts, likes, shares, comments and whether there was engagement from the organisation. Table 10 below depicts observational comments the researcher made when looking at each participant's Facebook and Instagram account respectively.

4.5.1. Facebook observations

From the observation of the six participants' Facebook accounts, it is clear four or 66 percent do not use Facebook for engagement. One participant does not have a social media account and only the large retailer's Facebook account is used for engagement and responding to every comment and complaint by a stakeholder.

Table 10. Observation of participants' engagement activity on Facebook.

Facebook	Observation
Participant 1	• No Facebook account and therefore no engagement
Participant 2	• Facebook is not used for two-way communication • No posts on 4 of the 7 days of the week • On the days that they post, organisation only uploads one item
Participant 3	• Facebook is not used for two-way communication

	• 5 of the 7 days there were no posts • On the 2 days that there are posts, there is no engagement
Participant 4	• Facebook is not used for two-way communication • Although multiple posts on at least 3 days this week, there is no engagement • 3 days this week there are no posts • Only on one post on Monday does the organisation respond to a comment by loving it
Participant 5	• Facebook is not used for two-way communication • Only 2 posts this week, with 1 each day which suggest little or no interaction • 5 days this week there were no posts
Participant 6	• Facebook is used for two-way communication, engagement and responds swiftly to customer queries • Organisation responds to each comment whether it is related to the post or not. • Engagement between customers not the organisation itself • Organisation likes every comment, validates customers and if there is a complaint, they address it • Organisation responds to complaints immediately • Only 1 day this week that there were no posts

4.5.2. Instagram observations

Observation results show two organisations or 33 percent do not have an Instagram account and four organisations or 66 percent do not use their Instagram accounts for two-way engagement.

Table 11. Observation of participants' engagement activity on Instagram

Instagram	**Observation**
Participant 1	• No Instagram account so definitely no engagement
Participant 2	• Instagram is not used for two-way communication • 2 of the 7 days there were no posts • 5 days this week only 1 post per day, no engagement
Participant 3	• Instagram is not used for two-way communication • 5 of the 7 days there were no posts • On the 2 days that there are posts, there is no engagement
Participant 4	• Instagram is not used for two-way communication • 5 days this week there are multiple posts per day • Sunday is the only day there are no posts on this social media site

Participant 5	• No Instagram account so no engagement on this platform
Participant 6	• Social media is not used for two-way communication • 6 days this week there are no posts

4.5.3. Correlation between findings and social media accounts analysed

As part of the triangulation process, the researcher compared the responses from the PR practitioners with that of the observations of their organisation's social media accounts to establish whether they use social media for two-way communication. As stated earlier, triangulation can bring about confirmation of the findings or highlight a completely new aspect. Considering Flick's (2004) perspective of monitoring social media to get a glimpse of the topic from different stakeholders, the researcher was able to observe from the outside whether the respective organisations responded to questions, queries and comments on their social media posts. While the majority of the answers presented during the virtual interviews said that social media was used for dialogue, a slight deviation was found during the observations in real time.

The findings indicate that five participants or 82.6 percent said in the interviews that they use social media for engagement, yet an observation of their social media accounts depict a slightly different picture with only four or 66 percent actively engaging with their stakeholders online. Figure 4 below is a comparative look at the interview findings on whether social media is used for engagement compared to the researcher's observation of their social media behaviour in real time.

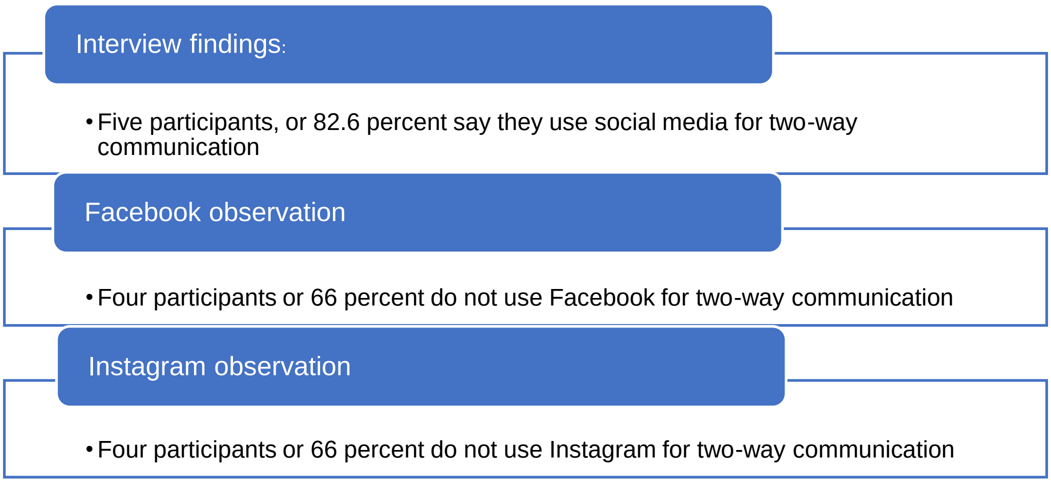

Figure 4. Links between interview findings and social media account observations.

4.6. Chapter summary

The formulation and analysis of the research enabled the researcher to describe the population, dissect the primary codes and themes developed for this study and formulate meaning. Primary codes, refined codes, themes and refined themes in the stakeholder, networking and social media categories that emerged from the data corpus was discussed and thereafter interrogated further to answer the main research question and subsequent three sub-research questions. In addition, the researcher compared participant feedback with an observation of two of their organisational social media accounts to establish if it was used for two-way engagement.

Chapter 5 offers a summary of the research findings and whether the objectives of the study have been met. The study is concluded and recommendations for future study are offered.

Chapter 5: Discussion, conclusion, and recommendations

Chapter 5 summarises the research findings and concludes this study which explored PR practitioners' capacity to build stakeholder relationships and network during a pandemic. The overall objectives of the study will be revisited with the view of aligning it to the findings. This chapter also identifies limitations of the study and presents recommendations for future studies on how to build relationships in the PR industry while working remotely.

5.1. Summary of research questions and research objectives

This study was aimed at exploring how PR practitioners developed stakeholder relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three sub-research questions guiding research include: interrogating the impact of little or no face-to-face interaction for the industry, establishing how technology was used for networking and stakeholder engagement and the extent to which practitioners used social media for dialogical communication.

The goal of this study was to establish the communicative relationship between PR practitioners and their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. To meet the overall goal, four objectives must be met. These objectives include: establishing the professional effects of less face-to-face interaction for PR practitioners as stakeholder contact was in-person pre-COVID-19; identifying which technological tools were used in the context of less face-to-face interaction given the restrictions on stakeholder contact during lockdown; determining the preferred ways of interacting on the part of PR based on their experience before and during the pandemic, and determining the effectiveness of new modes of relationship-building for practitioners to establish whether technology can be used as a replacement for in-person contact.

5.2. Summary of findings

In researching the question: "*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?*" the study revealed several findings from the qualitative virtual interviews conducted as well as a comparative look at two of the social media accounts of the organisations each PR practitioner represents. The findings from the study are tabulated below in the following categories: stakeholders, networking and social media.

Table 12. Summary of research findings.

Category	**Research Findings**
Stakeholders	• Interdependence is vital in the organisation-stakeholder relationship. • Advantages of the lack of face-to-face contact during the pandemic include time-saving, cost-saving, innovative ideas, and adaptability. • Disadvantages associated with the lack of face-to-face interaction for stakeholder relations was the impact on staff and the challenge faced by managers to monitor and mentor staff who were working remotely.

Networking	• Impossible to network without physical interaction. Or if PR practitioners tried, the form of networking was ineffective because the interaction was cold and impersonal.
Social media	• Social media was highly valuable as it enabled PR practitioners to carry on with their work with the lack of in-person contact having the least effect on output. • PR practitioners could showcase their work on various platforms, obtain and supply story ideas for journalists and connect with staff virtually. • Social media was used for engagement and two-way communication. • Advantages of social media included reaching a larger audience, receiving valuable feedback, time and cost-saving, and enabling a work-life balance. • Majority (66 percent) of participants do not use Facebook and Instagram for engagement/ two-way communication.

5.3. Discussion

Findings of this study shows that stakeholder relations could be built with little or no face-to-face interaction as virtual tools enabled PR practitioners to connect with their stakeholders throughout the lockdown. Stakeholder theory is particularly relevant to this finding as Goodijk (2003) suggested organisations cannot turn a blind eye to the feelings, perceptions, and pressures from stakeholders. The importance of staying in contact with stakeholders is vital as external pressures on the organisation needs to be always monitored (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Mintzberg,1994; Okazaki, Plangger, Roulet & Menéndez; 2020) and plans need to be put in place that can strategically affect the organisation (Baltussen, Jansen & Bijlmakers; 2018; Steyn & Puth, 2000).

Another significant finding is that PR practitioners found it difficult to network with existing stakeholders or to build new networks as these interactions were highly dependent on in-person contact at events, coffee dates, after-work drinks, meet and greets etc. The integrated communities built among an organisation's stakeholders as described by Shin, Pang and Kim (2015) could not take place because of restrictions on contact with stakeholders. This meant that the strength of the relationships or of linkages as referred to by Phillips (2006) was adversely affected. Network theory describes an ecosystem in which humans and technology co-exist (Czarniawska, 2006) and what is evident from the study is that the participants utilised technological tools to make and remake connections with stakeholders as described by Dankert (2011).

Each of the three sub-research questions are discussed in relation to the findings to establish whether the research questions have been addressed and the objectives met.

5.3.1. Impact of little or no face-to-face interaction

In this section, the researcher will discuss the first sub-research question and first objective on the impact of little or no face-to-face interaction for the PR industry. The first sub-research question was: "*What effect does little or no face-to-face interaction have on stakeholder relations in the PR industry?*", and the first research objective was to: "*Establish some of the immediate social and professional effects of less face-to-face interaction from the perspective of PR practitioners, as traditionally, stakeholder contact takes place in person*".

This study shows the little or no face-to-face interaction during COVID-19 presented several disadvantages for stakeholder engagement. However, PR practitioners were able to capitalise on the use of virtual tools, such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp chats and calls and social media to remain connected to and in contact with their stakeholders. For example, emails and Zoom were used to communicate with potential clients and sponsors while Facebook and Instagram were used for consumers and other discretionary stakeholders. Some of the advantages of the lack of face-to-face contact during the pandemic include time-saving, cost-saving, innovative ideas, and adaptability. Personally, PR practitioners reported an improved work-life balance. Spending more time with their family and pets were also a few of the benefits of not having to trek to a centralised office everyday as PR practitioners had more time to do what they valued. This validates what Castells (1996) referred to as a flexible working environment placing the onus on both the employer and employee to be open-minded.

Professionally, however, the disadvantages associated with the lack of face-to-face interaction for stakeholder relations was the impact on staff and the challenge faced by managers to monitor and mentor staff who were working remotely. Networking was also reported to be impossible given that there was a restriction on in-person gatherings as little or no events could take place during a hard lockdown. While PR practitioners were broadening their networks as proposed by Van der Wal (2020) by attending virtual conferences during COVID-19, these virtual meetings proved to be an ineffective method of relationship-building. PR practitioners also reported that while virtual events took place, they were unable to make meaningful connections with dozens or hundreds of people in a virtual meeting. From the findings, PR practitioners said they felt like they were "just a number" and that a virtual meeting was not the place to meet new stakeholders or clientele.

Social media and new media tools were most beneficial during the pandemic as it enabled PR practitioners to carry on with their work despite the lack of in-person contact. PR practitioners could also showcase their work on various platforms, obtain and supply story ideas for journalists and connect with staff virtually. Further, advantages of social media were that during COVID-19 more people were using social media as indicated by Pérez-Escoda et. al. (2020), and consequently, PR practitioners could easily reach a larger audience, receive immediate feedback from stakeholders and have a conversation online (DiStaso et. al., 2011; Eyrich et. al., 2008).

However, while social media presented the opportunity to build relationships online (Graham & Avery, 2013), there was mixed reaction to the notion of two-way communication/engagement/interaction online to build relationships (Aichner et al., 2020; Grunig, 2009; Johann, Wolf & Godulla, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2021; Komodromos, 2016; Morenoa et al., 2015; Uysal & Yang, 2013). On the contrary, the finding that some participants agree that social media is used for one-way communication is supported by Morenoa et al. (2015), who indicated that while organisations were aware of the benefits of dialogical communication on social media, they were not capitalising on it. Instead, the notion that social media was merely a platform to showcase their work aligns with Grunig's (2009:1) view that the online environment was used as a "dumping ground" for PR practitioners' key messages. Or, put differently, by Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2021:26), organisations were using social media as a "corporate showcase".

Findings from the interviews show that PR organisations do not respond to every comment or complaint. Instead, discretion is used when responding. This supports the literature that environmental scanning is performed by the PR strategist who determines whether stakeholders, ordinarily on the outskirts of the organisation, are relevant and should be placed high on the agenda of executive managers around the boardroom table (Steyn, 2000; Steyn, 2002; Steyn & Niemann, 2010; Steyn, 2018).

This lack of engagement was also found to be the case when the researcher monitored the social media accounts of the six representative organisations and found that the majority (66 percent) do not use Facebook and Instagram for engagement/ two-way communication. This is supported by the assertion by Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2021) that some organisations have little interest in dialogical communication on Facebook for two reasons; one, the lack of existing need to interact and two, the low level of interaction itself. An interesting perspective worth considering, is that of Kent and Taylor (2021) who propose that social media should be treated as the start of social debate and then stakeholders should take the conversation offline in a face-to-face setting to continue the interaction.

Therefore, sub-research question one was answered as both advantages and disadvantages of little or no face-to-face interaction for the PR industry was observed. Objective one was also met as participants expressed both personal and professional effects of little or no in-person contact.

5.3.2. Use of technology amid less in-person contact

In this section the researcher discusses the second and third sub-research questions and second and fourth objectives which address the use of technology and social media for engagement and the digital tools used due to a prohibition on physical interaction. The second sub-research question was: "*How was technology used as a tool for networking and stakeholder engagement in PR practic*e?", and the third sub-research question was: "*To what extent did PR practitioners use social media for engagement and/or two-way communication?".* The second objective was to: "*Establish which (digital) tools and techniques are used in the context of less face-to-face interaction given the restrictions of stakeholder contact during lockdown*", and the fourth objective was to: "*Determine the effectiveness of new modes of relationship-building for practitioners to establish whether technology can be used as a replacement for in-person contact*".

All participants agree networking in PR is significantly dependent on in-person contact and that they were unable to network with their stakeholders during the pandemic due to the prohibition on in-person meetings or gatherings. All participants reported it was impossible to network without physical interaction and concur that nothing replaces face-to-face interaction for relationship building (Ean, 2010). Social media, however, made it possible for PR practitioners to engage in two-way communication online. The findings show all PR practitioners reported a greater reliance on technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is aligned with the view of Pérez-Escoda et. al. (2020:15) who said the pandemic fast-tracked the transformation of the communication industry with more "videoconferences, interventions from home, digital montages and interviews from different spaces". Similarly, Beaunoyer et. al. (2020) indicated an unprecedented change in user behaviour which manifested in the use of digital technology and social media.

All PR practitioners used WhatsApp, emails and various virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Microsoft Teams to conduct client and staff meetings. However, no new techniques emerged from the findings apart from one of the participants displaying out-of-the-box digital techniques to network and garner new alliances. In that case, the organisation replicated water-cooler sessions with their staff in the virtual space. So staff would be placed in a virtual meeting room together for a 15-minute informal catch-up session. Looking ahead, PR practitioners need to utilise new communication changes to engage with their stakeholders or face lagging behind as indicated by Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010).

Therefore, sub-research question two was answered in that the participants concurred they were unable to utilise technology to network during the pandemic because networking required in-person interaction to take place. Sub-research question three was answered as participants placed a high premium on social media engagement and this finding correlates with the social media accounts observations. Objective two was met as the various virtual platforms and other digital tools were used in the context of less-face-to-face interaction. Objective four, however, was not met as no new modes of relationship building emerged from the findings. In fact, many organisations were just trying to stay afloat given the financial impact of COVID-19 and tried to stay in touch with their stakeholders with the new virtual tools at their disposal. While at least one participant tried to get staff to stay in touch with each other in a virtual "water-cooler" session, there is no evidence of how effective this method was.

5.3.3. Preferred method of interaction during a pandemic

In this section the researcher will discuss the third objective, which was to: "*Determine the preferred ways of interacting on the part of PR practitioners based on their experience before and during the pandemic*". Without question, all PR practitioners still preferred face-to-face interaction to build stakeholder relationships and network with existing and new contacts. This finding is supported by the perspective of Ean (2010), who said that face-to-face communication is perceived to be more effective compared to computer-mediated communication as it allows each participant to pick up on non-verbal cues and responses are more direct and instant.

The finding that PR practitioners said they were able to stay in contact and perform their daily tasks with the aid of social media supports the view that "human relationships would not exist without social media" (Przybysz, 2020:8). While PR practitioners preferred that the working environment would go back to “normal” or the way it used to be before COVID-19, they concur it might not be the case. Instead, all PR practitioners also said that new media enabled them to facilitate a hybrid working model for stakeholder engagement. This model would work towards ensuring safety from the virus, make financial sense with the more frequent use of digital tools for events and press conferences and enable organisations to implement the new working arrangements for the duration of the lockdown and even long after the pandemic has passed.

Therefore, objective three has been met as it has been established that all the participants preferred interacting with their stakeholders in person.

5.4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought in sharp focus whether PR practitioners were able to adapt to a new way of networking and nurture stakeholder relationships virtually. COVID-19 accelerated social media as a new communication paradigm with greater emphasis on engagement, and the motivation to follow and to be part of the media flow. From the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled PR practitioners to utilise this new communication paradigm wittingly or unwittingly with vigour. In answering the question: “*How are PR practitioners building stakeholder relationships during a pandemic?”*, the research findings show PR practitioners could build stakeholder relations online by using new media tools and social media to connect with their stakeholders. The findings also show that most PR practitioners are not capitalising on social media for two-way or dialogical communication online to build new and sustain existing stakeholder relationships. While less physical interaction for the PR industry had the most impact on PR practitioners’ ability to network, it is clear new ways of building relationships online are possible, but a phasing out of the traditional means of face-to-face engagement is not likely. Instead, a hybrid model of building stakeholder relations is more probable.

5.5. Limitations and recommendations

The size of the data set used in this study is small and cannot be accepted as a true reflection of all PR practitioners. The social media analysis was limited to Facebook and Instagram as this was the most-used medium used by the participants. While Facebook is considered good for dialogue, the dynamic nature of the medium can be seen as a limitation (Lwin, et. al., 2020). This makes it difficult to get an accurate representation of the feedback as comments and interaction may have changed as time passes.

It is recommended that future research could include a far wider analysis of various forms of social media such as Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok and any emerging new media. Exactly which PR practitioners used social media and new media tools to network during the COVID-19 pandemic could shed light on the need for smarter technologies to combat the need for physical interaction to network. Kent and Taylor’s (2021) argument that social media should be treated as the start of social debate and then stakeholders should take the conversation offline in a face-to-face setting to continue the interaction is also worth exploring further.

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